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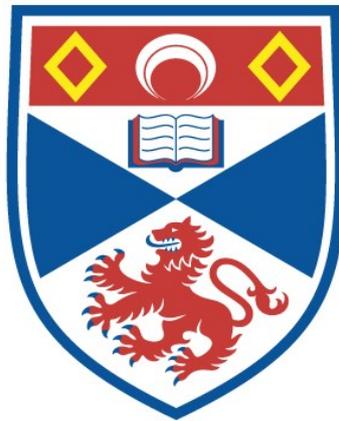
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'THE ETHICS OF ART' : INCARNATION, REVELATION  
AND TRANSCENDENCE IN THE AESTHETICS AND  
ETHICS OF GEORGE ELIOT AND M.M. BAKHTIN

Lindsay M. Sullivan

A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of PhD  
at the  
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"The Ethics of Art": Incarnation, Revelation, and  
Transcendence in the Aesthetics and Ethics of  
George Eliot and M. M. Bakhtin

Lindsay M. Sullivan



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St Andrews University  
Thesis submitted for the degree of Ph.D.  
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<sup>1</sup> I transferred to the University of St Andrews in October 1997 when my supervisor, Dr. Esther Reed was appointed a lectureship in the Divinity Faculty.  
I was granted a leave of absence from October 1999 to September 2001.

## Abstract

This thesis offers an analysis of George Eliot's aesthetics and ethics from the interdisciplinary perspective of literature and theology. I examine the role that religious motifs play in Eliot's "ethics of art," and argue that the motifs of incarnation, revelation, and transcendence are central to Eliot's aesthetic aim of extending her reader's sympathies. Eliot's ethics of art is designed to help her reader transcend his or her inherent egoism, and to improve the way her reader understands his or her own self in relation to the world and to others. An exploration of the religious motifs of incarnation, revelation, and transcendence explains how Eliot achieved this aim without resorting to didacticism or preaching. In order to demonstrate this, the thesis offers a reading of *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda* in which I employ three concepts that are present in the early philosophical writings of Mikhail Bakhtin; non-alibi in being, excess of seeing, and self/other relations. The motif of incarnation is central to each of these concepts and forms a bridge between Bakhtin's aesthetics and ethics. In applying these concepts to a reading of *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda*, I demonstrate the way in which Eliot's "ethics of art" relies on theological motifs.

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## Chapter One: Introduction

This thesis is an exercise in interdisciplinarity. It brings the disciplines of English literature and theology into dialogue, and attempts a fresh reading of George Eliot's *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda* in light of insights derived from both. I argue that an interdisciplinary approach that brings together literary theory, literary criticism, and theology, is necessary for two reasons. First, Eliot herself was interested in religious and theological concerns both on a personal and on a professional level. Second, Eliot explores theological themes, engages with religious groups, and employs theological motifs as part of her ethics and aesthetics. In this thesis I aim to explore the role that theological motifs play in Eliot's aim of extending her reader's sympathies. This aesthetic aim is expressed in the literary criticism that she wrote, in letters about her own art, and within her novels, and I attempt to show that it has a strong ethical component. Eliot herself does not use the word 'ethics' in connection with her aesthetics of sympathy. However, a close reading of her aesthetics of sympathy demonstrates that it does have ethical implications; her aesthetics have as a goal a change in the way the reader relates to those amongst whom he or she lives. It is this change in the way that one relates to the other, or specifically to one's neighbour, that is, I suggest, distinctly ethical.

The theological motifs that interest us especially are incarnation, revelation, and transcendence, and I argue that they help us to understand two things. Firstly, how Eliot moves her characters towards altruism within the novels; and, secondly, how she understands the dynamic relationship between her reader and her texts.

Eliot's aim of extending her reader's sympathies needs to be unpacked: it is neither naïve nor simple. A number of presuppositions about the nature and status of the author, reader, and text must be explored if we are fully to understand Eliot's aesthetic of sympathy. We cannot neglect the role of the reader because Eliot explicitly addresses the reader. However, we need to question what she understands the reader's role to be, and why there is a need for the reader to have his or her sympathies extended. As I shall show, Eliot's moral vision is that as individuals we are either more or less egoists or altruists, and her aim is to move her reader towards altruism. Our egoism works itself out not only in our actions, but also in the very way in which we think about our self, the world around us, and our interaction with the world, particularly in the way we relate to other people. This means that an extension of the reader's sympathies is necessary because of the two-fold problem of egoism and a limited perspective on the world. Eliot presupposes certain things about human beings: every human being has a limited perspective on the world; this perspective, though limited, is unique. So the need to extend our sympathies implies a lack of some sort. It implies a lack of sympathy, an inherent selfishness, and an inability to see things from another's point of view. Therefore, Eliot's aim of extending her reader's sympathies is to meet a need in her readers. Egoism and its corresponding limited perspective on the world require a two-fold solution. Readers need a right perspective on the world, and a right perspective on the other. Eliot's hope is that literature and art can change the reader's perspective. Extension of sympathies involves a new understanding of the self, a new way of looking at the world, and a new understanding of the other. As we shall see, it is within this dynamic of extending the reader's sympathies that the theological motifs operate. To

extend one's sympathies is to change the way that we look at the world, and the way that we relate to others.

The motifs of incarnation, revelation, and transcendence work in the intra-textual and extra-textual dimensions of *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda*, and form a bridge between Eliot's aesthetics and ethics. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines motif as a "constituent feature of a composition," or as an object "forming a distinct element of a design." I argue that the motifs of incarnation, revelation, and transcendence are constituent features of *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda*, and form a distinct element of the design of these texts. Since it is difficult to separate Eliot's 'aesthetics' and her 'ethics' I employ the term intra-textual to refer to her aesthetics and extra-textual to refer to the ethical dimension of her writings.<sup>1</sup> Equally, intra-textual refers to the way characters relate to other characters in the novel, and extra-textual to the way the text provokes a response from the reader. I will use intra-textual and extra-textual to express the dynamism between aesthetics and ethics that occurs as the reader reads.

On an intra-textual level the motif of incarnation functions in the way that characters are seen to be embodied in time and space, how they must act from within that location, and how they are sympathetic to their neighbour in specific situations as opposed to humanity in general. The motif of incarnation also works on an intra-textual level in the way that the characters have to search for a vocation. On an extra-textual level, the motif of incarnation is operative in the way that Eliot first has the reader become embodied in the narratives of *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda*. Eliot then

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<sup>1</sup> Garrett Stewart uses the term extra-textual, but not intra-textual, in *Dear Reader: The Conscripted Audience in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 313.

elicits a response to this act of reading, beyond the confines of the text and beyond the time of reading. Eliot employs the motif of revelation at an intra-textual level in the sense that the characters are challenged or shocked by knowledge that comes from the other, from beyond the self, and causes a change within the self. On an extra-textual level the motif of revelation functions as a moment when the reader gains knowledge from the other in the text of *Middlemarch* or *Daniel Deronda*. The motif of transcendence works on an intra-textual level in the way in which characters move beyond egoism, towards altruism. It is important to note at this point that I do not claim here that Eliot understands transcendence to mean that which goes beyond the human in the sense of entering the realm of metaphysics. Rather, she understands transcendence to mean the exceeding of our limited perspective on the world and that of the others amongst whom we live. This said, it is essential to note that Eliot nowhere encourages us to seek to escape our responsibilities to others. Transcendence does not entail the leaving of others behind. Rather, transcendence occurs in the recognition of the claims of the other, and the willingness to act ethically toward them.<sup>2</sup> On an extra-textual level, the result of reading *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda* should be that we are more sympathetic to the others amongst whom we live.

In this thesis, I argue that an appreciation of Eliot's aesthetics and ethics is limited, even hindered, by a lack of understanding of the Christian theological motifs of

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<sup>2</sup> In chapter three I discuss the work of Martha Nussbaum. She discusses the ability of narrative fiction to effect a change in the reader. Nussbaum's writings engage with the notion of transcendence in various ways. Transcendence for Nussbaum is similar to this idea of transcending our limited perspective on the world. She rejects any notion of transcendence that refers to anything beyond the human. For further discussions of the concept of transcendence in Nussbaum's work see Gregory L. Jones, "The Love Which *Love's Knowledge* Knows Not: Nussbaum's Evasion of Christianity," *The Thomist* 56.2 April 1992: 323-337, and Fergus Kerr, "Transcending humanity: Nussbaum's versions," *Immortal Longings: Versions of Transcending Humanity* (London: SPCK, 1997), 1-22.

incarnation, revelation, and transcendence, which appear in her novels. More specifically, I shall argue that during the act of reading *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda* these theological nuances prompt the reader to respond to the ethics which Eliot's aesthetics lay before him or her; it is only possible to respond to Eliot's aesthetics and read ethically when we understand these theological motifs. Through the reader's acknowledgement and response to these theological motifs of incarnation, revelation, and transcendence, an ethically responsible reading of Eliot's novels becomes possible. In order to understand fully the role of theological motifs in Eliot's aesthetics and ethics, I use an approach that is sensitive to the novels' generic form, to the aim of extending her reader's sympathies, and to current literary theories that discuss the roles of author, reader, and text in the process of forming an interpretation. I also argue in this thesis that the Russian literary critic, Mikhail Bakhtin, provides a framework for articulating Eliot's aesthetic of sympathy.<sup>3</sup>

With all this in mind, I will now look at Eliot's personal and professional interest in religion. This will help us to explain further why an interdisciplinary approach to the reading of Eliot's novels is appropriate, and will also provide us with a basis for looking

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<sup>3</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975) is the author of a number of writings which are difficult to categorise or describe. He wrote on specific authors (Rabelais and Dostoevsky), wrote in various styles including monographs and essays, and wrote on concepts such as carnival, dialogism, polyphony, heteroglossia, and chronotope. His interests were in philosophy, aesthetics, literature, and linguistics. Alexandar Mihailovic, in *Corporeal Words: Mikhail Bakhtin's Theology of Discourse* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1997), says that Bakhtin is interested in philosophy, literary theory, textual criticism, politics, and theology (91). Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson, in *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), write: "[Bakhtin] has been described as structuralist and poststructuralist, Marxist and post-Marxist, speech act theorist, sociolinguist, liberal, pluralist, mystic, vitalist, Christian, and materialist" (4). His biography is proving to be as enigmatic as his writings. Caryl Emerson, in *The First Hundred Years of Mikhail Bakhtin* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), writes: "[Bakhtin] wrote very few personal letters [ . . . ] he avoided the telephone and was made acutely uncomfortable by formal interviews; he left no diary or written memoirs whereby others could piece together his life" (ix). For biographical information, see *Creation of a Prosaics*, xiii-xv, and 3.

later in more detail at the role that the motifs of incarnation, revelation, and transcendence play in her work.

### *Eliot's personal and professional interest in religion*

The first reason for an interdisciplinary approach to reading Eliot's novels is her personal and professional interest in religion and theology. Eliot was always profoundly interested in religion, in both her personal and her professional life. On a personal, biographical level we know that Eliot, or more specifically, Mary Ann Evans, grew up in an Anglican home, but adopted a more evangelical faith in early adulthood.<sup>4</sup> *The George Eliot Letters* is an excellent primary source which reveals the hold that Evangelical Christianity had on the young Mary Ann Evans. In particular, the reader is directed to those letters addressed to and received from Maria Lewis, Martha Jackson, and Elizabeth Evans, her paternal aunt. Rosemarie Bodenheimer, in *The Real Life of Mary Ann Evans: George Eliot, Her Letters, and Her Fiction*, says that Mary Ann's letters to her aunt and uncle are "carefully religious in tone and content" (37).<sup>5</sup> A good example is the letter dated 5 December 1840. It contains no less than six biblical

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<sup>4</sup> Mary Anne Evans was baptised in the parish church of Chilvers Coton, Warwickshire, on 29 November 1819, and took the Anglican Communion for the first time on Christmas Day 1836. For further details see Rosemary Ashton, *George Eliot: A Life* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1996), 24, and Kathryn Hughes, *George Eliot: The Last Victorian* (London: Fourth Estate, 1998), 21.

For detailed biographies, I refer the reader to the following additional studies: J. W. Cross, *George Eliot's Life as Related in Her Letters and Journals*, Gordon S. Haight, *George Eliot: A Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), Frederick Karl, *George Eliot: Voice of a Century* (London: Flamingo, 1996), Ruby V. Redinger, *The Emergent Self* (New York: Knopf, 1975), Jennifer Uglow, *George Eliot* (London: Virago, 1987). Primary sources can be found in Gordon S. Haight ed., *The George Eliot Letters*, 9 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954-78), and Margaret Harris and Judith Johnston eds., *The Journals of George Eliot* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). All subsequent references to Eliot's letters and journals will be from these editions.

<sup>5</sup> Rosemarie Bodenheimer, *The Real Life of Mary Ann Evans: George Eliot, Her Letters, and Fiction* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994).

allusions to passages in 1 Samuel, James, John, and Isaiah, plus a “confession” of Mary Ann’s “besetting sin,” *i.e.*, her “ever struggling ambition.”<sup>6</sup> In a letter to François D’Albert Durade, 6 December 1859, Eliot (now Marian Lewes) writes:

I hardly ever spoke to you of the strong hold Evangelical Christianity had on me from the age of fifteen to two and twenty and of the abundant intercourse I had with earnest people of various religious sects.<sup>7</sup>

This retrospective letter gives an autobiographical witness to the importance that Christianity had on the young Mary Ann Evans.

However, a close reading of these letters to her aunt and friends reveals tensions, and hints that the young Mary Ann Evans was not comfortable with her faith. In her early twenties, due to growing scepticism and doubt about the supernatural aspect of Christianity, Mary Ann moved away from traditional belief in Christianity.<sup>8</sup> A decisive event occurred on 2 January 1842, when Mary Ann refused to accompany her father and

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<sup>6</sup> *GEL* 1, 73-4.

<sup>7</sup> *GEL* 3, 230-2.

<sup>8</sup> There are many accounts of Eliot’s personal religious development. The following list is a guide to the reader: Kathleen Adams, “George Eliot and Religion,” *George Eliot Fellowship Review* 9 (1978): 26-29, Rosemary Ashton, *George Eliot: A Life*, Rosemarie Bodenheimer, *The Real Life of Mary Ann Evans*, Gordon S. Haight, *George Eliot: A Biography*, and Kathryn Hughes, *George Eliot: The Last Victorian*. The following critical studies also offer comments on Eliot’s religious development: Mary Wilson Carpenter, *George Eliot and the Landscape of Time: Narrative Form and Protestant Apocalyptic History*; Elizabeth Jay, *The Religion of the Heart: Anglican Evangelicalism and the Nineteenth-Century Novel*; U. C. Knoepfelmacher, *Religious Humanism and the Victorian Novel*; Kerry McSweeney, *Middlemarch*; Bernard Paris, *Experiments in Life: George Eliot’s Quest for Values*; Joseph Wiesenfarth, *George Eliot’s Mythmaking*; and Basil Willey, *Nineteenth-Century Studies: Coleridge to Matthew Arnold*. Peter C. Hodgson, in *Theology in the Fiction of George Eliot*, has a chapter on “George Eliot’s Religious Pilgrimage,” including Evangelical Christianity (4-5), and the Religion of Humanity (6-13). Hodgson also says that recent biographies offer very little on the subject of religion. He writes: “William S. Peterson notes this deficit in his review of Ashton in *The New York Times*, 27 July 1997. He refers to Eliot’s life-long search for some larger meaning in the cosmos, and suggests that it would be helpful if the next biographer would tell us not only about ‘Eliot the beleaguered woman’ but also about ‘Eliot the beleaguered religious skeptic’” (176). Both the biographies and the critical studies tend to focus on Eliot’s religious life and thought up until the period of the ‘Holy War,’ and then maintain silence on the topic.

Maria Lewis to church.<sup>9</sup> This prompted the so-called 'Holy War' with her father and close friends.

Rosemarie Bodenheimer, in *The Real Life of Mary Ann Evans*, argues that it is from this experience of the 'Holy War' that Eliot developed her notion of sympathy. Bodenheimer links Eliot's aesthetic of sympathy to Christian ethics, suggesting that sympathy stems from the idea of charity. She analyses Eliot's letter to Sara Hennell in which Eliot quotes from chapter fourteen of Paul's letter to the Romans, in which he urges those strong in the faith not to undermine the faith of their weaker brothers or sisters. Bodenheimer suggests that, paradoxically, it is from Christianity itself that Eliot draws her doctrine of sympathy. She says that in her fiction Eliot tells the story of a wide mind having to confront and live among narrow-mindedness, rather than telling of the loss of religious faith.<sup>10</sup> Bodenheimer argues that Eliot's doctrine of sympathy was a result of

what she imagined as her own transgressions and can be initially understood as the instincts of remorse and repair, rather than as the adopted beliefs of an agnostic humanist or the self-establishing ideologies of a Victorian liberal intellectual. (266)

In this thesis I argue that sympathy is crucial to Eliot's aesthetics, and that in turn her aesthetics do rely on theological motifs, despite her rejection of Christianity.

Eliot scholars agree that sympathy is a vital component of Eliot's work. They do not, however, agree on the sources of Eliot's interest in sympathy. Unlike Bodenheimer who argues that Eliot draws her doctrine of sympathy from Christianity, charity, and

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<sup>9</sup> *GEL* 1, 124.

<sup>10</sup> For further discussions of Victorian novels concerning religious faith see Margaret Maison, *Search Your Soul, Eustace: A Survey of the Religious Novel in the Victorian Age* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1961), and Robert Lee Wolff, *Gains and Losses: Novels of Faith and Doubt in Victorian England* (London: J.

Paul's caution that the strong are not to lead the weak astray, Neil Roberts argues in *George Eliot: Her Beliefs and Her Art* that Eliot first learnt the importance of sympathy from Wordsworth, before she found it confirmed in Comte and Feuerbach (23).<sup>11</sup>

Suzanne Graver, in *George Eliot and Community: A Study in Social Theory and Fictional Form*, offers a useful summary of the issues involved:

The doctrine [of sympathy] has been defined in various ways, depending on whether scholars look to nineteenth-century fiction, poetry, or prose for its expression. Thomas A. Noble locates the "doctrine of sympathy" in the criticism George Eliot wrote during the 1850s and in her early novels, and ascribes to it a simple credo: "Art has a moral purpose; the purpose is to widen human sympathy; this purpose can be achieved only by giving a true picture of life." Isobel Armstrong derives and defines the doctrine from reviews of poetry written between 1830 and 1870, identifying it as a "great cohesive force" that enlarges and binds together individual sensibilities. George Levine discusses the "anti-romantic and anti-heroic" form the "aesthetics of sympathy" takes in prose fiction, in which sympathy is invoked "for the imperfect since imperfection is the condition of this world." (264)<sup>12</sup>

This is a useful summary in that it shows the diversity and similarities between the theories. In chapter three we will see that Eliot is concerned about sympathy in the reviews and essays she wrote; she is concerned to argue that art does have a moral purpose, and that moral purpose is to widen human sympathy. We shall see that for Eliot, sympathy is "anti-romantic" and "anti-heroic" in that she does write about imperfect people. In the discussion of Eliot's aesthetics we will see that a number of key points emerge, and that there is continuity in aesthetic thinking in Eliot's reviews, letters, and early fiction. In this thesis I want to show that religious motifs are a part of

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Murray, 1977).

<sup>11</sup> Neil Roberts, *George Eliot: Her Beliefs and Her Art* (London: Elek, 1975).

<sup>12</sup> Suzanne Graver, *George Eliot and Community: A Study in Social Theory and Fictional Form* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

Eliot's aesthetics of sympathy, not just that she developed sympathy from the idea of Christian charity.

We cannot know for sure why Mary Ann rejected Christianity. One reason proposed for her rejection of Christianity is her friendship with the Brays and Hennells, her neighbours at Rose Hill.<sup>13</sup> Mary Ann had brought Charles Hennell's *An Inquiry concerning the Origin of Christianity* (1838), which was written at the request of his sister Caroline. Caroline Hennell had married Charles Bray in 1836, and was shocked by his lack of faith. She asked her brother to investigate, and although he began with the aim of defending Christianity, the result was that his own faith was also challenged. Bodenheimer summarises his conclusions: "the life of Christ was in no way miraculous and that Christianity was not a divine revelation but a natural religion" (61). A second reason proposed for Eliot's rejection of Christianity is her growing belief that religion and morals could be separated. Even before meeting the Brays and Hennells, she had begun to think that one could be a moral person without a religious belief. On 30 March 1840, Mary Ann Evans wrote to Maria Lewis: "I was considerably shaken by the impression that religion was not a requisite to moral excellence."<sup>14</sup> Neil Roberts, in *George Eliot: Her Beliefs and Her Art*, says: "One of the most important reasons for her dissatisfaction with Christianity was that it proposed a fundamentally selfish reason for moral action" (27). Mary Ann's friendship with the Brays, her growing belief that

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<sup>13</sup> Neil Roberts points out that Gordon Haight, in *George Eliot: A Biography*, writes that attributing the change in Mary Ann's views solely to the Brays' influence is an oversimplification (Roberts 22, Haight, 39). Rosemary Ashton says that Cara Bray also witnessed to the fact that Mary Ann had changed her beliefs prior to meeting the Brays (Ashton, *A Life*, 39-40).

<sup>14</sup> This comment is made in response to Bulwer Lytton's *Devereux* (1829). See *GEL* 1, 45.

religion and morality could be separate, and her own self-doubts about her faith, resulted in her rejection of Christianity.

Eliot's view of Christianity during and immediately following the 'Holy War' is expressed in two letters. A letter to her father, dated 28 February 1842, talks of "admir[ing] and cherish[ing] what I believe to be the moral teaching of Jesus himself," and a letter to Francis Watts, a minister called in to try and persuade Mary Ann of the truth of Christianity, dated 3 August 1842, says:

It seems to me that the awful anticipations entailed by a reception of all the dogmas in the New Testament operate unfavourably on moral beauty by disturbing that spontaneity, that choice of the good for its own sake, that answers to my ideal.<sup>15</sup>

Mary Ann dislikes the idea that a person would choose what is right or good only in response to the fear of eternal punishment. Eliot expresses the same dissatisfaction with Christianity in her critiques of Young and Dr Cumming, which I will discuss below. In these essays, as in the letters above, Eliot is dissatisfied with the idea that Christianity proposes selfish reasons for doing good. Thus, her personal and professional criticisms are aimed at the same target.

One result of Mary Ann's friendship with the Brays and the Hennells was that she was commissioned to translate David Freidrich Strauss's *Das Leben Jesu: kritisch bearbeitet*. Upon the marriage of Charles Hennell and Rufa Brabant in November 1843, the task of translation was passed to Mary Ann.<sup>16</sup> I will examine Eliot's relation to Strauss, along with her relation to Spinoza, Feuerbach, and Comte in chapter two.

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<sup>15</sup> GEL 1, 128-30 and 143-4 respectively.

<sup>16</sup> The translation was begun by Rufa (Elizabeth Rebecca) Brabant, daughter of Dr. Brabant, who had visited Charles Hennell after the publication of the *Inquiry*. Dr. Brabant was Eliot's one-time mentor.

Similarly, through her friendship with Charles Bray, Eliot met John Chapman with whom she was to work on the *Westminster Review*.

Despite a period of antagonism to Christianity, however, Mary Ann, later Marian, retained an emotional attachment to forms of Christian belief, even when she could no longer give Christianity her intellectual assent. All personal connections with organised Christianity were severed, but Marian retained a deep interest in religious and theological matters.<sup>17</sup> This is evident in a number of Marian Lewes's letters. A study of the letters in chronological order suggests a move from antagonism towards Christianity to a search for common ground, and reveals that Eliot's articles on Young and Cumming were written at the height of her antagonistic period.

Marian Lewes's interest in religious and theological matters is expressed in letters to François D'Albert-Durade, Barbara Bodichon, Bessie Rayner Parkes, and Harriet Beecher Stowe. I will give some textual analysis of these letters. Marian Lewes's letter to D'Albert Durade, dated 6 December 1859, speaks of the "antagonism" she felt towards Christianity, shortly after the 'Holy War.' But in this retrospective letter, she expresses altered opinions:

Ten years of experience have wrought great changes in that inward self: I have no longer any antagonism towards any faith in which human sorrow and human longing for purity have expressed themselves; on the contrary, I have a sympathy with it that predominates over all argumentative tendencies. I have not returned to dogmatic Christianity – to the acceptance of any set of doctrines as a creed, and a superhuman revelation of the Unseen – but I see in it the highest expression of the religious sentiment that has yet found its place in the history of mankind, and I have the profoundest interest in the inward life of sincere Christians in all ages. Many things that I should have argued against ten years ago, I now feel myself too ignorant and too limited in moral sensibility to speak of with confident disapprobation: on many points where I used to delight in

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<sup>17</sup> On 16 November 1865, Eliot records in her journal that she is reading the Bible. See *Journals of George Eliot*, 126.

expressing intellectual difference, I now delight in feeling an emotional agreement.<sup>18</sup>

In the years between 1842 and 1859, Eliot's antagonism towards Christianity has all but vanished. Argumentative tendencies, disapprobation, and intellectual difference have been replaced by sympathy and emotional agreement. In a letter to Barbara Bodichon, dated 26 November 1862, Marian Lewes says, twenty years after the 'Holy War,' that she is not interested in robbing a man of his religious beliefs.<sup>19</sup> She is convinced of the efficacy of all sincere faith and aware of the "spiritual blight that comes with No-faith," and has lost any "negative propagandism" towards Christianity. She says she has little sympathy with Free-thinkers, and has lost interest in "mere antagonism" to religious doctrines. She wants to know the "lasting meaning that lies in all religious doctrine."<sup>20</sup> In this letter there is a clear move away from explicit antagonism towards Christianity. Marian Lewes wrote to Bessie Rayner Parkes on 6 February 1864, outlining her support of the latter's decision to embrace Catholicism.<sup>21</sup> In a letter to Harriet Beecher Stowe, Marian expressed a lack of interest in Pantheism.<sup>22</sup> Evans writes that she has "sympathy" rather than "antagonism" or "argumentative tendencies" towards religious faith.<sup>23</sup> She is looking for a religion that springs from "sympathy with that which of all

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<sup>18</sup> GEL 3, 230-32. Similarly, in a letter to Sara Hennell, 17 January 1858, Marian Lewes says that she has "long ceased to feel any sympathy with mere antagonism and destruction" towards religion (GEL 2, 421).

<sup>19</sup> Barbara Bodichon (*née* Leigh Smith) was Eliot's closest female friend. The women met through their mutual friend, Bessie Rayner Parkes, in June 1852. It was Barbara's recognition of Eliot's authorship of *Adam Bede* that cemented their friendship. See GEL 3, 56 and 63. For further details on Bodichon see *Oxford Reader's Companion to George Eliot*, ed. John Rignall (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 31-3. For a biography of Bodichon, see Pam Hirsch, *Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon, 1827-1891: feminist, artist and rebel* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1998).

<sup>20</sup> GEL 4, 64-5.

<sup>21</sup> GEL 4, 131.

<sup>22</sup> GEL 5, 31.

<sup>23</sup> J. R. Watson, in "God and the Novelists: George Eliot," says that although Eliot came to reject traditional Christianity, she never lost her respect for it (279). See *The Expository Times* 110.9 (June 1999): 279-283.

things is most certainly known to us, the difficulty of the human lot."<sup>24</sup> From this close reading of Eliot's letters we see her continued interest in religious matters.<sup>25</sup>

Similarly, Felicia Bonaparte, in *The Triptych and Cross: The Central Myths of George Eliot's Poetic Imagination*, writes:

In Eliot's letters one can trace a distinct progression in her attitude and understanding of religion, from the militant atheism that followed her apostasy, to the inevitable mellowing of her maturity, and to a substantial reassessment in the light of continuous interpretation. (54)<sup>26</sup>

This "progression" often gets overlooked. Eliot's attitude to religion was fluid. We have seen from Eliot's letters that her personal interest in religion follows a trajectory of Evangelical fervour, to antagonism, through to sympathy with religious thought. This deep interest in religious and theological matters, evident from her letters, also appears within the novels. From *Scenes of Clerical Life* through to *Daniel Deronda*, Eliot is a novelist concerned with spiritual questions and the practical applications thereof. In chapter two I explore some of the ways in which literary critics have examined religious themes and figures in Eliot's fiction. However, I argue that the role that theological

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<sup>24</sup> Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811-96). Ellen Argyros reminds us, in *"Without Any Check of Proud Reserve": Sympathy and its Limits in George Eliot's Novels* (New York: Peter Lang, 1999) that Eliot and Stowe were friends, colleagues, and rivals, corresponding with one another between 1869 and 1880 (41-2). Argyros also directs the reader to Marlene Springer, "Stowe and Eliot: An Epistolary Friendship," *Biography: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly* 9.1 (Winter 1986): 59-81, and Robyn R. Warhol, "Toward a Theory of the Engaging Narrator: Earnest Interventions in Gaskell, Stowe, and Eliot," *PMLA* 101.5 (October 1986): 811-818.

<sup>25</sup> Peter Hodgson, in *Theology in the Fiction of George Eliot*, cites a letter that supports the argument that Eliot had an ongoing interest in Christianity. Catharine T. Herford wrote to *The Guardian*, 2 July 1980, in response to letters questioning the propriety of placing a memorial to George Eliot in Westminster Abbey on the hundredth anniversary of her death. The letter records that Herford's mother remembers Eliot attending Rosslyn Hill (Unitarian) Chapel "more Sundays than not," and finding there a "spiritual home." This behaviour is not consistent with an ongoing antagonism toward Christianity. See Hodgson, 178. Valerie Dodd also refers to this letter in *George Eliot: An Intellectual Life* (London: Macmillan, 1990), 86.

<sup>26</sup> Felicia Bonaparte, *The Triptych and the Cross: The Central Myths of George Eliot's Poetic Imagination* (New York: New York University Press, 1979).

motifs play in Eliot's ethics and aesthetics has been overlooked, specifically in the area of the author, reader, and text relationship. I now look at Eliot's professional engagement with religion, which occurred during the height of her antagonism towards Christianity.

On a professional level, Marian Evans engaged critically with Christian thought in her work as translator, editor, and reviewer. Her translations of German theology and critiques of Christian preachers and poets coincided with the height of her antagonism towards Christianity. Marian Evans translated two German texts; Strauss's *Das Leben Jesu: kritisch bearbeitet*, and Ludwig Feuerbach's *Das Wesen Christentum*.<sup>27</sup> She also translated Benedict Spinoza's *Ethics* and *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*.<sup>28</sup> Marian Evans engaged with these thinkers and was influenced by their work (although, as we shall see in chapter two, it is important not to overstate their influence). As a reviewer for and editor of the *Westminster Review*, Eliot retained her professional interest in religious and theological texts. Two of her articles are of particular note. "Evangelical Teaching: Dr Cumming" (1855) and "Worldliness and Other-Worldliness: The Poet Young" (1857) are withering critiques of the Christian thought, teaching, and sentiment that are expressed in these authors' works.<sup>29</sup> These reviews were written at the height of

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<sup>27</sup> Strauss's *Das Leben Jesu* was published 1835-6, and the translation was published in June 1846 by John Chapman. Feuerbach's *Das Wesen Christentum* was published 1841, and the translation was published in July 1854 by Chapman.

<sup>28</sup> Eliot began work on a translation of Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* in 1843. She translated Spinoza's *Ethics* between 8 November 1854 and February 1856. George Henry Lewes, her partner from July 1854 until his death in 1878, was also interested in Spinoza. He wrote an article on Spinoza's life and work for the *Westminster Review* in 1843, which was also published as a pamphlet. See Ashton, *A Life*, 71, 130, and 391.

<sup>29</sup> "Evangelical Teaching: Dr Cumming," and "Worldliness and Other-Worldliness: The Poet Young," are included in *Essays of George Eliot*, ed. Thomas Pinney (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963), 158-189 and 335-385 respectively. David Lodge, in the Introduction to *Scenes of Clerical Life* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), describes "Evangelical Teaching" as a "withering critique" of Christianity, 8.

Eliot's antagonism towards Christianity. Despite her published attacks on Christianity, however, Christian thought continued to have a certain hold on her. This lifelong interest, personal and professional, in forms of Christian belief also finds expression in her fiction. It is not simply that Eliot was antagonistic or sympathetic to Christianity, but that sympathy itself, as well as her ethics and aesthetics, is infused with Christian imagery.

### *Eliot's novels*

The second reason for an interdisciplinary approach to Eliot's novels is that *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda* contain many examples of the theological motifs of incarnation, revelation, and transcendence. Peter C. Hodgson, in *Theology in the Fiction of George Eliot*, writes that Eliot "was a deeply religious thinker, despite having abandoned orthodox forms of Christian belief, and religious themes and figures appear in all her novels" (ix). I explore these theological motifs in detail in chapters five and six, where it becomes more apparent that this thesis aims to fill two gaps in Eliot scholarship. The first is that little has been written about Eliot's novels from an interdisciplinary perspective, and the second is that theological motifs in Eliot's fiction have been misunderstood or ignored.

### *Literature and theology*

The interdisciplinary nature of this research project means that it is situated in and informed by two research contexts. The first is contemporary critical discussion of literature and theology. Today, 'Literature and Theology' is not a clearly defined

academic discipline. Literature and theology, independently of one another, are two vast disciplines. A student of 'Literature and Theology' does not simply study two university disciplines or simply study them alongside one another. 'Literature and Theology' is more than the sum of its parts, because not only does it have to deal with the issues that each separate discipline has to deal with, but the set of questions multiply as the disciplines confront and challenge one another. It is, as David Jasper writes, an "almost inexhaustibly fertile" field of study.<sup>30</sup> It is further complicated by scholars who work within the discipline shifting their position. For example, David Jasper, in the second edition of *The Study of Literature and Religion: An Introduction*, says that the first edition contains some of his preoccupations in the field of literature and religion during the mid-1980s, and he is not particularly mindful to defend or update them (xiv). He says that he is more "theologically 'radical'" in 1991 than he was in 1985 (xv), and that "most 'theology', as such, bores me to tears." He cautions the reader: "Everything that is written here, then, should be read, as it were, under erasure" (xviii). I will look here at how recent scholarship views interdisciplinary study in 'Literature and Theology,' and how this scholarship affects a reading of Eliot's novels.

David Jasper, in "How Can We Read the Bible?" writes that he "vigorously oppose[s]" the presupposition that "'literature and religion' is a naturally harmonious study" (20).<sup>31</sup> His work counters the idea that there is a natural harmony between the two academic disciplines, and instead emphasises some of the differences between

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<sup>30</sup> David Jasper, Preface to the first edition of *The Study of Literature and Religion: An Introduction* (London: Macmillan, 1989). Jasper is the director of the Centre for the Study of Literature and Theology at the University of Glasgow. In the following paragraph I quote from the Preface to the second edition of this text.

<sup>31</sup> David Jasper, "How Can We Read the Bible?" *English Literature, Theology, and the Curriculum*, ed.

literature and theology. He wants to challenge the assumption that this basic harmony exists. He wants, rather, to explore the “deep, painful, creative tension” between literature and theology (11). Terry Wright, in *Theology and Literature*, takes this one stage further and says that “the assumptions of one discipline are often the heresies of another” (1).<sup>32</sup> I will look at some of the heresies and sources of this creative tension below.

In the first chapter of *Theology and Literature*, subtitled ‘A Creative Tension,’ Terry Wright says: “this tension between theology and literature is not altogether new.” He includes Samuel Johnson, T. S. Eliot, and Helen Gardner as being among those who are against merging or confusing the two disciplines (9).<sup>33</sup> Wright focuses on the rise of English as an academic subject, and discusses how literature was “quite seriously being offered as a replacement religion, filling the vacuum of values created by the decline of Orthodox Christianity” (5).<sup>34</sup> He writes:

All it seems safe to say is that there is, in the modern period at least, a tension between the two subjects, a tension which has been exacerbated by the decline of belief in Christianity and the rise of literature as the provider of a new canon, a new set of scriptures enshrining an alternative set of liberal-humanist values. (5)

This succinct paragraph illuminates a number of areas of tension between the two academic disciplines. At the very least there is a tension between Christian and liberal-

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Liam Gearon (London: Cassell, 1999), 9-26.

<sup>32</sup> Terry Wright, *Theology and Literature* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988).

<sup>33</sup> Paul S. Fiddes also lists Johnson and Gardner, along with C. S. Lewis, in *Freedom and Limit: A Dialogue Between Literature and Christian Doctrine* (London: Macmillan, 1991), 27.

<sup>34</sup> In *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, Terry Eagleton says that one explanation for the growth of English studies in the nineteenth century is the failure of religion. He quotes from the inaugural lecture of George Gordon, Merton Professor of English Literature at Oxford: “England is sick, and [ . . . ] English literature must save it. The Churches (as I understand) having failed, and social remedies being slow, English literature has now a triple function; still, I suppose to delight and instruct us, but also, and above all, to save our souls and heal the State” (20). The lecture was 9 May 1923. See also G. S. Gordon, *The Discipline of Letters, and Other Essays* (Oxford, 1946), 12-13, and Chris Baldick, *The Social Mission of*

humanist values. It is more than a clash between two academic disciplines; it is a clash between two world views, Christian and post-Christian, or Christian and Humanist/post-Humanist. This has repercussions for the study of literature.

If English departments teach literary criticism and literary theories that never challenge liberal-humanist values, then there is often no place for a detailed analysis of religious, spiritual, or theological ideas, themes, or motifs. Christopher Southgate, in "Reconsidering Phlebas: Faith in the Life and Work of T. S. Eliot," writes:

The ethos of much literary criticism in recent years has been that religious belief is at best a mere curiosity, an individual idiosyncrasy, at worst an outworn way in which an establishment dominates the hearts and minds of a people. (222)<sup>35</sup>

Similarly, David Jasper writes that "the vast majority of people teaching English literature appear to profess a profound lack of interest in religion except as a curious archaic left-over indulged in by the few."<sup>36</sup> Jasper is aware that there is a "widespread practice in academic departments of literature to dismiss the 'religious' and 'theological' as dangerously narrow and evangelistic (in practice, sadly, all too often true)." A Christian literary critic might wish to read and challenge literary theories advocating Marxist, psychoanalytic, feminist, lesbian, gay, or 'queer' theory, or new historicist theories in light of what the Trinitarian God says about humankind's relationship to Him and to one another. However, critics and theorists with allegiance to liberal-humanist values might say that such cultural or religious imperialism is what they wish to prevent. They would resist any imposition of a meta-narrative on all these areas. The imposition of the kind of truth claims that theology can make, could be seen as a heresy

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*English Criticism, 1848-1932* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 105.

<sup>35</sup> Christopher Southgate, "Reconsidering Phlebas: Faith in the Life and Work of T. S. Eliot," *English Literature, Theology, and the Curriculum*, 221-228.

<sup>36</sup> Jasper, "How Can We Read the Bible?" 21.

to scholars and critics who argue for the death of the author, or the role of the reader in forming an interpretation of a text. In my reading of Eliot, I wish to suggest that Christian theology provides a more adequate discourse to appreciate Eliot's aesthetic aim than current literary theory.

These tensions between literature and theology directly affect our reading of Eliot's novels. Criticism that has a strong liberal-humanist bias tends to read Eliot in ways that overlook the religious elements in her work, and we will see how this has affected criticism of Eliot in chapter two. As already indicated, there is no evidence to suggest that Eliot thought of herself as a theologian or saw her novels as an alternative theology. Indeed, in a letter to her publisher John Blackwood, George Henry Lewes writes that the stories in *Scenes of Clerical Life* have a human rather than theological aspect.<sup>37</sup> Marian Lewes later resisted the invitation extended by Frederick Harrison to write a novel as a vehicle to propagate Positivist thought. However, despite her move away from orthodox Christianity, Christian theological motifs are present in *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda*, and they form part of Eliot's aesthetics of sympathy.

Against this background, I discuss two areas of scholarship in literature and theology that directly affect the way we read Eliot's novels. The first is a discussion of the influence of Protestant theology on the novel. The second is literature's exploration of theological themes.

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<sup>37</sup> G. H. Lewes wrote to John Blackwood on 6 November 1856 about the proposed series, "The Scenes of Clerical Life," and said: "It will consist of tales and sketches illustrative of the actual life of our country clergy about a quarter of a century ago; but solely in its *human* and *not at all* in its *theological* aspect; the object being . . . [to represent] the clergy like any other class with the humours, sorrows, and troubles of other men. [ . . . ] the tone throughout will be sympathetic and not at all antagonistic." (*GEL* 2, 269-70)

## *Theology and the novel*

Literary scholarship is divided over the extent to which the novel has connections with more explicitly theological genres. In particular, there is tension with respect to whether the novel should be regarded as a 'religious' or 'secular' genre. In this section I explore the work of critics who discuss the influence of Puritan theology on the form of the novel. In the course of this discussion I will focus on how critics view the novels of Daniel Defoe and Samuel Richardson.

Catherine Fox, in an essay entitled "'Telling the old, old story': God and the novelist as creators," suggests that the new degree of characterisation in storytelling from the sixteenth century onwards can be traced to the Puritan habits of self-examination and the keeping of spiritual journals. Fox suggests that the modern novel is a literary descendent of spiritual autobiography (101).<sup>38</sup> Valentine Cunningham also discusses the relation between Puritan theology and the novel. In *Everywhere Spoken Against: Dissent in the Victorian Novel*, he argues that the Puritan background provided Defoe with a "programme" for the English novel. He highlights "the diary-keeping habit" and "the practice of daily self-scrutiny before God," arguing that these became some of the novel's most recognisable features. He also highlights "the everyday," "the domestic circumstance," and "the ordinary life of ordinary people" (9).<sup>39</sup> Similarly, Terry Wright, in *Theology and Literature*, writes about Defoe. He argues: "Calvinist introspection [. . .] contributed to a massive outpouring of autobiography in the second

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<sup>38</sup> Catherine Fox, "'Telling the old, old story': God and the novelists as creators," *The Novel, Spirituality and Modern Culture: Eight Novelists Write about their Craft and their Context*, ed. Paul S. Fiddes (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000), 99-112.

<sup>39</sup> Valentine Cunningham, *Everywhere Spoken Against: Dissent in the Victorian Novel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975).

half of the seventeenth century, providing a clear model for the new literary form of the novel to follow.” Wright argues that Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* and *Moll Flanders* can be seen as “pseudo-autobiographies” because of their concern with sin, soul-searching, and conversion (114). Ian Watt, in *The Rise of the Novel*, also discusses *Robinson Crusoe* in relation to the confessional autobiography, and links its narrative structure to the introspective tendency of Puritanism in general (75).<sup>40</sup> However, Watt collapses this argument upon itself: having argued for the role of Calvinist theology in the development of the form, he then argues that a degree of secularisation was essential for the continuation of the form. He writes:

It would seem, then, that Defoe’s importance in the history of the novel is directly connected with the way his narrative structure embodied the struggle between Puritanism and the tendency to secularisation which was rooted in material progress. At the same time it is also apparent that the secular and economic viewpoint is the dominant partner, and that it is this which explains why it is Defoe, rather than Bunyan, who is usually considered to be the first key figure in the rise of the novel. (83)

Watt concludes that a measure of secularisation was an indispensable condition for the rise of the new genre. The chapter entitled “Robinson Crusoe, Individualism, and the Novel” ends somewhat awkwardly. He writes: “we can say of [Defoe], as of later novelists in the same tradition, such as Samuel Richardson, George Eliot, or D. H. Lawrence, that they have inherited of Puritanism everything except its religious faith” (85). I understand this to mean that Watt is arguing for the influence of Puritanism on the form, rather than the content, of the novel.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1974).

<sup>41</sup> Margaret Anne Doody, in *The True Story of the Novel*, is critical of theories of the novel that overemphasise the importance of Protestant Theology on the ‘rise’ of the novel. In her own work she argues that Catholic Theology and a pre-modern economic setting could also provide the necessary

Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa, or The History of a Young Lady* (1747-48) is another novel that is associated with spiritual autobiography.<sup>42</sup> Strictly speaking, as an epistolary novel, it does not have the same formal structure as a spiritual autobiography. It is not an autobiography, since it is structured by the arrangement of letters between two pairs of correspondents.<sup>43</sup> However, despite this formal difference, there are elements in the novel that show the influence of spiritual autobiography. Clarissa Harlowe sees marriage as a spiritual choice, and desires to follow her conscience in matters of marriage. Similarly, she keeps a strict account of her daily activities. Towards the end of the novel, her death scenes are treated in a hagiographic manner. Fox, Cunningham, and Wright suggest that the novel has intimate connections with other theologically informed genres. In reading Defoe's *Moll Flanders* and *Robinson Crusoe*, and Richardson's *Clarissa*, we see that traces of these theological genres remain in the novel.

Casuistry is another strand of theological thinking that can be seen to have an effect on the development of the novel. Josephine Donovan, in *Women and the Rise of the Novel, 1405-1726*, articulates the role that this theological method played in the rise

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conditions for the 'rise' of the novel. She writes: "British and American critics of Protestant descent or under the influence of Protestant history have often "explained" the development of the Novel in connection with the rise of Protestantism and of the new capitalist bourgeoisie. [. . .] The English-speaking critics' penchant for looking at English Puritans and merchants for the *origins* of the Novel, however, indicates a very parochial view of the genre and history. [. . .] A consideration of Spanish [novels] . . . alone would lead to an admission that Catholicism and a pre-modern economic setting could also give rise to the Novel" (1-2).

<sup>42</sup> For further discussions of this see John Dussinger, "Conscience and the Pattern of Christian Perfection in *Clarissa*," *PMLA* 81 (1966): 236-245, G. A. Starr, *Defoe and Spiritual Autobiography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965), and Cynthia Griffin Wolff, *Samuel Richardson and the Eighteenth Century Puritan Character* (Hamden, CT.: Archon, 1972).

<sup>43</sup> For further information see Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Imagining a Self: Autobiography and Novel in Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976).

of the novel.<sup>44</sup> She argues that women fiction writers of the period 1405-1726 “seized on the theological method of casuistry to particularise their arguments in defense of women.” She offers this definition of casuistry:

Emerging in the late Middle Ages, casuistry is a method whereby general rules are adapted, modified, or interrogated through the investigation of a particular case that problematizes the rule. The term *casuistry* got its bad reputation from the fact that to accommodate particular cases the rules often became so riddled with exceptions that they were no longer rules; moral relativism was the result. (x)

The theological method of casuistry was employed by women in the development of the novel because of its emphasis on taking particulars into account. Donovan says that casuistry enabled women novelists to present particularised cases which interrogated misogynist generalisation concerning women. She continues to explain more of casuistry:

“Circumstances Alter Cases” [. . .] was a byword of casuistry. It claims that a case is not to be judged in the abstract but always relative to its particular circumstance. Circumstantial details can change the purport of any given case and thus an understanding of them is necessary for fair ethical and aesthetic judgement to take place. Paying attention to the particularities of any individual’s situation necessarily challenged and enlarged ideological norms and abstractions, allowing for a more complex appreciation of individual behaviour. (xi)

Donovan connects the method of casuistry with the novel’s presentation of an individual’s life:

The novel emerged in part out of the theological method of casuistry, where generalized rules are adapted or refracted by individualized cases that challenge a general principle. A focus on the details of a case, on the circumstances of a life, is inherently subversive to doctrine, for no rule can be stretched to accommodate all the particularities of an individual case. (5)

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<sup>44</sup> Josephine Donovan, *Women and the Rise of the Novel, 1405-1726* (London: Macmillan, 1999). From the title of this book, it is clear that Donovan believes the novel was a genre of literature before the eighteenth century. Her work is about the role that women played in the rise of the novel.

Donovan says that it is only the novel that allows for “the nuanced exploration of circumstances that is necessary for this kind of moral reasoning.” She says that the novel is “the only form in which casuistical reasoning can be fully enacted.” In the course of her book, Donovan draws not just on the theological method of casuistry, but also on the writing of Bakhtin. Indeed, she draws parallels between casuistical thinking and Bakhtin’s writings. She argues that the novel can be considered to be “subversive,” because of its “emphasis on individual and particularized circumstances” (5). She writes:

The novel provides, in effect, an ethical defense of the individual against tyrannical norms. Its antiauthoritarian “Galilean perception . . . denies . . . absolutism,” according to Bakhtin (DI, 366), valorizing instead the irreducible uniqueness of the individual and her or his situation. (6)

In chapter four I will analyse in detail Bakhtin’s understanding of the “irreducible uniqueness of the individual and her or his situation,” and the role that the theological motif of incarnation plays in his understanding of the human being. Bakhtin’s understanding of the human being and his or her ‘non-alibi in being,’ as is articulated in his early philosophical essays, relies on incarnation more than it does on casuistry.

Donovan argues that Bakhtin “conceives the novel in ethical terms as the site where the particulars of experience refuse to be dominated or objectified by what he calls *theoretism*” (6). She continues:

As opposed to *theoretism*, Bakhtin proposed an ethical and aesthetic response he termed a *prosaics*. Unlike a *poetics*, which since Aristotle has been conceived as a largely formalist and purely aesthetic theory, a *prosaics* integrates the ethical with the aesthetic, focusing on the moral thematics of a literary work, rather than on its formal aesthetic properties. (6)

Donovan suggests that the novel is the genre that best allows for the expression of particularised individual cases (xi). This is, says Donovan, as Bakhtin contended,

“subversive of ‘theoretistic’ authorian dogma.” In chapter four we will see that Bakhtin’s philosophy of the act is the reverse of Kant’s categorical imperative, where we would act the same in all situations and circumstances. For Bakhtin there is no abstract or categorical norm that we would all follow. He rejects all such ‘theoretism’ and, as we shall see, writes about an incarnated philosophy.

In the next section we will see that the novel itself, even when moved away from these explicitly theological genres, continued to challenge and confront theological issues in its exploration of theological and religious themes.

### *Literature’s exploration of theological themes*

Another way in which I wish to discuss the creative tension between literature and theology is to consider the different critical reactions to literary exploration of theological themes. Literature that explores religious, spiritual, and theological themes ranges across the centuries. From the Old English texts “The Seafarer” and “The Wanderer,” the Middle English texts “Pearl,” “Patience,” “Cleanness,” and “Piers Plowman,” Edmund Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene*, John Donne’s *Songs and Sonnets*, John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, Samuel Richardson’s *Clarissa, or The History of a Young Lady*, Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” the novels of Thomas Hardy and D. H. Lawrence, and the plays of Samuel Beckett, through to contemporary fiction like Jill Paton Walsh’s *Knowledge of Angels*, Michael Arditti’s *The Celibate and Easter*, J. M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*, and Ian McEwan’s *Atonement*, the canon and/or counter-canon of English literature resounds with examples of literary texts that explore, for example, the themes of sin, temptation, grace, redemption,

atonement, the nature of fallen humankind, fate, confession, guilt, spirituality and sexuality, and the nature of passion as suffering and intense love. Some of these themes are explored in Eliot's fiction. For example, temptation is a theme explored through the situations that Lydgate, Bulstrode, Mary Garth, and Dorothea face in *Middlemarch*, and that Gwendolen faces in *Daniel Deronda*. Redemption is a theme explored in the fates of Lydgate, Rosamond, Will Ladislaw, and Dorothea in *Middlemarch*, and through Gwendolen, Hans, and Mirah in *Daniel Deronda*.

It is not literature's exploration of theological themes, *per se*, that is problematic. However, there are tensions between liberal-humanist literary theory and criticism, and Christian theology. The Christian position that God has spoken throughout history through the prophets, and his truth is revealed ultimately in and through his Son, Jesus Christ, is incompatible with theories of deconstruction and post-modernism. In some works of literary criticism that define themselves as 'Marxist,' 'psychoanalytical,' or 'feminist,' theological themes are ignored, marginalised, or denigrated. I will explore the history of criticism of religious and theological themes in Eliot's fiction in section one of chapter two. A second problem is that Christian apologists might read Christian themes into fiction. As Paul S. Fiddes, in *Freedom and Limit: A Dialogue between Literature and Christian Doctrine*, writes:

In searching for a relationship between theology and literature, we must beware of denigrating the arts, by treating them as a happy hunting ground for mere 'shadows' of Christian truths. All too often Christian apologists have attempted to turn the great secular writers into crypto-Christians, witnessing to Christian themes unawares and even verifying Christian truth through this witness, as a kind of natural theology of literature. (32-3)

We will see in the next chapter some of the ways that theologians have interpreted Eliot's novels. I am not arguing that Eliot is really a spokesperson for Christianity and a

Christian witness, despite her own religious convictions; however, there are Christian motifs in her works and they have not been given adequate critical expression.

David Jasper writes that for most teachers of literature 'religion and literature' suggests: "either a 'Christian' reading of the literary canon, or a 'Christianizing' of authors who would deeply resist such a move." He says: "One still encounters endless projects to establish 'Christ figures' in literature, or versions of doctrines of atonement embedded in fiction and drama."<sup>45</sup> I do not want to argue that the way that Eliot fits into the debate between literature and theology is through the use of Christ figures or types, though work of this type has been done (again we will look at this in chapter two).<sup>46</sup> I do not look at incarnation, revelation, and transcendence in Eliot as though they are religious themes, and ignore the wider context and genre. I look at how religious motifs operate thematically and structurally and form a bridge between her aesthetics and ethics. Specifically problematic is the critical attention that is paid to *themes* of theological exploration, when this is at the expense of the larger issue of textuality. 'Textuality' is, as Martha Nussbaum points out in *Love's Knowledge: Essays in Philosophy and Literature*, the complex relationships of one text with other texts (170).<sup>47</sup> A reading of theological themes in literary texts that ignores the wider issue of textuality is inadequate and problematic, as we shall see in our review of Eliot scholarship in chapter two.

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<sup>45</sup> See "How Can We Read the Bible?" 20. Jasper also cites the following examples: David Anderson, *The Passion of Man in Gospel and Literature*, Roy W. Battenhouse, *Shakespearean Tragedy: Its Art and Christian Premises*, and F. W. Dillistone, *The Novelist and the Passion Story* ("How Can We Read?" 26).

<sup>46</sup> For example, in "George Eliot's Wesleyan Madonna," Elsie B. Holmes argues that Dinah is "a Methodist Madonna who is a composite of Dante's Virgin Mary, the Roman Catholic's Mother of God, the Protestant's Mother of Jesus, Feuerbach's feminine principle, and the mid-nineteenth century ideal woman" (59). *George Eliot Fellowship Review* 18 (1987): 52-59.

<sup>47</sup> Martha C. Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

Thus, in this section I have introduced the first research context that informs this thesis. We have seen that the fact that the novel as genre has been associated with theological writings such as Puritan autobiographies, provides one reason for examining Eliot's novels from an interdisciplinary perspective. Eliot is a literary descendent of writers like Defoe and Richardson, whose novels had explicit connections to theological genres. We have also seen that novels in general, and Eliot's in particular, continue to engage with religious and theological issues on a thematic level. In the next section I introduce the second research context that informs this thesis, namely Eliot scholarship.

### *Eliot scholarship*

The second gap in Eliot scholarship which this thesis aims to fill is to assess the ways in which recent literary criticism of Eliot's work ignores or misunderstands the theological in her work, and the way in which the theological motifs of incarnation, revelation, and transcendence are tied to her aesthetics and ethics. We need to take seriously the role of the reader, and to be sensitive to Eliot's aesthetic of challenging and changing the reader, and the role that theological motifs play in this process.

### *Eliot and religion*

Peter C. Hodgson, in *Theology in the Fiction of George Eliot*, argues that in Eliot's novels:

[R]eligious figures, roles, beliefs, and practices are treated with both an understanding and a sympathy rare in modern literature. Yet the recent critical studies of George Eliot virtually ignore her engagement with religious issues or find various deconstructive devices to explain it away. The critics simply assume

that she was a nonbeliever who used religion to achieve certain aesthetic, psychological, political, or moral effects. (1)

It is not just that Eliot treats religious ideas and people with sympathy (we shall see her sympathetic treatment of Dissent and Evangelicalism in chapter two), but that religious motifs structure her aesthetics of sympathy. Chapter two of this thesis investigates the history of the various ways in which religious and theological issues have been discussed in Eliot criticism. The failure to read the theological motifs in Eliot is, I argue, connected to a general tendency by literary critics and theorists to overlook theological issues. I look at the specific reasons for this in chapter two.

Chapter two is in three sections. The first section looks at Eliot criticism that does not address the religious, spiritual, and theological themes, images, and motifs that are present in her novels, including the argument that her novels are about the 'death of God.' The second section explores Eliot criticism that looks at the influence of Strauss, Spinoza, Feuerbach, and Comte on the life and writings of Marian Evans. Critics who have examined Eliot's fiction via the lens of her relationship with the 'Religion of Humanity' have tended to read the fiction through the biographical lens. These readings do not account for the way theological motifs of incarnation, revelation, and transcendence operate in both Eliot's aesthetics and ethics and as a bridge between them. Moreover, this method of interpreting Eliot's novels does little to address the generic differences between the philosophers and theologians, and Eliot's novels. The theological nuances of her aesthetics have not been explored fully by literary critics, nor has the way in which the theological motifs provide a bridge between her aesthetics and her ethics. It is only when we appreciate fully these nuances that we can appreciate fully Eliot's aesthetics and ethics and the connection between them. The methods I will

review do not illuminate how these motifs operate both thematically and structurally, aesthetically and ethically.

The third section of chapter two is in two parts. The first explores some of the ways in which religious and theological themes and language have been examined in Eliot's fiction, and focuses on her use of Biblical language, the way in which Dorothea has been interpreted according to a number of religious backgrounds, and Eliot's sympathetic treatment of Dissent and Evangelicalism. Some of the critical approaches of the religious, spiritual, or theological ideas in Eliot's novels ensure that these ideas are just treated as one theme among many. Such a methodology, which treats religious or theological issues as just one theme among many for literature to explore, is not adequate for interdisciplinary study. Either, literary critics tend to look at religious themes in the novels without concerning themselves with questions that theology raises, or theologians use the texts in ways of which literary critics disapprove. The second part examines the way in which two theologians, Peter C. Hodgson and Mary Grey, have employed Eliot's writings to further their own work. Some theologians have misunderstood Eliot's novels, or used them merely to illustrate their own work. These studies which do discuss Eliot's use of religious and theological themes and language have paved the way for my research. In this thesis I build on the foundation they provide, and extend the work that has been done to look at the religious aspects and dimensions of Eliot's aesthetics. To aid me in this work, I employ the ideas of Bakhtin.

### *Eliot and the aesthetic of sympathy*

In chapter three I examine the central tenet of Eliot's aesthetics, namely sympathy. Eliot's novels aim to change her readers for the better; this is her ethics of art. There is plenty of evidence for this in Eliot's letters, reviews, essays and fiction. Some literary critics would argue that this evidence is not relevant because they consider the author's life and views of her work to be extraneous to literary criticism. This view is refuted by other critics, however, thus enabling us to take into consideration this important evidence. Eliot aims to change her reader not through didacticism or preaching, but through expanding her reader's sympathies. Aesthetics are important in Eliot's moral universe because she wants to change her reader through art and not through preaching. The chapter is in three sections. In section one I situate Eliot's aesthetic aim of extending her reader's sympathies within literary theoretical discourse about whether or not a text has an extra-textual referent. New Criticism was dismissive of the idea that a literary text could 'affect' a reader, but the work of Martha Nussbaum has recently rejuvenated this idea. Nussbaum challenges the long-held presupposition that it is inappropriate to ask ethical questions of literary texts. However, Nussbaum does not directly address Eliot and her aesthetics, or the role that religious motifs play. In order to understand how Eliot's fiction changes her readers without being didactic, we need to look at theological understandings of transformation, specifically incarnation, revelation, and transcendence. Nussbaum's understanding of the ethical power of fiction does not explain how Eliot's aesthetic of sympathy works; to articulate this we need to turn to the early philosophical writings of Bakhtin. The work of chapters three and four

provides the groundwork for my analysis of *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda* in chapters five and six.

### *Bakhtin and incarnation*

Marijke Rudnik-Smalbraak, in an article entitled "The One and Another: George Eliot's Dialogic Incarnations," argues that although Eliot and Bakhtin lived at different times and in different cultures, there are a number of similarities between them.<sup>48</sup> Her article is an excellent introduction to the relation between the two writers, and I believe her work can be expanded. Rudnik-Smalbraak describes Bakhtin as a "Russian cultural philosopher with an orientation towards literature" and Eliot as a "British novelist with a leaning towards philosophy." Rudnik-Smalbraak refers to Bakhtin and Eliot as "two kindred spirits," even "two kindred (novelistic) souls" and says:

[B]oth authors, Bakhtin and Eliot, assign a central role to ethics in their thinking and writing, and to the ways in which ethics and aesthetics are interconnected. (501)

This joint interest in ethics and aesthetics is of crucial importance to this thesis. There are a number of ways in which Bakhtin's work on ethics and aesthetics provides a lens for a reading of Eliot's novels, and provides criteria for assessing the role that incarnation, revelation, and transcendence play in Eliot's ethics and aesthetics. I argue that Bakhtin's early philosophical essays provide significant critical tools for analysing Eliot's novels, and for looking at how theological motifs of incarnation, revelation, and transcendence function both thematically and structurally in her novels. I draw on

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<sup>48</sup> Marijke Rudnik-Smalbraak, "The One and Another: George Eliot's Dialogic Incarnations," *Neophilologus* 77: 3 (1993): 499-507.

concepts found in Bakhtin's early writings, including answerability, non-alibi in being, excess of seeing, and self/other relations and explore how they help us read Eliot's novels.

Rudnik-Smalbraak quotes Mary Ann Evans's letter to John Sibree, and offers a Bakhtinian reading of it:

It is necessary to me, not simply to *be* but to *utter*, and I require utterance of my friends. What is it to me that I think the same thoughts? I think them in a somewhat different fashion. No mind that has any *real* life is a mere echo of another . . . It is like a diffusion or expansion of one's own life to be assured that its vibrations are repeated in another, and words are the media of those vibrations.<sup>49</sup>

Marijke Rudnik-Smalbraak writes:

At an early stage of her existence as a speaking and writing subject, Eliot had come to an awareness of the dialogic nature of each individual, living utterance, experiencing the specific context in which such an utterance must needs arise as an existential interaction between "the one" and "another". (501)

This interaction between the "one" and "another" constitutes a paradigm for our understanding of Eliot's aesthetics. In the above quotation we see that Eliot is arguing for the uniqueness of each individual. Furthermore, we see that a response to the other is important to Eliot even at this early stage of her writing life, that the rhetoric of the letter demands a response. In her novels, too, her aesthetics are designed to evoke a response in her reader. Sympathy is not an innate quality, but a response to the other. In her interpretation of this letter, Rudnik-Smalbraak highlights Bakhtinian concepts and argues that "Utterance is being, being is utterance – the word, the act of speaking is of vital, of existential importance to the young Mary Ann." Rudnik-Smalbraak ties this into several passages from Bakhtin. In the series of notes that has been entitled "The

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<sup>49</sup> *GEL* 1, 255. Eliot also refers to her books as "a form of utterance" in *GEL* 4, 472.

Problem of the Text,” Bakhtin says: “For the word, (and, consequently, for a human being) there is nothing more terrible than a *lack of response*” (127).<sup>50</sup> Rudnik-Smalbraak writes:

Therefore, the word of the one must be, indeed *is* inextricably associated with another’s word, in a living exchange, a live interaction. Language is by definition “dialogic”, and so is every individual utterance – it carries within itself the response of the other, orients itself towards such a response and is thus (partly) constructed in and by the “response-potential”. (499)<sup>51</sup>

We will see in chapter four how Bakhtin’s understanding of Chalcedon and intra-trinitarian theology informs his understanding of the word and the human being. For both Eliot and Bakhtin, then, both words and human beings are embodied in time and space – both are relational.

Eliot’s aesthetics are oriented toward the response of the reader. Rudnik-Smalbraak quotes from Bakhtin’s essay “Discourse in the Novel” to show that the word is also directed toward a response:

The word in living conversation is directly, blatantly, oriented toward a future answer-word: it provokes an answer, anticipates it and structures itself in the answer’s direction. Forming itself in the atmosphere of the already spoken, the word is at the same time determined by that which has not yet been said but which is needed and in fact anticipated by the answering word. Such is the situation in any living dialogue (280).<sup>52</sup>

Similarly, Eliot’s aesthetics provoke, anticipate, and are structured towards a response.

Eliot’s aesthetics are dialogic and not simply didactic. Her aesthetics provoke us, they

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<sup>50</sup> See “The Problem of the Text in Linguistics, Philology, and the Human Sciences: An Experiment in Philosophical Analysis,” *Speech Genres and Other Essays*, Eds. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Trans. Vern W. McGee (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), 103-31.

<sup>51</sup> In the discussion of *Middlemarch* we will see the devastation caused by Casaubon’s lack of response to Dorothea and Rosamond’s lack of response to Lydgate.

<sup>52</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel,” *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*, Ed. Michael Holquist. Trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas, 1981) 259-422.

demand a response from us. Rudnik-Smalbraak says that “Mary Ann Evans also felt, however, that her utterance could only come into being, could only begin to vibrate in reciprocity. Words demanded, required a response” (409). We see that this is an essential part of Eliot’s aesthetic endeavour. The rhetorical clues in the text call for a response from the reader. This again has parallels with Bakhtin’s theory of answerability as set out in ‘Art and Answerability.’

Chapter four is in two sections and is centred on the role that incarnation plays in both Eliot’s and Bakhtin’s ethics and aesthetics. Section one of this chapter recaps the literary criticism of Eliot that overlooks the motif of incarnation and suggests reasons for this oversight. Section two explores the role that incarnation plays in three of Bakhtin’s concepts: non-alibi in being, excess of seeing, and self/other relations. Following the close textual analysis of Bakhtin’s early philosophical essays, I offer a Bakhtinian analysis of selected incidents from Eliot’s *Romola*. The aim of this section is to smooth the transition from the theoretical analysis of Bakhtin’s writings to the use of this analysis in my reading of *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda*. In this section I show how the concept of non-alibi in being highlights the moral distinction between Romola and Tito. In both Eliot and Bakhtin’s moral world views, to claim an alibi is wrong. Tito moves deeper into narcissism and egoism, and Romola moves further towards altruism. In this analysis we will see that there is a correlation between those who try and claim an alibi and those who are egoists, and between those who do not try and claim an alibi and those who are altruists. This distinction is important for Eliot’s aesthetic aim. Her aim is to move her reader from egoism towards altruism, and to have her reader not claim an alibi for his or her reading of *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda*.

Bakhtin's first published piece, 'Art and Answerability,' hints that there is a connection between art and life, between aesthetics and ethics. Bakhtin writes:

I have to answer with my own life for what I have experienced and understood in art, so that everything that I have experienced and understood would not remain ineffectual in my life.

This article is at once dense and profound. Bakhtin challenges the reader to read ethically and responsibly, and to live out the implications of, or to *answer* for, what he or she has read.<sup>53</sup> I want to suggest that this idea of answerability helps us read Eliot's aesthetics, and understand that the reader of *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda* is to "answer" with his or her life for what he or she has read in Eliot's novels. Bakhtin's understanding of answerability and his explication of non-alibi in being, excess of seeing, and self/other relations are based on his understanding of the human person, his anthropology. Bakhtin's anthropology is distinctly Christian. The theological motif of incarnation is central to Bakhtin's understanding of the human person, and consequently has ramifications for his understanding of ethics and aesthetics. Answerability cannot be understood without the concept of incarnation.

Bakhtin's argument that we are responsible for what we read can best be understood with reference to non-alibi in being, excess of seeing, and self/other relations. These concepts, which in themselves are not explicitly textual procedures, nonetheless help us bridge the gap between ethics and aesthetics. Important work has

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<sup>53</sup> In *Corporeal Words: Mikhail Bakhtin's Theology of Discourse*, Alexandar Mihailovic says that Bakhtin encouraged his students to research in a similarly active manner. Mihailovic summarises Bakhtin's advice to students at Saransk: "The "active engagement in [the] subject matter" of a scholarly book is "the most important precondition for the productive reading" of it, Bakhtin writes. "The greater and more insistent are our demands towards the book, the more will it speak to us. It does not care for indifferent readers and does not respond to them. The true, engaged work on a book is not a passive appropriation but a living and passionate dialogue with it" (97).

been done by Ruth Coates in *Christianity and Bakhtin*, and by Alexandar Mihailovic in *Corporeal Words: Mikhail Bakhtin's Theology of Discourse*, in establishing the importance of the Christian motif of incarnation in Bakhtin's work.<sup>54</sup> This is a new area of Bakhtin scholarship, which can help us address some of the critical problems surrounding Eliot's aesthetics of sympathy and articulate the role that religious motifs play in this process.

### *Non-alibi in being*

The first of Bakhtin's concepts which I wish to explore is non-alibi in being. Crucial to this concept is Bakhtin's understanding of the human person in time and space. Bakhtin argues that both ethically and aesthetically we each occupy a unique place in space and time and that, as such, none of us has an alibi for our place in existence. By this he means that we are each embodied in a unique space and time, and that our responsibilities are to that time and place. We are free to choose to neglect our responsibilities, but the ethically responsive person does not neglect their duties to the other person. 'Non-alibi' suggests that as a concept it has legal implications, but for Bakhtin the emphasis is moral and ethical. It is a concept that resonates in Eliot's novels. Non-alibi in being works on both an intra-textual and an extra-textual level in *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda*. I will discuss this in chapters five and six.

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<sup>54</sup> Ruth Coates, *Christianity in Bakhtin: God and the exiled author* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

### *Excess of seeing*

The second of Bakhtin's concepts which I wish to bring to a reading of *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda* is excess of seeing. This is a concept which cannot be understood without reference to non-alibi in being and self/other relations, although it is not identical to them. Our unique position in time and space, and in relation to the other, necessitates that on a visual level, we do not see things as other people see them. Our unique position gives us a unique viewpoint. We see what the other does not see. The narrator in both *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda* is constantly shifting her perspective, employing visual motifs such as the telescope and microscope, and encouraging us to look at things in a different way. This concept also works on an intra-textual and extra-textual level in Eliot's novels. I will look at this in chapters five and six.

### *Self/other relations*

The third of Bakhtin's concept which I wish to bring to a reading of Eliot's novels is his discussion of self/other relations. We shall see that Bakhtin's aesthetics, along with his ethics, are based on the recognition of the fundamental difference between the self and the other. In his essays, *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* and "The Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity," we shall see that his ethics and aesthetics are based on the radical separateness of the self and the other, and the author and the hero. Eliot also has her characters learn the essential otherness of the other characters that they come into contact with. Her characters are either more or less egoists or altruists, and through the development of these characters Eliot similarly educates the reader. Non-alibi in being, excess of seeing, and self/other relations do work thematically, but I want to stress their

importance on a structural level. The reader should also recognise and acknowledge that there is a fundamental difference between the reader and the text.

In chapter five I offer a theological reading of the aesthetics of *Middlemarch*. I remind the reader that Eliot's understanding of the human being is that each is an egoist, and that her aim of extending her reader's sympathies is directed towards moving her reader beyond egoism and towards altruism. I relate Eliot's portrayal of egoism in *Middlemarch* to her aim of extending her reader's sympathies. I argue that because of the excess of seeing that the reader enjoys, the reader cannot claim to have an alibi, and must therefore be responsible for his or her reading of *Middlemarch*. In practical terms, being responsible for one's reading means tolerating and accepting the other among whom we live, and being ethically responsible. I have divided the chapter into three sections. Section one examines the egoistic behaviour and thinking of Rosamond Vincy and Edward Casaubon. These characters are self-centred in their actions and their thinking, and relate events and other people to their own concerns and lives. Neither of them responds to the other. Both make their marriage partners unhappy because of their unresponsiveness. Their behaviour serves as a negative example, *i.e.*, how not to behave. In this section I include a discussion of how a number of other characters enjoy an excess of seeing in relation to Casaubon but do not use this excess charitably. Although the narrator of *Middlemarch* makes it quite clear that Casaubon is not to be excused for his behaviour, the reader is not to judge him in the unfavourable way that others do. Section two focuses on the moral failings of Nicholas Bulstrode, particularly with reference to how he tries to claim an alibi for his actions. In section three, I offer a Bakhtinian reading of the emotional climax of the novel. I argue that Dorothea's

acceptance of her incarnated position, her refusal to claim an alibi for her uniqueness, and her employing her excess of seeing in relation to Lydgate, Rosamond, and Ladislav enable us to fully understand the role of incarnation and transcendence in the aesthetics of *Middlemarch*. Dorothea transcends her egoism because of her acceptance of her incarnation in time and space, and her ethical response to that.

In chapter six I offer a theological reading of *Daniel Deronda*. I have divided this chapter into three sections. The first section analyses how Eliot's presentation of the egoistic thinking and behaviour of Grandcourt and Gwendolen is related to her aim of extending her reader's sympathies. The second section compares how Grandcourt and Deronda use the excess of seeing they enjoy in relation to Gwendolen, and how this relates to Eliot's ethics of art. The third section examines Deronda's relation to Mordecai. The novel charts the way in which Deronda embraces his Jewish identity and how Gwendolen learns to relate better to others. In the course of Deronda's relations to Mordecai we see him learn to accept responsibility to the other, and likewise Gwendolen learns this. Bakhtin's understanding of the human being as incarnated and relational helps us understand the complex self/other relations Eliot presents us with in this text, and how her ethics of art affects the way we relate to our neighbour once the act of reading is over.

## Chapter Two: Eliot's novels and Christian theology

The presence of the Christian theological motifs of incarnation, revelation, and transcendence in Eliot's ethics and aesthetics has, I suggested in chapter one, been overlooked by literary critics and theologians. This is problematic because, as we will see in chapter three, the theological motifs of incarnation, revelation, and transcendence are instrumental to the way in which Eliot's aesthetics have an effect on the reader, beyond the text. Eliot's aesthetics are designed to have an affect on the reader and, as I shall demonstrate, the theological motifs operate in both the intra-textual and extra-textual dimensions of *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda*. The failure to appreciate the role that theological motifs play in Eliot's aesthetics contributes to a misreading of Eliot's aesthetics, and in particular, to her being perceived as a didactic moraliser. Eliot has a moral aim, but we will see that she shuns didacticism as a means of achieving it. I do not argue for a 'Christian' reading of Eliot's novels in this thesis. Rather, my aim is to consider how the Christian theological motifs of incarnation, revelation, and transcendence operate thematically and structurally within *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda*, and form a part of Eliot's aesthetic aim of extending her reader's sympathies.

There is a vast body of critical literature on Eliot's life and novels. In my review of this literature in this chapter, I focus on three strands: criticism that does not deal with Eliot's religious and theological themes at all; criticism which considers the influence of David Friedrich Strauss, Benedict Spinoza, Ludwig Feuerbach, and Auguste Comte on Eliot's personal life and/or her fiction; and criticism that has considered Eliot's use of

the religious, spiritual, and theological themes, images, and motifs on a thematic level.<sup>1</sup> Each of these strands fails to do justice to the importance of incarnation, revelation, and transcendence for Eliot's aesthetics and ethics. Literature which overlooks religious themes tends to leave out a fundamental aspect of Eliot's work. The literature which looks at the influence of various nineteenth-century thinkers and theologians fails to take into account the subtlety and complexity of Eliot's ethics as they are developed in her fiction. This is a failure which my own work will seek to correct. The literature that deals with religious themes in Eliot's work provides some useful starting points for my own research, but rarely goes far enough. My work departs from this, in its emphasis on the importance of theological motifs for Eliot's ethics and aesthetics.

I argue that the presence of the Christian theological motifs of incarnation, revelation, and transcendence in Eliot's ethics and aesthetics has been overlooked, even by those who otherwise comment on Eliot's use of religious language, themes, and her treatment of Dissent, Methodism, and Evangelicalism in her novels. This correlates with both a general tendency in literary criticism to ignore Christianity because of liberal-humanist assumptions and presuppositions, as well as a more particular focus on Eliot because of her 'conversion' to the Religion of Humanity.

This chapter explores how literary critics and theologians have read the religious and theological themes and motifs in Eliot's novels. These three strands provide the structure of this chapter; it is in three sections, each dealing with one of these areas of scholarship, in the order outlined above. In the introduction we saw that there were a

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<sup>1</sup> It is possible to categorise Eliot criticism in many ways. For example, Terry Wright, in an essay entitled "Critical Approaches to George Eliot," *George Eliot: Centenary Essays and an Unpublished Fragment* ed. Anne Smith (London: Vision Press, 1980), 21-35, offers a different economy of scholarship. He

number of general tensions between literature and theology, and in this chapter we will see how these tensions affect a reading of Eliot's novels. I now discuss the literary criticism that does not deal with religious or theological themes in Eliot's fiction.

*Eliot criticism that does not deal with religious and theological themes*

There are a number of trends current in Eliot scholarship that do not look at theological or religious themes at all, or else only touch on them tangentially. This critical literature leaves out fundamental aspects of Eliot's work. I have subdivided this section into three parts. Part one looks at interpretations that do not explore religion and theology. Part two looks at criticism that advocates reading *Middlemarch* as a novel that is about the "death of God." Part three reviews the way in which Eliot was seen as offering an alternative to Christian morality in her writing, with the consequence that the Christian motifs in her work were overlooked.

Some of the major areas of recent criticism include Eliot's relation to feminism,<sup>2</sup> the nature of her realism, her interest in science,<sup>3</sup> and her interest in society.<sup>4</sup> Other

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organises criticism of Eliot into the following categories: intellectual, aesthetic, psychological, political, historical, and feminist.

<sup>2</sup> There is a large volume of criticism devoted to Eliot's relation to feminism and feminist thought. There is not space here to list all the books and articles; the reader is referred to the bibliography, and to the entries for Austen, Beer, Blake, Chase, Edwards, Gilbert and Gubar, Millet, Moers, Newton, and Showalter. In addition, the *Oxford Reader's Companion to George Eliot* lists entries for the woman question and feminist criticism.

<sup>3</sup> There is also a substantial volume of criticism devoted to Eliot's relation to science. The reader is referred to the following bibliographic entries: Gillian Beer, *Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narratives in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, George Levine, *Darwin and the Novelists: Patterns of Science in Victorian Fiction*, Diana Postlethwaite, *Making it Whole: A Victorian Circle and the Shape of the World*, Sally Shuttleworth, *George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Science: The Make-Believe of a Beginning*, and Mark Wormald, "Microscopy and Semiotic in *Middlemarch*," *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 50.4 (1996): 501-24. See also the *Oxford Reader's Companion to George Eliot*.

<sup>4</sup> For criticism related to Eliot and society see Suzanne Graver, *George Eliot and Community: A Study in Social Theory and Fictional Form*, and Bernard Semmel, *George Eliot and the Politics of National Inheritance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

studies look at Eliot and blackmail, medicine, the law, or intoxication.<sup>5</sup> The *Oxford Reader's Companion to George Eliot*, in addition, offers entries on new historicist (67-9), post-colonial (69-70), and psychoanalytic approaches to Eliot's novels (70-71). All of these areas of interpretation offer insight into one or other of Eliot's novels, but do not engage with the religious and theological in those novels. However, a number of critics challenge the neglect of critical attention to the religious aspects of Eliot's novels.

Terry Wright, in "Critical Approaches to George Eliot," argues that religion is intrinsic to any real understanding of Eliot's work. He argues that "it is difficult to write about her without discussing the religious and philosophical framework of her novels" (21), and that "any critical approach to George Eliot, if it apprehends her work at all accurately, returns to the central concern with religion in its broadest sense, the attempt to give meaning to life." I agree with Wright's critical assessment of religion in Eliot's novels. It is important to comprehend the religious element of her work, and an interdisciplinary approach is best. However, I have alluded to numerous strands of Eliot criticism which do not attend to the religious and philosophical issues in the novels.

Peter C. Hodgson's *Theology in the Fiction of George Eliot* provides an alternative to these studies that overlook the religious aspects of Eliot's fiction. His work is a response to the critical neglect of religion in Eliot's fiction. He attributes this neglect to "conventional wisdom" that says Eliot lost interest in religion because she became a disciple of the Religion of Humanity, and then explored other subjects in her novels. Hodgson does not agree with this interpretation, and writes: "On a simple level the latter

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<sup>5</sup> See Hao Li, *Memory and History in George Eliot: Transfiguring the Past* (London: Macmillan, 2000), Kathleen McCormack, *George Eliot and Intoxication: Dangerous Drugs for the Condition of England* (London: Macmillan, 2000), and Alexander Welsh, *George Eliot and Blackmail* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985).

statement, at least, is demonstrably false” (1). By this Hodgson means that Eliot’s novels do contain explorations of religious subjects. But he says that critics either ignore these religious issues or find “deconstructive devices” to explain them away (1). These devices might include her ‘conversion’ to the Religion of Humanity, or argue that Eliot only deals with religious issues because she lived during a time when religious issues were more ‘relevant’ than they are today. However, this line of argument conflicts with criticism that situates Eliot in her historical context, but which ignores religion in her work.

Nonetheless, it seems that Hodgson has his own agenda in looking at theological and religious issues in Eliot’s fiction. He is convinced not only that this aspect of her work has been neglected, but also that her “ideas are of considerable interest to theological efforts at rethinking the meaning and substance of religious faith in our own time” (ix). My own reading of Eliot’s novels focuses on the role that Christian theological motifs play in her aesthetics, and is a very different project from Hodgson’s reading of Eliot’s novels as source material for rethinking the meaning and substance of religious faith in our own time.

Another prominent trend in Eliot scholarship at the moment is the need to understand her fiction in its cultural and historical context, *i.e.*, to articulate our understanding of Eliot from our understanding of her context. Josephine McDonagh, in *George Eliot*, argues against reading Eliot as a “writer-genius, oracle of universal and unchanging moral truths”; instead we should see her as “the Victorian intellectual, solidly rooted in the conditions and culture of her own time.”<sup>6</sup> McDonagh argues that it

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<sup>6</sup> Josephine McDonagh, *George Eliot* (Plymouth: Northcote House, 1997).

is vital to understand the culture in which Eliot wrote if we are to understand her fiction. She argues that one feature of the “history-of-ideas approaches” to Eliot’s work has been “to offer insight into the way in which her works provide a forum for the discussion of a surprisingly wide range of non-literary debates, from arenas such as science, politics, or philosophy” (10). She writes that “Eliot adapted the very flexible form of the novel in order to incorporate discussion of the pressing intellectual issues of the day” (11). She argues:

The thrust of recent approaches to Eliot has been to restore her works to this context. Rather than reading them as uncomplicated documents of an enduring reality, critics have begun to see them as complex texts that weave together various kinds of ideas about the world that had a special pertinence in the intellectual debates of the period – ideas to do with evolution, the organisation of society, the place and responsibilities of the individual, or the limits of social progress. (11)

I agree that this assessment is accurate, but it commends everything except religion. It is important to situate Eliot’s novels within the intellectual contexts and debates of her day; but this should not be at the expense of religious issues, as religion is an intrinsic part of Eliot’s historical context. As I mentioned earlier, the idea that Eliot only wrote about religion because of the time in which she lived, conflicts with this neglect of religious motifs and concerns in the history of ideas approach.

These approaches are broad, interesting, and insightful, and willing to consider almost everything except religion and theology, unless, as we shall see in the second section of this chapter, it is to consider Eliot’s relation to the Religion of Humanity. Before looking at Eliot’s relation to Strauss, Spinoza, Feuerbach, and Comte, I now look

at how some critics have read *Middlemarch* as being about the death, or in the words of J. Hillis Miller's book, 'The disappearance of God,' in the nineteenth century.<sup>7</sup>

### *Middlemarch and the 'death of God'*

Terry Wright is associated with a strand of criticism which subverts the presence of the religious and theological in Eliot's fiction. This strand of criticism argues that her fiction is really about 'the death of religion.'<sup>8</sup> Terry Wright and Kerry McSweeney write about the absence of God in *Middlemarch*. In the nineteenth century, biblical scholarship was posing a challenge to the Bible's historicity, and scientific developments were posing a threat to the Genesis narrative. Traditional forms of Christian belief were being challenged on many fronts at this time. The 'death of God' made way for the 'Religion of Humanity.'

Terry Wright's *Middlemarch* contains a chapter on "The Death of God," and in "*Middlemarch* as a Religious Novel, or Life without God," he writes: "Nowhere in George Eliot's work is the absence of God so noticeable as in *Middlemarch*" (641). He argues that *Middlemarch* "goes further than George Eliot's other novels, in which God and Christ are more prominent though very much watered down not only in the narration but in the mouths of his believers," and says the narrative of *Middlemarch* "never for a moment suggests that God might exist" (641).<sup>9</sup> It is true that there are no

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<sup>7</sup> J. Hillis Miller, *The Disappearance of God: Five Nineteenth-Century Writers* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1963).

<sup>8</sup> W. H. Mallock, in his 1879 review of *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, writes that Eliot was "the first great godless writer of fiction that has appeared in England." His review is included in *George Eliot: The Critical Heritage*, ed. David Carroll (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971), 448-460.

<sup>9</sup> Terry Wright, "Middlemarch as a Religious Novel, or Life without God," *Middlemarch*, ed. Bert G. Hornback (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000), 640-649. The essay was first published in *Images of Belief in Literature*, ed. David Jasper (New York: St Martin's Press, 1984), 138-53. Also *George Eliot's Middlemarch* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991).

explicit references to or discourse about God and Christ in *Middlemarch*. However, Christian motifs are nonetheless present in the texts in a number of ways. Kerry McSweeney agrees with Wright that *Middlemarch* is “an important piece of evidence in the case of the disappearance of God in the nineteenth century.”<sup>10</sup> Terry Wright suggests:

Christian critics, or those with an interest in literature and religion, should be able to appreciate the novel for its vivid and accurate representation of the agonies endured in the nineteenth century by those learning to live without God. (641)

The dangers inherent in this approach are two-fold. This is a somewhat socio-religious approach to the novel. There is a tendency to read the novel through Eliot’s historical situation, or a pseudo-biographical approach – that the search for religion or God in the novel is really Eliot’s account of her own religious agonies.

Kerry McSweeney does not focus on the religious “agonies,” but on what he perceives to be Eliot’s alternative body of belief, *i.e.*, alternative to Christianity. He writes:

In *Middlemarch*, Eliot presents a non-theological and non-metaphysical body of beliefs that she believes capable of providing a basis for non-egotistic values and other-regarding actions, and of performing for gifted members of the modern social organism, the same ennobling function that traditional religious ideals had performed for St Teresa of Avila, who lived in a society still in its theological phase. These beliefs form the doctrinal core of *Middlemarch*; since they are directly articulated by the narrator, as well as reflected in character and action, it is not difficult to extrapolate them from the text. (26)

I agree that “non-egoistic values and other-regarding actions” are important, but they are not achieved by the means that McSweeney identifies. From McSweeney’s argument above, it is not clear whether he is advocating the notion of extrapolating “non-

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<sup>10</sup> Quoted in W. J. Harvey, “Criticism of the novel: contemporary reception,” *Middlemarch: Critical Approaches to the Novel*, ed. Barbara Hardy (London: Athlone Press, 1967), 145.

theological and non-metaphysical beliefs” from the text. I question whether we can take the narrator of *Middlemarch* to be a mouthpiece for Eliot herself. It is dangerous to conflate what we know of Eliot’s life with the narrator of *Middlemarch*, since the use of a narrator is a complex narrative device, and one that Eliot skilfully manipulates throughout her texts. In chapter five I argue that in addition to learning about the agonies endured by those learning to live without God, *Middlemarch* can be appreciated for many more reasons. It can be appreciated for the way in which the motif of incarnation functions thematically and structurally in and through characters like Dorothea and Lydgate. It can be appreciated for the way in which revelation is important for the characters and the readers, and the way in which Eliot employs the motif of transcendence in the lives of her characters and in a position of centrality in her ethics.

Wright says that *Middlemarch* is:

a religious novel in the broad sense that it is concerned with religious need, the desire to find unity, meaning and purpose in life, in a world in which God, to use one of the key words of the novel, is a ‘blank’. (641-2)

This catch-all definition of a religious novel could refer to many novels which are much less explicitly religious than *Middlemarch*. *Middlemarch*, along with *Daniel Deronda*, is a “religious novel” in much more explicit ways. Wright says that *Middlemarch* “represents a world unredeemed by revelation in which religious needs must be met by entirely human means” (649). Eliot’s belief or unbelief in revelation is not the issue here: religious motifs, including the motifs of incarnation, revelation, and transcendence, operate in *Middlemarch* in a more sophisticated way that Wright here suggests. In the chapters on *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda* I argue that for those interested in religion and literature, Bakhtin offers a different way of reading these novels, one that

enables the reader to appreciate Eliot's use of theological motifs in both her ethics and her aesthetics. It is not my intention to argue for a Christianised reading of *Middlemarch*, or indeed *Daniel Deronda*. However, I do argue that there are theological motifs in these novels. Moreover, incarnation, revelation, and transcendence are part of the fabric of *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda*. It is important to recognise these because I will show that the "other-regarding actions" and "non-egotistical values" highlighted by McSweeney still rely on the theological motifs of incarnation, revelation, and transcendence. These theological motifs are integral to Eliot's moral vision.

### *Eliot as moral guide*

In addition to the criticism that proposes that *Middlemarch* is a novel about the 'death' or 'disappearance' of God, there is a strand of criticism that argues that Eliot's novels helped bridge the gap between a Christian and a post-Christian world view.<sup>11</sup> This criticism argues that Eliot's novels helped ensure the continuance of a Christian morality, without the supernatural aspects of the religion. At the height of her literary career, Eliot's reputation rested not only on her literary merit, but also on the moral contents of her work. As Josephine McDonagh writes in *George Eliot*, at the time of her death Eliot had gained not only "literary acclaim," but also "moral prestige" (2). McDonagh quotes Bernard Semmel's argument in *George Eliot and the Politics of National Inheritance*, that Eliot "came to occupy the revered position of a moral guide within a period of changing religious and social views." Semmel cites G. M. Young's

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<sup>11</sup> Sara M. Putzell-Korab, in *The Evolving Consciousness: An Hegelian Reading of the Novels of George Eliot* (Salzburg, 1982), argues that Eliot is the "most influential of post-Christian Victorian novelists" (2). Putzell-Korab defines post-Christian as seeing the Christian faith "not as the goal or fulfillment of an

claim that Eliot had 'saved us from the moral catastrophe which might have been expected to follow upon the waning of religious conviction.' McDonagh argues that: "The idea that Eliot's work is morally redemptive, capable of supplying secure moral values in a profane world, is a theme that comes to the fore in much of the criticism of her work" (2). Some contemporary critics did not realise that Eliot was writing as an agnostic. Others praised her work because her morals kept going in spite of the loss of religious faith. David Carroll, in "George Eliot: The Sibyl of Mercia," writes that "despite losing her own Christian faith, [Eliot] reasserted in no uncertain terms firm moral truths" (12).<sup>12</sup> This reputation of being a moral guide was a mixed blessing. On the one hand the moral content of her work softened the disapprobation that Eliot had suffered as a fallen woman, but on the other hand it led to her being perceived as an overt moraliser.

We saw in chapter one how English literature came to be perceived as offering an alternative to Christianity. There is a need to recognise the role that Christian motifs play in Eliot's moral vision. Carroll says that "there were those who never became aware that she was seeking to separate the forms and rituals of religion from its moral content, and they remained happy with what one reviewer called the "high Christian morality" of the early novels" (12). In chapter three we will see that following Eliot's death her novels became unpopular and her literary reputation suffered a decline. Her novels were perceived to be too moralistic and too didactic. However, developments in literary criticism and theory now mean that Eliot's novels are read in different ways. Her

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individual's life, but as a phase through which an individual develops and beyond which the true, modern hero progresses" (2).

<sup>12</sup> David Carroll, "George Eliot: The Sibyl of Mercia," *Studies in the Novel* 15.1 (Spring 1983): 10-25.

texts are more complex and do not preach. Her morals or ethics are an integral part of the narrative structure and are not easily extracted.

In this section I have shown some of the ways in which literary critics ignore the religious and theological themes in Eliot's novels. I have also examined two texts of literary criticism that argue that *Middlemarch* is about the absence or death of God. In the third section I discussed whether Eliot's novels have been offered as an alternative to Christianity morality. Some of the reasons behind this critical oversight stem from the cultural climate of literature and theology today, but as we shall see in the next section, other reasons stem from reading Eliot's novels through a biographical lens and seeing them as representing the Religion of Humanity.

*Eliot criticism which considers the influence of David Friedrich Strauss, Benedict Spinoza, Ludwig Feuerbach, and Auguste Comte on her personal life and/or her fiction*

Much of the literary criticism that has considered the religious aspect of Eliot's novels has focused on the nature of the influence of Strauss, Spinoza, Feuerbach, and Comte on her life and fiction. In this section I examine the literary criticism which has focused on her relation to these thinkers. I have identified five general problems with this type of criticism, as well as a number of specific problems with the individual writers. First, some critics actually seem to conflate a religious biography of Eliot with interpretations of the novels. There is a danger that critics allow Eliot's own religious biography to dictate their reading of the novels, thereby analysing her novels in a manner that follows

Eliot's autobiography.<sup>13</sup> Second, while Marian Evans writes of the rapport she feels with the authors she translated and studied, this does not necessarily result in a direct correlation of influence in the novels themselves. Third, individual critics argue over the extent to which Eliot was influenced by one or other of these thinkers. One result of this is a number of conflicting, even contradictory, readings of the novels. For example, both *Romola* and *Middlemarch* are described as Positivist and anti-Positivist novels.<sup>14</sup> Fourth, this type of criticism can be reductionist. For example, Terry Wright, in *Theology and Literature*, writes:

All George Eliot's novels, in fact, present Christianity through the reductive lenses of Strauss and Feuerbach, whose *Life of Jesus* and *Essence of Christianity* she translated. The three clergymen depicted in *Scenes of Clerical Life* learn to place more importance on human than divine love. Adam Bede learns humility through the Feuerbachian 'baptism' of suffering while Dinah Morris, the Methodist preacher, grows to lean more on her innate intuition than on the Bible, Maggie Tulliver accepts the guidance of à Kempis, imitating Christ in self-sacrifice, but without any hope of sharing in the resurrection. Savonarola withdraws his claims to supernatural vision, so winning *Romola's* devotion. Felix Holt pours scorn on all unprovable metaphysical beliefs while Dorothea Brooke loses all faith in anything but a 'divine' struggle of good against evil. Even for Daniel Deronda his discovery of Judaism involves a sense of historical mission rather than a spiritual call. (115-16)

This comment is problematic because it does not allow for the change we saw in Eliot's religious beliefs to filter through into her fiction. In comparing the early and the later novels it offers no comment on any developments in Eliot's artistry. I am troubled by

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<sup>13</sup> Peter C. Hodgson argues that it is misleading to suggest that she became a disciple of any of these thinkers (6).

<sup>14</sup> James F. Scott, in "George Eliot, Positivism, and the Social Vision of *Middlemarch*," *Victorian Studies* 16 (1972): 59-76, argues that Eliot was at once respectful and critical of Comte and Positivism. He argues that although there are some sections of *Middlemarch* that could be interpreted as following the recommendations of Frederic Harrison, ultimately the failures of Lydgate and Bulstrode argue against a Comtean interpretation of *Middlemarch*. Martha Vogeler, in "George Eliot and the Positivists," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 35 (December 1980): 406-31, agrees with Scott, and says that *Middlemarch* is not a positivist novel, and that the Positivists themselves did not recognise it as such either. For further discussion see Nancy L. Paxton, "Feminism and Positivism in George Eliot's *Romola*," *Nineteenth-Century Women Writers of the English-Speaking World*, ed. Rhoda Nathan (Westport, CT.: 1986), 143-

the idea that Eliot is presenting Christianity in any explicit way. Also this interpretation of Eliot's novels relies heavily on the fact that Eliot translated these authors. Eliot's translations of Strauss and Feuerbach are stumbling blocks to literary critics, when they use them as reasons not to look at the Christian motifs in her fiction. Here Wright is reducing Eliot's involvement with Christianity to a thematic level only, and his interpretation is heavily dependent on the plots of the novels. Wright neither engages with the structure or the extra-textual dimension of the novels, nor with Eliot's aesthetic aim of extending her reader's sympathies. Eliot may have aimed to extract the supernatural from Christianity, but she did not extract Christian motifs from her fiction.

A fifth problem is that Strauss, Spinoza, Feuerbach, and Comte were all philosophers or theologians, and Eliot was a writer of fiction. There is little writing that addresses the questions of interdisciplinary influence. Critical writing that discusses the influence of these writers on Eliot overlooks these generic differences. It is better to exercise caution and avoid confusing Eliot with these thinkers. The differences between Eliot and these thinkers will become clearer in chapter three when I look at Eliot's aesthetics. I do not offer an exhaustive critique of Eliot criticism which considers the influence of these thinkers on Eliot's life and fiction. I am not wishing to read the fiction against the biographical facts of Marian Lewes's life and religious conscience and convictions, but I argue that reading Eliot's novels through the lens of Strauss, Spinoza, Feuerbach, and Comte, is not the most appropriate lens to help the reader to appreciate the theological motifs that can be found in the novels. Rather, my purpose in this section is to argue that this type of literary criticism offers inadequate analysis of the theological

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50, Bernard Semmel, *George Eliot and the Politics of National Inheritance*, and Terry Wright, "George Eliot and Positivism: A Reassessment," *Modern Language Review* 76.2 (1981): 257-72.

motifs of incarnation, revelation, and transcendence found in the novels, and inadequate analysis of the complexities and particulars that occur in Eliot's fiction. In particular, I focus on the motif of the incarnation, and on the individual and how this ties to the idea of the novel as a form of ethical knowledge. I have divided this section into four, and look at each of these writers in turn. A more sophisticated and integrated interdisciplinary approach that looks at the differences between the writers, as well as the degrees of influence, is needed. Reading Eliot's novel through the lens of Bakhtin provides this integrated interdisciplinary approach.

### *Eliot and Strauss*

Eliot scholars have focused on the influence of Strauss on her life and work because she translated his work. However, it is clear that Eliot found the task, the subject matter, and the methodology of the translation unpalatable. Of immediate concern for my discussion of the role that theological motifs play in her ethics and aesthetics, is the fact that she found the subject matter of the translation unpalatable. Strauss's argument that the human and the divine are united in humanity as a whole rather than in an individual, Jesus Christ, is antithetical to Eliot's artistic endeavour. After briefly describing Eliot's experience of translating Strauss, I examine his understanding of the unity of the human and the divine, and show how Eliot's aesthetics and ethics divert from this understanding.

We saw in chapter one that Marian Evans took on the task of translating Strauss's *Das Leben Jesu*, after Rufa Brabant gave up the translation after marrying

Charles Hennell.<sup>15</sup> Evans considered the task a duty and worked diligently, consulting Sara Hennell on points of German as she went along. The translation took from 1844 to 1846, and at various points along the way Evans described herself as “Strauss-sick.”<sup>16</sup> David Jasper, in *The Sacred and Secular Canon in Romanticism: Preserving the Sacred Truths*, in a chapter entitled, “*Weltliteratur* and the Biblical Critics,” writes:

Strauss [. . .] she often found dry and pedantic, a ‘German system-monger’ whose methodology was to her relentless, dissective and repetitive. It was said that she frequently could only endure to continue her work of translation by gazing while she worked at a cast of the neoclassical Danish sculptor Bertel Thorwaldsen’s beautiful figure of the Risen Christ. (77)

Basil Willey, in *Nineteenth-Century Studies: From Coleridge to Matthew Arnold*, writes of Evans’ “much groaning and sickness of heart” (220), and quotes her description of “soul-stupefying labour.”<sup>17</sup> It is ironic that Evans had to gaze at a statue of Christ while she was translating a text which dissected traditional Christian understanding of the incarnation.

Strauss critiqued the Christian concept of the particularity and uniqueness of Jesus Christ and the traditional understanding of the incarnation. Hans Frei, in *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Hermeneutics*, in a chapter entitled “Strauss’s Perfection of the “Mythical” Option,” writes:

The upshot of [Strauss’s] study seemed to him to be that the truth of the Christian claim, the idea of reconciliation or of the unity of the infinite and finite in man and his history, is philosophical [. . .] in nature and, therefore, has no essential, indispensable connection with any single historical occurrence or series

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<sup>15</sup> Evans met Strauss on two occasions. The first occasion was unprofitable, as Strauss appeared down, and Evans’s spoken German was not good enough to permit conversation (*GEL* 2, 171). A second meeting occurred in July 1858, when Eliot’s spoken German was much improved (*GEL* 2, 472). For further details see the *Oxford Reader’s Companion to George Eliot*, under ‘Strauss’.

<sup>16</sup> *GEL* 1, 206, 207, and 217-18.

<sup>17</sup> Basil Willey, *Nineteenth-Century Studies: Coleridge to Matthew Arnold* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1949), and *GEL* 1, 185.

of occurrences. In other words, it is not dependent for its truth on the claims that a God-man once existed and that Jesus Christ was that God-man. (235)<sup>18</sup>

In theological terms, Strauss is saying that Jesus Christ was not uniquely both God and man, and that his life, death and resurrection were not responsible for reconciling God and humankind in any substantive way. Strauss himself asks:

[I]s not the idea of the unity of the divine and human natures a real one in a far higher sense, when I regard the whole of mankind as its realization, than when I single out one man as such a realization? is not an incarnation of God from eternity a truer one than incarnation limited to a particular point of time (780, xxvii).<sup>19</sup>

In this, Strauss is denying the uniqueness and particularity of Jesus Christ, and dismissing the doctrine of the Incarnation as implausible. By arguing that the idea of the unity of the divine and human is more real when considered in respect of the whole of humanity as opposed to being centred in one individual, Strauss profoundly alters and diminishes the uniqueness and person of Jesus Christ. Peter C. Hodgson summarises this line of argument: "It is humanity to which the christological predicates are properly ascribed" (6). Strauss goes on to argue that everyone is affected by the time and place into which they are born, and argues that traditional Christian interpretations of Christ ask one to believe that Christ, and Christ alone, is unaffected by the time and place in which he was born. He expands:

[E]ven the most highly gifted of human individuals is always influenced by the conditions of the particular circle in which he lives and moves. He belongs to a special family, age, and nation; his soul, however, independent and self-centred, is fed on the one hand, and on the other limited by the nature and degree of the culture so derived; his aims are swayed by surrounding circumstance, and are

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<sup>18</sup> Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven, CT.: Yale University Press, 1974).

<sup>19</sup> Marian Evans, in her review of R. W. Mackay's *The Progress of the Intellect*, highlights his faith that divine revelation is similarly not contained exclusively in one age or nation; it is rather, an ongoing process. See Willey, *Nineteenth-Century Studies*, 229. This review is included in *Essays of George Eliot*, 27-45.

hence exposed not only to obstructions in their execution, but also to indefinite modifications and improvements resulting from maturer experience. But the divinely begotten Son or Incarnate Word of traditional belief is under no such restriction. His original endowment needs no human teaching, being entirely and absolutely independent of limiting conditions of family or nation; his aims, or rather the single aim to fulfil which he is sent into the world, is pre-appointed from eternity, and carried out with inevitable persistency and certainty, apart from any of the usual influences of social life, or even of the laws of nature.

Strauss's argument that the divinely begotten Son or Incarnate Word of traditional belief is under no such restrictions as ordinary human beings is, like most heresies, based on a half-truth. It is true that Christ's aim *is* pre-appointed from eternity, and *is* carried out with certainty, and the world around him cannot prevent this aim. The problem for Strauss was the idea that Jesus was unlike other people, and did not seem to have to abide by the same rules. David Jasper writes that Strauss offers a negative response to his formulation that a person can at once be a unique manifestation of the divine life and also participate fully in the nexus of history like other human beings (*Sacred and Secular*, 84). This idea that Jesus Christ was unlike other people and did not have to abide by the same rules is at once true and not true. The paradox in the Christian conception of Jesus Christ, both biblically and according to Christian tradition, is that he is unique and yet at the same time like us in every way.<sup>20</sup> However, Strauss deviates from mainstream Christian belief about the nature of the incarnation, which is about God taking on human flesh and being subject to time and place.

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<sup>20</sup> Biblical support for this view can be found in the following passages: John 1v1-3, 14, Romans 1v1-4 ("who as to his human nature was a descendant of David"), Romans 8v3, Galatians 4v4, Phil 2v5-8 (Christ Jesus "being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness"), Colossians 2v9 ("For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form"), Hebrews 2v14-18 ("he too shared in their humanity," and "he had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted"), Hebrews 4v15 ("For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our

It is difficult to know the effect that Strauss had on Eliot. Peter C. Hodgson offers this commentary on Strauss's argument that humanity as a whole is the union of the divine and the human, rather than a single individual:

Eliot must have found such a conclusion to be both abstract and unproductive: we have to do not with humanity as a whole but with concrete human beings, through whom alone ideals and values become historical realities. It is a rather odd bourgeois illusion to suppose, as Strauss did, that humanity as such is the union of two natures, divine and human – working intellectual miracles, progressing toward moral perfection, triumphing over nature, etc. (6)

This is a significant observation for Eliot's aesthetics and ethics. In Eliot's fiction, she is very much concerned with concrete individual human beings rather than humanity as a whole. Her novels focus on the struggle of individuals, her characters learn that they have to relate to specific others, and she encourages her readers to relate to individuals. Eliot and Strauss are different types of writers. The novel as a genre does not deal with humanity as a whole, but with specific human beings. Eliot expresses clearly this concern for individual human beings in a letter to Charles Bray, 15 November, 1857. She writes:

I dislike extremely a passage [. . .] in which you appear to consider the disregard of individuals as a lofty condition of mind. 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. The fact that in the scheme of things we see a constant and tremendous sacrifice of individuals is, it seems to me only one of the many proofs that urge upon us our total inability to find in our own natures a key to the Divine Mystery. I could more readily turn Christian again and worship Jesus again than embrace a Theism which professes to explain the proceedings of God.<sup>21</sup>

Eliot's conviction, expressed in this quotation, that our moral progress can be measured by the degree in which we sympathise with "individual suffering and individual joy" is

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weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet was without sin"), and 1 John 5v20.

<sup>21</sup> GEL 2, 402-4.

central to her whole aesthetic endeavour. Our sympathy with another individual is both the theme and the goal of her writings, and shall be explored more fully in the next chapter. In my analysis of *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda* in chapters five and six I will show that Bakhtin provides a better model for understanding the incarnation motif in Eliot than Strauss. A comparison of Strauss and Eliot is misleading for a reading of Eliot's aesthetic of sympathy. Strauss denies the possibility and validity of the uniqueness of Christ's incarnation, *i.e.*, he argues that the Christian doctrine that Christ was both fully human and fully divine is implausible. He argues against Christ's uniqueness, because it sets him apart from us. However, Bakhtin hints that it is only Christ's incarnation that allows for our uniqueness. We are only capable of treating the other properly, ethically, as it were, once we accept his or her uniqueness. Christ's uniqueness is the guarantee of our uniqueness. Christ's uniqueness does not belittle us, and it is the only thing that guarantees that each human being is seen as unique. Because Christ is unique, we see the other as unique. Christ's incarnation in time and space means that we need to recognise that everyone else is also in time and space. Strauss thinks that an emphasis on Christ's uniqueness limits and restricts us, but in fact it is only Christ's incarnation that guarantees our freedom. Christ's incarnation provides the rationale behind why we should treat the other or the neighbour fairly. Bakhtin's early philosophical essays, and the concepts of answerability, non-alibi in being, excess of seeing, and self/other relations, all rely on the motif of incarnation. Bakhtin argues that our ethics and aesthetics depend on our incarnation, which in turn is dependent on Christ's incarnation. In Bakhtin, we see Jesus Christ compared to human beings, and

that Christ, like us, is incarnated in time and space. It is Christ's uniqueness that legitimises attention being paid to individuals.

In this section we have seen that Eliot translated Strauss's work, but that she found it an unpleasant task, both with regard to theme and methodology. The work itself she found difficult and the conclusions unsatisfying. Strauss's idea that the divine and the human are united in humanity as a whole, rather than in an individual (*i.e.*, Jesus Christ), is antithetical to Eliot's whole aesthetic endeavour. Eliot wants us to have sympathy for "individual suffering and individual joy," and she would have her characters and her readers respond to the particular, rather than the more vague notion of the species that Strauss proposes. Moreover, she presents flawed characters and calls us to sympathise with them. In the next section I look at the divide in critical opinion over the degree to which Spinoza influenced Eliot, before looking at Dorothy Atkins's work on Spinoza's influence on Eliot's novels. Atkins's book is one of the few devoted to the study of both authors.

### *Eliot and Spinoza*

Eliot scholars have considered whether Spinoza's work influenced Eliot because she translated his writings. Marian Lewes worked on a translation of Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-politicus* (1670) in 1849 (it was unpublished), and his *Ethics* (1677) between 1854 and 1856 (published in 1981). Although there is significantly less critical material written on Eliot's relation to Spinoza, critical opinion is nonetheless divided over the extent to which Eliot was influenced by his work. Rosemary Ashton, in *George Eliot*, says that Spinoza is quite influential on her work (15), whereas Peter Jones, in

*Philosophy and the Novel*, says that Eliot was not influenced by Spinoza.<sup>22</sup> Dorothy Atkins, in *George Eliot and Spinoza*, laments “the neglect of detailed consideration for the influence of Spinoza on George Eliot,” and her book is one of the few to address the specific relation between the two writers.<sup>23</sup> Atkins discusses Eliot’s characters in relation to freedom and bondage. She argues that Eliot often pairs characters thematically, to show the struggle for freedom from bondage. This criticism relates to an understanding of the human being and the way in which we sympathise with individuals. Atkins offers an interesting perspective on Eliot’s presentation of character. She says that people need to understand their position in the world, and the way they should relate to others. She writes:

The action of [Eliot’s] novels is dramatised against a background which is very large and complicated, and characters have to come to an understanding of the intricate web of interconnecting human lives and the larger framework of community existence. Individuals must work out personal salvation within fixed temporal and social boundaries. Characters either grow into knowledge or remain in bondage, depending on their acceptance and understanding of this large sphere of existence. (10-11)

This is an interesting commentary on Eliot’s novels, which contains some insights with which I agree. For example, the background, or medium in which the novel’s action occurs, *is* large and complicated, and Eliot’s characters *do* have to come to an understanding of the intricate web of interconnecting human lives, as well as the larger framework of community existence. Similarly, in chapters five and six, we see that

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<sup>22</sup> Rosemary Ashton, *George Eliot* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 74-75, and Peter Jones, *Philosophy and the Novel: philosophical aspects of ‘Middlemarch’, ‘Anna Karenina’, ‘The brothers Karamazov’, ‘A la recherche du temps perdu’ and of the methods of criticism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975).

<sup>23</sup> Dorothy Atkins, *George Eliot and Spinoza*, Salzburg Studies in English Literature Romantic Reassessment 78 (Salzburg, 1978). “The neglect of detailed consideration for the influence of Spinoza on George Eliot is unfortunate because Spinoza, alone among the philosophers she studied carefully for translation, formulated a complex ethical system [...] George Eliot based her assumptions concerning human responsibility and morality in part on the ethical philosophy of Spinoza” (5).

Eliot's characters are aware, often acutely so, of their "fixed temporal and social boundaries" or the lack thereof. We see that this serves a dual purpose in Eliot's aesthetics: Eliot's characters learn to be more sympathetic to one another, and readers learn to be sympathetic to characters. In *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda* Eliot shows a thematic and structural interest in the individual both in relation to society and others. An understanding of the human being in his or her social context is vital to Eliot's aesthetic aim. Through understanding how an individual character is situated in a particular time and place, with specific responsibilities and social pressure being exerted on them, we learn about the pressures an individual faces, and consequently learn to sympathise with him or her. However, I argue that Bakhtin's concepts of non-alibi in being, excess of seeing, and his understanding of self/other relations are better lenses through which to view this phenomenon than Spinoza's concepts of bondage and freedom, and they also help the reader understand the role that the motifs of incarnation, revelation, and transcendence play in Eliot's novels.

### *Eliot and Feuerbach*

Eliot scholars have focused on the influence of Feuerbach because, once again, Eliot translated his work. Eliot had greater choice over her translation of Feuerbach's work, and seems to have enjoyed more affinity with his writings than with either Strauss or Spinoza. Marian Evans's translation of Feuerbach was the only work to be published under her own name. It was published by John Chapman in 1854. *The Oxford Companion to George Eliot* says Eliot's decision to translate Feuerbach was "self-initiated" (418). Eliot scholars comment on the greater influence of Feuerbach.

However, once again, differences emerge when we look at the understanding of the human being in relation to Eliot's aesthetics and ethics. Differences emerge not only between the styles of the two writers, but also in the understanding and treatment of human beings.

Critics and biographers agree that Eliot found Feuerbach's teaching about marriage being a 'free bond of love' and 'sacred in itself' congenial to her decision to live with George Henry Lewes. Kathryn Hughes, in *George Eliot: The Last Victorian*, argues that Marian found "theological justification" for her relationship with Lewes in Feuerbach's ideas that the quality of relationships, and not their legal status was what mattered, and was what made a marriage 'moral' and 'religious' (146). Eliot's translation of Feuerbach and her decision to live with Lewes are concurrent. Rosemary Ashton, in "The Intellectual 'Medium' of *Middlemarch*," says that Feuerbach's writings about marriage were "of intellectual and emotional importance" to Eliot at this time (166).<sup>24</sup> Critics also suggest that Eliot learnt the notion of sympathy from Feuerbach, but as we have seen, she may also have learnt it from Wordsworth or Christianity.

Kerry McSweeney, in *George Eliot (Marian Evans): A Literary Life*, writes:

*The Essence of Christianity* was a frontal assault on the transcendental and supernatural postulates of traditional Christian belief. For Feuerbach, nothing transcended man. The true sense of theology was anthropology [. . .] there was 'no distinction between the *predicates*' of the divine and the human subject. (32-3)

As we saw in chapter one, Eliot herself was troubled by the supernatural tenets of Christianity. Feuerbach attacks not only the subject of theology, *i.e.*, he attacks the idea that God is a Supreme Being, transcendent of humankind, he also attacks the method by

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<sup>24</sup> Rosemary Ashton, "The Intellectual 'Medium' of *Middlemarch*," *The Review of English Studies* 30 (1979): 154-168.

which we talk about God. Specifically he challenges the idea that humans can only know about God or know God to the extent to which God chooses to reveal Godself. It is something of a circuitous argument. If you say that theology is nothing more than anthropology then it is clear that your system of thought cannot allow for any notion of revelation that is beyond the human. I now discuss Feuerbach's understanding of revelation in more detail.

In *The Essence of Christianity* Feuerbach attacks the idea that man can in and of himself know nothing of God, *i.e.*, the idea that the only knowledge we have of God is what God himself reveals to us. Feuerbach critiques the Christian understanding of revelation in particular. Feuerbach sees revelation in opposition to human knowledge and reason:

The belief in revelation exhibits in the clearest manner the characteristic illusion of the religious consciousness. The general premiss [*sic*] of this belief is: man can of himself know nothing of God; all his knowledge is merely vain, earthly, human. But God is a superhuman being; God is known only by himself. Thus we know nothing of God beyond what he reveals to us. The knowledge imparted by God is alone divine, superhuman, supernatural knowledge. By means of revelation, therefore, we know God through himself; for revelation is the word of God – God declaring himself. Hence, in the belief in revelation man makes himself a negation, he goes out of and beyond himself; he places revelation in opposition to human knowledge and opinion; in it is contained a hidden knowledge, the fullness of all supersensuous mysteries; here reason must hold its peace. (206)<sup>25</sup>

Feuerbach attacks this "illusion" and says that God must have reference not to himself but to man's power of comprehension. He argues, therefore, that what man can understand can only come from man in God. He argues that the ideal nature of man reveals itself to the phenomenal man:

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<sup>25</sup> From "The Contradiction in the Revelation of God," *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. George Eliot (New York: Prometheus Books, 1989). All subsequent references are to this edition.

Now what God thinks in relation to man is determined by the idea of man – it has arisen out of reflection on human nature. [. . .] In the scheme of his revelation God must have reference not to himself, but to man's power of comprehension. That which comes from God to man, comes to man only from *man in God*, that is, only from the ideal nature of man to the phenomenal man, from the species to the individual. Thus, between the divine revelation and the so-called human reason or nature there is no other than an illusory distinction; – the contents of the divine revelation are of human origin, for they have proceeded not from God as God, but from God as determined by human reason, human wants, that is directly from human reason and human wants. And so in revelation man goes out of himself, in order, by a circuitous path, to return to himself! Here we have a striking confirmation of the position that the secret of theology is nothing else than anthropology – the knowledge of God nothing else than a knowledge of man! (207). Preface to second edition xxxvi-xxxix.

Feuerbach rejects the revelation contained in the Bible, for example, through the creation account in Genesis, Exodus, the Law, the Prophets, and the theological arguments contained in Romans and Hebrews. Feuerbach limits God's revelation to human comprehension. Since human comprehension is the limit of what he can learn, then what can ultimately be revealed is only human; therefore God must be human. He argues away any distinction between human reason and divine revelation (The biblical text of 1 Corinthians differentiates between human reason and divine revelation). Feuerbach's conclusions are by no means widely accepted by theologians: many challenge Feuerbach's argument that the secret of theology is anthropology. I now move to look at the differences between Eliot and Feuerbach, including differences in style and differences in the understanding and treatment of human beings. Feuerbach's understanding of the species and the individual is not in accord with Eliot's artistic endeavour.

In *The Essence of Christianity* Feuerbach argues that the faults of one human being are cancelled out by the virtues of another human being. Consequently, although each individual human being is flawed, the species as a whole is perfect. We read:

All men are sinners. Granted; but they are not all sinners in the same way; on the contrary, there exists a great and essential difference between them. One man is inclined to falsehood, another is not; he would rather give up his life than break his word or tell a lie; the third has a propensity to intoxication, the fourth to licentiousness; while the fifth, whether by favour of Nature, or from the energy of his character, exhibits none of these vices. Thus, in the moral as well as the physical and intellectual elements, men compensate for each other, so that taken as a whole they are as they should be, they present the perfect man. (155-6)<sup>26</sup>

Feuerbach puts this thought succinctly: “The sins and failings of individuals vanish in the species itself” (157). He says that in the species alone “lies the redemption, the justification, the reconciliation and the cure of the sins and deficiencies of the individual” (159). This line of reasoning does not take into account the way in which each human being’s sin or moral failings has consequences on the next human being. Eliot’s novels, on the other hand, show in great detail the effect that one’s behaviour has on one’s neighbours. In Feuerbach’s moral scheme, there is little call to act ethically toward the other, since one’s individual flaws will be cancelled in the species anyway. Eliot, on the other hand, wants her characters and her readers to learn to act ethically towards the other.

Three literary critics advise caution in considering Feuerbach’s influence on Eliot. Kerry McSweeney, in *Middlemarch*, criticises the “constant rhetorical excesses and intermittent fatuities of Feuerbach’s discourse” (33). As we have already seen in section one of this chapter, McSweeney argues that *Middlemarch* can be read as a book about the death of God, which makes his warning against oversimplifying the relationship between Feuerbach and Eliot all the more potent. He warns against obscuring “the distinction between the fine mind of Marian Evans and the comparatively

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<sup>26</sup> From “The Distinction between Christianity and Heathenism,” in *The Essence of Christianity*.

crude mind of Feuerbach, and between her temperament and sensibility and his” (33).

Peter C. Hodgson also points out the differences between Eliot and Feuerbach:

Feuerbach lacked a sense of the tragic and thus had no real understanding of the religious awareness of guilt and forgiveness, sin and redemption. His theory is too predictable, too unnuanced, too prosaic, too insensitive to intended religious meanings. How pretentious to suppose that one has found, in Casaubon-like fashion, the key to all religious mythologies! (160-1)

The genre of the novel does not easily correspond with an unnuanced theory. The novel is an open form, one that focuses on the individual, and his or her particular circumstances. Hodgson argues that it is possible that Eliot has Feuerbach, or Strauss, or a composite of theologians in mind when she created the character of Casaubon in *Middlemarch*. He continues:

While Casaubon thought he had discovered the key to all religious mythologies in a primordial revelation, Feuerbach found it in a primordial psychic projection and Strauss in a primordial divine-human unity. George Eliot was suspicious of all such totalizing theories, all proposals about the ‘essence’ of something.

What Feuerbach lacked above all else was poetic sensibility – an appreciation for mystery, an attention to the concrete and particular, an ability to see and articulate the surprising connections (as well as differences) between things, an apprehension of both deep conflicts and new possibilities. George Eliot possessed it in abundance. (161)

The generic difference between the two writers has not been clearly spelt out. Both Bakhtin and Eliot, in their aesthetics and ethics, are against totalising theories. Feuerbach’s writing is too systematic and does not pay enough attention to the individual. There is a significant difference between theological and philosophical systems and the novel, particularly in the scope that each form of writing has for focusing on the individual. The novel has more scope for nuances, and can give attention to the concrete and particular. I will develop this argument in chapters three and four, in my discussion of the work of Martha Nussbaum and Bakhtin.

Brian Davies, in "George Eliot and Christianity," is also aware of an "experienced difference" between reading Eliot and Feuerbach.<sup>27</sup> He argues that in her novels Eliot is "not simply negative in her treatment of and approach to religious individuals with their various parcels of traditional religious doctrines," and that her religious characters are drawn "with sympathy, with understanding, and with real appreciation of them taken for what they are rather than what they might be after a reading of Feuerbach" (54). He argues that her attitude to Christianity cannot be adequately explained with reference to Feuerbach alone:

So to appreciate George Eliot's attitude to Christianity we must do more than acknowledge her debt to Feuerbach, great though it is, and her intellectual conviction that a proper religion for man, the true essence of Christianity, lies in a religion of humanity, a religion of service, love and sympathy. For George Eliot's interest in Christianity went well beyond that of a totally emancipated observer. [. . .] The conclusion must be that George Eliot has not been fully understood by someone who calls her a straightforward atheist. Her attitude to Christianity is a complex one [. . .]. (60)

Some literary critics have seen Christianity in Eliot and we look at them in the next section. Not only is her attitude to Christianity complex, but she employs motifs in a complex way. Peter C. Hodgson also writes of the difference between Eliot and Feuerbach:

While affirming that religion ought above all to promote human flourishing, her sense of human evil and historical tragedy was too deep to allow her to embrace a religion that might actually worship or idolise human beings either as individuals or as a species – those very humans whose tendency, out of ambition or fear, is to draw everything into themselves. Her insight into the human condition was more profound and also more tragic than that of Feuerbach and Comte. Hers was a religion of humanity directed, not to veneration, but to service and sympathy. (9)

Hodgson makes some important points here. Nowhere in Eliot's writings, in her letters, journals, or novels, does she even hint that she would worship, idolise, or venerate

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<sup>27</sup> Brian Davies, "George Eliot and Christianity," *Downside Review* 100 (January 1982): 47-61.

human beings, either on an individual level, or at the level of the species. Her moral vision and understanding of the human being is that we are all egoists, and are all tainted by “moral stupidity” (see *Middlemarch*, chapter 21).<sup>28</sup> The whole of her aesthetic of sympathy is based on the presupposition that we are egoists, and we have a flawed perspective on the world, with relation to our understanding of our own position in the world, and our relation to others. Eliot’s understanding and treatment of egoism poses an overt challenge to a Feuerbachian interpretation of her work. In chapter three we will see in more detail her portrayal of flawed characters, and in five and six her understanding of the way in which “moral stupidity” affects each of us. The religious motifs of incarnation, revelation, and transcendence, are instrumental in paving out a way from this moral stupidity.

Eliot’s reading and translation of Feuerbach coincided with, and possibly justified, her decision to live with Lewes; on this personal level, her reading of his work is thus significant. The translation itself was less troublesome than her translation of Strauss. However, given the different genres in which they wrote, and the different ends of those genres it is prudent not to conflate the work of Eliot and Feuerbach.

### *Eliot and Positivism*

It is important to discuss the nature of Comte’s influence on Eliot, since one reason given for not paying attention to the Christian motifs in Eliot’s fiction is that she was a disciple of Comte and a follower of the Religion of Humanity. I think it is significant that Positivists of her day thought that neither her life nor her works reflected their

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<sup>28</sup> George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, ed. David Carroll (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 205. All subsequent

beliefs. This fact rebuts the idea that her work is only religious in so far as it is about the Religion of Humanity. In addition, we will once again see that there is a different understanding of human beings in Comte and Eliot's works.

In the previous section we looked at some of the ways in which it is possible to overemphasise a degree of influence of Feuerbach on Eliot, and this caution is also relevant when looking at Eliot's relation to Auguste Comte and his British followers. We must be cautious about assuming a direct correlation between Positivist thought and Eliot's novels. In this section I focus on two related questions. I want to consider not only Eliot's familiarity with Comte's work, but also the related question of whether Comte's British disciples saw Eliot as propagating his work, or recognised his influence on her work. I look briefly at Eliot's familiarity with Comte, before looking at how a number of leading British Comtists read both Eliot's life and her writings, and their conclusion that she had betrayed Positivist principles in both.

Both Marian and George Henry Lewes were familiar with Comte's work. Terry Wright, in *The Religion of Humanity: The Impact of Comtean Positivism on Victorian Britain*, says that Eliot's copy of Comte's work is closely annotated (266).<sup>29</sup> However, this does not in itself prove whether Eliot was a disciple, a follower, or an interested reader. Critical opinion has been divided over whether Eliot was a Comtist or not. Wright says that the subject of Comte's influence on Eliot has always been "controversial," "from the first reviews by Christian critics, who used the Positivist stigma to beat her dogma, to recent more sympathetic accounts of her work" (173). As I

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references are to this edition.

<sup>29</sup> Terry Wright, *The Religion of Humanity: The Impact of Comtean Positivism on Victorian Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

have already mentioned, both *Romola* and *Middlemarch* have been read as positivist and anti-positivist novels. The fact that such contradictory readings exist of the same novels should give us pause when considering the extent to which Eliot was influenced by Comte. I now consider Eliot's friendships with two British positivists.

Martha S. Vogeler, in "George Eliot and the Positivists," examines Marian Lewes's friendships with a number of British Positivists. The Leweses enjoyed friendships with several people who were deeply committed to Positivist thought, including Frederic Harrison and Richard Congreve. Vogeler concentrates her attention on the Lewes' friendship with these men.<sup>30</sup> The Leweses met the Congreves in February 1859, and a close friendship developed between Marian Lewes and Maria Congreve. W. M. Simon, in *European Positivism in the Nineteenth Century: An Essay in Intellectual History*, says that there are "few references" to Comte "to be found in her writings before 1859, when she and Lewes became neighbours of the Congreves in Wandsworth" (207).<sup>31</sup> Vogeler contends that neither Congreve nor Harrison saw Eliot as a Positivist or believed that she propagated Positivism in her work. Vogeler points out that Harrison's first visit to the Priory was not to discuss Comte, but the legal issues that were concerned with Eliot's writing of *Felix Holt* (413). Marian Lewes and Frederic Harrison had a lengthy epistolary discussion over the role of fiction, and whether it could be used as a vehicle to promote Positivist thought, and I shall look at their correspondence in greater detail in chapter three. Vogeler argues that it has not been sufficiently noted that Eliot's response to Harrison "implied her repudiation of key Comtist principles" (414).

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<sup>30</sup> Terry Wright also concentrates on friendships with Congreves and Frederic Harrison (173-5).

<sup>31</sup> W. M. Simon, *European Positivism in the Nineteenth Century: An Essay in Intellectual History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1963).

In later years Eliot's friendship with both the Congreves and Frederic Harrison became strained.

Vogeler argues that a number of events towards the end of Eliot's life tested her ties with the Positivists. The first was her marriage to John Cross following Lewes's death. As Terry Wright says, "All these friendly relations [. . .] were shattered by her decision to marry John Cross, which was seen as an abrogation of the Positivist duty of eternal widowhood" (177). Vogeler says that the Comtists interpreted this event as showing that she was not truly a Positivist (420-21). Cross asked Frederic Harrison about marriage and Harrison assured him that the Positivists would not dream of applying the doctrine of eternal widowhood "to those who stand entirely aloof from our ways and our thoughts" (421). Harrison's letter of 6 May 1880 to Cross has been seen as a "double-edged letter of congratulation and veiled excommunication." Vogeler records that although Congreve dined with the Crosses, Harrison avoided meeting Eliot during the six remaining months of her life (421), and Wright records Congreve is reported as saying that she was never really a Positivist, and that Harrison called her an "epicene woman" (178).

The response of Harrison and Congreve to Marian Lewes' death in December 1880 is also indicative of a distance between her thinking and their thinking. Both Frederic Harrison and Congreve attended her funeral. However, Congreve, who thought that she had betrayed Positivists by marriage, did not mention her in his New Year's Day address to followers, and, as Vogeler says, did not appear to mention her in print again (422). Frederic Harrison did not speak about her Positivism at the centenary of her birth (430). Despite Marian Lewes's friendships with a number of Positivists, their

responses to her marriage to Cross and to her death make it impossible to conclude that they saw her as one of them. I now look at the ways in which Congreve and Harrison interpreted her novels.

Both Congreve and Frederic Harrison made comments about Eliot's fiction. Terry Wright argues that Congreve himself appears not to have recognised the Positivist significance of her work, finding *Middlemarch* "gloomy," seeing no reason "to encourage his adopted daughter to persevere with *Romola*," and writing dismissively of 'such works' as *Daniel Deronda* (175). Vogeler records that Frederic Harrison disliked most of Eliot's later work. In particular, she points out that the works Harrison found unsatisfactory in Eliot's canon are just those most often mined today for Positivist ore. Harrison disliked "The Spanish Gypsy", thinking it a 'fiasco' (414-15), *Middlemarch* (416-7), *Daniel Deronda* (417), and *The Impressions of Theophrastus Such* (419). He thought *Middlemarch* was "tedious and disagreeable by reason of the interminable maunderings of tedious men and women" who were "curiously uninteresting." Vogeler writes:

He did not, however, mention as grounds for his antagonism its perversely anti-Comtean features. Instead of a community about to attain Positivist culture under an altruistic physician, as in the plot Harrison had urged upon her earlier, *Middlemarch* portrays an unenlightened town, provincial in the worst sense. Its promising physician proves no spiritual leader: he fails in his twin goals of building on the work of Bichat (admired by Comte) and of overturning that of the Saint-Simonians (Comte's arch-rivals). His wife, far from inspiring him by superior moral virtue (expected of women by Comte), ruins his career. His unscrupulous banker friend is a parody of Comte's ideal temporal leader. And the novel's heroine is beguiled by the labors of a pedant (exemplifying the misdirection of intellect Comte deplored), and makes a second marriage (prohibited by Comte's doctrine of eternal widowhood). (417)

In this passage Vogeler presents quite clear reasons why it is inappropriate and inaccurate to read *Middlemarch* through the lens of Comte and his British followers.<sup>32</sup>

Despite the fact that a number of leading British Positivists did not see Eliot as a Positivist, or her work as expounding or propounding Positivist thought, there are still some critics who persevere in assuming she was a Comtist. Frederic Karl, in *George Eliot: Voice of a Century*, offers an intriguing argument concerning Eliot's relation to Positivism:

What is likely is that while Eliot did not accept any formalized system of beliefs, within positivism – as we see in her letters to Maria Congreve – she found enough sympathetic material parallel to her own beliefs to make her a believer of sorts. Critics of Eliot who feel her positivistic concerns have been “greatly exaggerated” are judging on the basis of her denials, not on her practices. It is true that she told Benjamin Jowett, the great classicist, that she was never a Comtist, and equally true that she was reported as saying she would never submit to an unqualified acceptance of it; it is also true that Congreve himself said she was not a convert, but an acceptor of certain general ideas. But her denials were part of the Eliot intellectual game: in her mature years, she denied all formal commitments to any sect or group. Nevertheless, in positivism she had found that empirical and rational approach to human existence which satisfied her. She, too, had advanced from theological to metaphysical to scientific or rational, the very steps Comte had recommended for society as a whole. (315)

The above quotation is an example of a critic who seems determined to hold that Eliot was a Positivist, without any evidence for this case, and with plenty of counter-evidence. It is necessary to ask what, precisely, a “believer of sorts” means? Karl even provides the counter-argument himself (*i.e.*, the lack of evidence that Eliot accepted Positivism within her letters to Maria Congreve, the fact that she told Benjamin Jowett she was never a Comtist, and that Congreve himself did not believe that she was a ‘convert’).

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<sup>32</sup> Terry Wright also says that Harrison similarly disliked *Daniel Deronda*. Writing to Beesly, Harrison commented: “Knowing all I do of her, and how she recently spoke to me of ‘us Positivists’, I am quite indignant at the silly playing about Judaism, and the unfair appeal to Theistic prejudice . . . when I think of the Positivist view of her art which she perfectly understands and professes to embody in art, I am quite grieved to see her career end in a poor literary aim.” See *The Religion of Humanity*, 176-7.

These denials, says Karl, were all part of Eliot's "intellectual game," although it is not at all clear what this game consisted of, and against whom it was played. The amount of counter-evidence provided by Karl cannot be rebutted in such a hypothetical fashion.<sup>33</sup> In short, British positivists did not see evidence of positivist commitments in either Eliot's life or works.

Terry Wright distinguishes between the writings of Comte and Eliot in a very important way:

Perhaps the most important difference between Comte's religion and George Eliot's lies in their concept of Humanity. For Comte the Great Being did not include all human beings but only those worthy of incorporation. He had little sympathy with the mass of mankind. George Eliot, on the contrary, could not place too much emphasis on the mediocrity of her characters. One of her greatest strengths as a novelist is her ability to show the moral significance of the smallest acts. For 'it is in these acts called trivialities that the seeds of joy' are to be lost or found. Her novels consistently display the qualities of humility, tolerance, sympathy and humour so noticeably absent from Comte's writing. His Religion of Humanity, it might be said, gained in her the quality of humanity. (201)

This distinction between Eliot and Comte's understanding of humanity is extremely important for an understanding of her ethics and aesthetics. Wright's observation is mirrored in a comment by Helena Granlund, in *The Paradox of Self-Love: Christian Elements in George Eliot's Treatment of Egoism*. Granlund distinguishes between Eliot's view of humanity, and that of Feuerbach and Comte:

Although Eliot shares the anthropocentric world view of Feuerbach and Comte, and although she recognises a potential for good and altruism in human nature, her work does not convey the same optimism regarding human nature in general, nor do we find the species replacing the individual as the centre of interest in her work. Her emphasis on the individual can partly be attributed to her medium, the

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<sup>33</sup> Vogeler says that some studies have linked Eliot's development to Comte, including Felicia Bonaparte, *Will and Destiny: Morality and Tragedy in George Eliot's Novels* (New York: New York University Press, 1975), Bernard J. Paris, *Experiments in Life: George Eliot's Quest for Values*, and Michael Wolff, "Marian Evans to George Eliot: The Moral and Intellectual Foundations of Her Career," Diss, Princeton University, 1958.

subject of the novel being the development of individual character, but in my view, Eliot's novels reflect a sense of the individual rather than the species or the community as the basis for moral development. In the complex relationship between the individual and his environment, it is the development of the individual that forms the primary factor in the evolution of society. Eliot's meliorist hopes for humanity are founded on her sense of the individual's potential for regeneration. Her meliorist views are balanced by her equal awareness of the human liability to corruption and degeneration and the effect of such corruption on social development. Thus the general impression of human nature emerging from her work is one of mixed good and evil, quite different from the impressions conveyed by Comte and Feuerbach. (5)<sup>34</sup>

Wright and Granlund are right to suggest that it is Eliot's attitude to humanity that distinguishes her from all these writers. We have already seen that she has a more sympathetic response to humans than Feuerbach does.

At the end of section one of this chapter I suggested that there are two reasons why critics have ignored the religious, spiritual, and theological themes, images and motifs in Eliot's fiction. The first was the cultural climate of literature and theology today, and the second was the tendency to read Eliot's novels through the lens of the 'Religion of Humanity.' In this section I have looked at Eliot's relationship with Strauss, Spinoza, Feuerbach, and Comte. In each case I have argued that it is important to recognise that there is a difference between the types of writing, *i.e.*, between biblical criticism, philosophy, and novels. Strauss, Spinoza, Feuerbach, and Comte are writing in a theoretical and systematic way, and Eliot is writing novels. I am not suggesting that Eliot was not influenced by these writers; each of them was a part of Marian Lewes's cultural and intellectual history and development in some ways. I am, however, arguing that Eliot's relationship with these thinkers is not the only way to view the religious and

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<sup>34</sup> Helena Granlund, *The Paradox of Self-Love: Christian Elements in George Eliot's Treatment of Egoism* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1994).

theological in her novels.<sup>35</sup> The two important differences are her attitude to Christianity and her attitude to humankind. First, Eliot's understanding of and relationship to Christianity is more subtle and nuanced than the more systematic challenges to traditional Christian belief offered by Strauss, Spinoza, Feuerbach, and Comte. None of these thinkers offer the only lens through which to read the theological in her fiction. Critical assumption has been that the Religion of Humanity offers the only way to read religious motifs in Eliot's work. Second, her understanding of the human being is radically different to that of these thinkers. As Peter C. Hodgson says, Eliot is more concerned that we sympathise with other human beings, rather than idolise or worship them. In the next section I will look at some literary critics and theologians who have examined Eliot's use of religious, spiritual, and theological themes in her fiction. Their methods are diverse, but each in some ways interprets Eliot's relation to the Bible and/or Christianity. However, these are mostly thematic, and do not engage with Eliot's aim of extending her reader's sympathies.

*Eliot criticism that has considered religion and theology on a thematic level*

There are a number of critical texts which deal with religious themes in Eliot's novels, and they provide a useful foundation for my work. In this section I look at the work of literary critics and theologians who argue that Eliot's novels show the influence of the Bible and Christianity. I have chosen to divide this into four sections. The first looks at Eliot's use of biblical language in her fiction. The second looks at her use of motifs such

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<sup>35</sup> James Champion, in "George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*: Imaginative Communion and the Critical Imperative," says "the influence of Feuerbach and Auguste Comte on Eliot tends to get noticed; what she calls her 'yearning affection towards the great religions of the world' does not" (281). See *In Good*

as Christ figures, themes and motifs drawn from spiritual autobiography and Saints' lives. I focus on the character of Dorothea in order to show the variety of interpretations. The third looks at Eliot's representation of different Christian denominational groups within her novels. The fourth section focuses on Peter C. Hodgson and Mary Grey, two theologians who interpret Eliot's novels.

### *Eliot and Biblical language*

There are a number of literary critics who cite Eliot's use of biblical language in her fiction. This takes two forms; the argument that specific passages have biblical overtones, and the argument that all of Eliot's writings are saturated with biblical language. David Jasper, for example, in *Sacred and Secular*, says that "without the Bible, George Eliot's fiction would be inconceivable and incomprehensible" (86). He interprets a specific passage in *Middlemarch*. Writing about Dorothea's vision from her window in chapter 80, after her lonely night of struggle when she believes that Will Ladislaw is in love with Rosamond, Jasper points out that the language of *Middlemarch*:

refers in almost every single word to the Bible, claiming still the authority of its phrases and resonances. The image of the caring father, the 'little child', the help against stumbling (Psalm 91:12), the Pauline images of baptism, resonate in the reader who is thoroughly familiar with Old and New Testaments. (87)

Terry Wright, in "*Middlemarch* as a Religious Novel, or Life Without God," also describes this passage as "full of Biblical resonance" (645). Robert Coles, in *Irony in the Mind's Life: Essays on Novels by James Agee, Elizabeth Bowen, and George Eliot*, says

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*Company: Essays in Honor of Robert Detweiler*, Eds. David Jasper and Mark Ledbetter (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1994), 275-295.

that language about Adam and Eve resonates throughout *Middlemarch*.<sup>36</sup> Beryl Gray, in "Power and Persuasion: Voices of Influence in *Romola*," speaks of George Eliot's "familiarity with the King James Bible" (125).<sup>37</sup> These are nice observations, but they do not address the way in which religious motifs play a part in Eliot's aesthetics and ethics.

Lisa Balthazar in "The Critique of Anglican Biblical Scholarship in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*," and Barry Qualls in "George Eliot and religion" talk more generally of Eliot's use of the Bible in her writings.<sup>38</sup> Balthazar argues that Eliot's early repudiation of supernatural religion in no way involved a repudiation of the Bible. Of Eliot, she writes:

All her writings – fiction and non-fiction, correspondence and journals – are replete with biblical references; many of which demonstrate Eliot's high regard for the Bible as a principal, indeed irreplaceable, source for ethical discussion.

I agree with Balthazar that all of Eliot's writings are replete with biblical references. But the significance of these biblical references for her aesthetics and ethics has not been explored fully. Balthazar does not articulate what she means by Eliot's "high regard" for the Bible as a principal source for ethical discussion. Religious and theological motifs are not just a source of ethical discussion, but are operative within Eliot's aesthetics and ethics, and form a bridge between them.

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<sup>36</sup> Robert Coles, *Irony in the Mind's Life: Essays on Novels by James Agee, Elizabeth Bowen, and George Eliot* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1974).

<sup>37</sup> Beryl Gray, "Power and Persuasion: Voices of Influence in *Romola*," *From Author to Text: Re-Reading George Eliot's Romola*, eds. Caroline Levine and Mark W. Turner (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998), 123-34. Marilyn Higuera's article, "Prelude to a Vocation," also pays attention to Eliot's use of religious language, or words with religious connotations. Higuera traces the etymology of ardent from the Latin, *ardere*, to burn. She turns to the writings of St. Theresa and St. John of the Cross, to understand the ardent nature, the one who reaches beyond the self.

<sup>38</sup> Lisa Balthazar, "The Critique of Anglican Biblical Scholarship in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*," *Literature and Theology* 15:1 (2001): 40-60, and Barry Qualls, "George Eliot and religion," *The Cambridge Companion to George Eliot*, ed. George Levine (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,

Barry Qualls, in "George Eliot and religion," writes:

Tellingly, the author who represented to her generation what the novel could accomplish did not write, did not think, without the texts that she abandoned when she lost her faith, without the language of the Bible and the traditions that formed around it, without the histories of its texts that she transformed into contexts and structures for the lives of her characters. (119-120)

Christian motifs and the language of the Bible were translated into her fiction. But more is at stake here. Eliot based her aesthetics on the Christian theological motifs of incarnation, revelation, and transcendence. In order to demonstrate this, I will focus in the next chapter on Eliot's aesthetics, and do a textual analysis of *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda* in chapters five and six.

### *Eliot and Saints' Lives and Spiritual Autobiography*

In this section I review Eliot's use of themes and motifs drawn from spiritual autobiography and Saints' lives, focusing on Dorothea. Kerry McSweeney argues that there are two ways we can view Dorothea's literary lineage. The first is to view her character "as a less exceptional character belonging to a less exalted lineage – that of the heroines of many eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novels by women writers, including Jane Austen's Emma Woodhouse and Fanny Price, and Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre and Lucy Snowe" (98). The second is to associate Dorothea with "Protestant heroines," including the Lady in Milton's *Comus* and Richardson's Clarissa. David Carroll, in *George Eliot and the Conflict of Interpretations: A Reading of the Novels*, argues that Dorothea Brooke's career is "cast in the form of a saint's life," and says that she is compared to St Theresa, St Barbara, St Clara, St Catherine, and the Virgin Mary

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2001), 119-137.

(242).<sup>39</sup> He argues that Eliot employs traditional elements associated from the life of a saint, for example, the dark night of the soul, and the beatific vision, and recasts them in nineteenth-century England. He makes the following comment:

This is where the life of the saint, that mythic hypothesis with its language of torture, sacrifice, and martyrdom, engages most intimately with the Jane Austen-like gentilities of provincial life.

Carroll concludes that the saint's life is one of the myths or models of life that Eliot is decentring in *Middlemarch*. There are certainly similarities between Dorothea and all these other literary heroines mentioned by McSweeney. Within *Middlemarch* she is certainly compared to saints and the Virgin Mother, but these motifs alone do not tell us much about the role that Christian motifs play in Eliot's aesthetics of sympathy.<sup>40</sup>

Kathleen Blake, in an essay entitled "George Eliot: the critical heritage," assesses Kathryn Bond Stockton's *God Between Their Lips: Desire Between Women in Irigaray, Brontë, and Eliot*.<sup>41</sup> Stockton examines female spirituality in Eliot's fiction. She offers a reading of the highly charged scene between Dorothea and Rosamond in chapter 81 of *Middlemarch*. Stockton reads this scene as exhibiting "the dynamics of autoeroticism and/or of erotically charged interchange between women." She argues that in this climatic scene both Dorothea and Rosamond are "engulfed by inwardness and by the Other," and links this spirituality to "ecstasy in the mode of St Theresa" (Blake, 214). This is something of a perverse reading of the scene between Dorothea and Rosamond, and infuses the scene with erotic lesbian overtones. It is one of the more

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<sup>39</sup> David Carroll, *George Eliot and the Conflict of Interpretations: A Reading of the Novels* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

<sup>40</sup> See also Judith Johnston, "Middlemarch's Dorothea Brooke and Medieval Hagiography," *George Eliot Review* 23 (1992): 40-45.

<sup>41</sup> Kathleen Blake, "George Eliot: the critical heritage," *The Cambridge Companion to George Eliot*, 202-225, and Kathryn Bond Stockton, *God Between Their Lips: Desire Between Women in Irigaray, Brontë, and Eliot* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994).

original readings of this passage, but ultimately I do not find it persuasive, since it does not accord with the narrative of *Middlemarch* and its presentation of the two women.<sup>42</sup> I offer my own analysis of this passage and the religious motifs that I find operative in it, in chapter five.

### *Eliot and Dissent and Evangelicalism*

This section explores Eliot's sympathetic presentation of Dissent and Evangelicalism in her novels. Valentine Cunningham, in *Everywhere Spoken Against: Dissent in the Victorian Novel*, and Elisabeth Jay in *The Religion of the Heart: Anglican Evangelicalism and the Nineteenth-Century Novel*, discuss Eliot's relation to Dissent and Evangelicalism respectively.<sup>43</sup> Valentine Cunningham argues that Eliot "stands out as a writer who will treat Dissenters with enormous compassion and with a notable measure of fairness. The fact that in the end she does not agree with Christianity is an indication of just how great her openness is" (9). Indeed, he argues that: "No great English novelist has got closer than George Eliot to the heart of the Dissenting matter." Elisabeth Jay, in *The Religion of the Heart*, argues for Eliot's "eminence as a novelist interested in religion" (69). She praises the "detailed fidelity and imaginative sympathy" with which Eliot portrayed Evangelicalism (209), and argues that Eliot does not portray the crisis of faith in her fiction. She writes:

To a novelist like George Eliot, fascinated by the complex relation between the individual and society, the evangelical spirit served to create characters with a

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<sup>42</sup> Ellen Argyros, in "*Without Any Check of Proud Reserve*": *Sympathy and Its Limits in George Eliot's Novels*, also suggests that there is a homosexual undercurrent in this scene between Rosamond and Dorothea (14).

<sup>43</sup> Valentine Cunningham, *Everywhere Spoken Against: Dissent in the Victorian Novel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975) and Elisabeth Jay, *The Religion of the Heart: Anglican Evangelicalism and the Nineteenth-Century Novel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979).

clear sense of their own identity and to throw their conflict with society into more prominent relief. (7)

Eliot is indeed fascinated by the complex relation between the individual and society, and I want to argue that she relies on the motif of incarnation in her analysis of this relationship. Incarnation is a motif that mediates between the self and the world, and is highly important for her analysis and understanding of the self's understanding of its relation to the world, and the way in which the self relates to the other.<sup>44</sup>

Similarly, David Lodge, in the Introduction to *Scenes of Clerical Life*, says that "Janet's Repentance" is:

a completely non-ironical account of a conversion from sinfulness to righteousness achieved through the selfless endeavours of an Evangelical clergyman – a representative, that is, of precisely the kind of Protestant Christianity against which Marian Evans had herself rebelled fourteen years before, and of which she had written a withering critique little more than a year before in an article entitled 'Evangelical Teaching: Dr Cumming'. (8).

Eliot is not only sympathetic to religious characters, although she undeniably was. Something far more radical is going on in her work, and that is the use of Christian theological motifs at the centre of her aesthetics of sympathy. Jay and Cunningham offer interesting analyses of Eliot's representation of historical sub-groups within Christianity, but their concern is not with the role that Christian motifs play Eliot's aesthetics.

### *Eliot and theologians*

In this section I look at the work of two theologians who have offered readings of Eliot's fiction. It is interesting to note that these theologians have not responded to Eliot's religious motifs either. Although Mary Grey and Peter C. Hodgson have different

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<sup>44</sup> There is a contemporary review of *Adam Bede* in *Nonconformist*, 19 (6 April, 1859), which also praises Eliot's treatment of Evangelicalism.

theological agendas, both suggest that Eliot's novels may be resources which can aid theological discussion. I have already quoted Hodgson's argument that Eliot's "ideas are of considerable interest to theological efforts at rethinking the meaning and substance of religious faith in our own time" (ix). He says that he "has found in George Eliot a surprising resource for reflecting on one of the most difficult questions: whether and how it is possible to speak meaningfully of the presence and action of God (or of the Divine Mystery) in the world today" (ix). He argues that Eliot was seeking to move through and beyond evangelicalism and the religion of humanity toward something new, and that she was moving towards:

A truthful religion without accusation and consolation, a practical religion orientated to human feelings, needs and deeds, and a religion open to the idea of a sympathetic, suffering, (omni)present God. (13)

Hodgson's work on Eliot's relationship with Feuerbach, Strauss, Comte, and Spinoza is helpful. Also, his argument that Eliot's religious ideas were in a state of change is a valid point. However, when he starts arguing that Eliot presents a "cosmotheandric" theology, I depart from him. I question whether it is valid to look at a literary author in order to support one's own theological agenda. He imposes on Eliot theological language and ideas. A similar criticism can be made of Mary Grey's reading of Eliot.

Mary Grey, in *Redeeming the Dream: Feminism, Redemption and Christian Tradition*, also thinks that Eliot's writings might help us with theological questions.<sup>45</sup>

She says:

I use the writings of Mary Ann Evans frequently: she is one of the best examples of a theologically educated literary woman with insights into the importance of relationships which drew her to battle with the restrictive framework of society in which she lived. (188)

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<sup>45</sup> Mary Grey, *Redeeming the Dream: Feminism, Redemption, and Christian Tradition* (London: SPCK, 1989).

I find Grey's methodology quite confusing. It is not always easy to tell whether she is referring to George Eliot the author, the narrator of the novels, or Marian Lewes. Grey reads 'George Eliot's' life and work through her feminist revisioning of the doctrine of atonement. Grey's central thesis is that redemption today works through the restoration of broken relationships, and "building right relation" (x and 10). She argues that "relating is at the heart of what is redemptive," and that "right relation is at the heart of the redemptive process" (31). She draws on the work of women novelists (those with a spiritual vision) because she thinks that this is an alternative to the lack of published theological writing by women. (Grey argues that in societies which prevented women from access to formal theological education, even when women managed to educate themselves informally, they had little chance of publishing their work. She acknowledges that not much had remained of women's theological writing – and what we have has been usually edited by the writer's confessor or spiritual director.) However, to my knowledge, Grey does not address or raise the question of what is the correct approach for this interdisciplinary study. This issue raises a number of questions about the quotation above. Certainly Mary Ann Evans/Marian Lewes was a theologically-aware woman, who had insights about the importance of relationships. I am not sure, though, about the connection between these and the "battle with the restrictive framework of society in which she lived." Did she battle as a woman? A feminist? A theologian? A novelist? And what, exactly, is the nature of the battle? We saw in section one of this chapter that Eliot's relation to feminism is far from straightforward. Both her novels and her life have been closely scrutinised. Feminist literary critics have sometimes chastised her for not going far enough. During her

lifetime she held her peace on the 'Woman Question.' Barbara Bodichon and Bessie Rayner Parkes both were more radical than she. Throughout her life there was a tension between rebellion and conformity, and radicalism and conservatism. We see this in her relation to her father and church, and her relationship with Lewes. Eliot did rebel against church, but then continued attending with her father, she was antagonistic towards Christianity, but her attitudes later softened. Eliot lived with the already-married Lewes, but considered their relationship to be a marriage. She was known as Mrs. Lewes, and they would have made their relationship legal, were it a possibility. In order to fit Eliot into her theological framework, Grey overlooks a number of major literary critical issues.

In this section I have looked at a number of ways in which literary critics and theologians have interpreted religious, spiritual, and theological themes, images, and motifs in Eliot's fiction. We have seen that Eliot retained a high regard for the Bible, and its language infused her fiction. I have shown how some literary critics see Eliot as subverting or recontextualising a number of religious motifs including aspects of spiritual autobiography and saints' lives. I have looked at Eliot's relation to Evangelicalism and Dissent. I then looked at how two theologians have looked at her work. These different critical methods go some way to showing that the Religion of Humanity is not the only way to read Eliot's fiction.

In this chapter I have reviewed critical material on three areas of Eliot scholarship: criticism that ignores religious and theological themes, criticism that looks at Eliot's relationship with Strauss, Spinoza, Feuerbach, and Comte, and criticism that looks at religious and theological ideas on a thematic level. None of these have provided

an interdisciplinary approach that enables us to look at the role that the theological motifs of incarnation, revelation, and transcendence play in Eliot's aesthetics and ethics. Before looking at how Bakhtin can help us here, in the next chapter I look at Eliot's aesthetics in more detail.

### **Chapter Three: Eliot, the novel, and the aesthetics of sympathy**

This chapter explores the relationship between Eliot's aesthetics and ethics. I have suggested so far that there is a need for better critical appreciation of the interaction of aesthetics and ethics in Eliot's work, and especially of what is entailed in her understanding of sympathy. In this chapter I will demonstrate that Eliot had a very specific aesthetic aim – that of extending her reader's sympathy, and that this aesthetic aim is one that has an ethical dimension. As I mentioned in the introduction, Eliot herself does not use the terms 'ethics' or 'ethical' in relation to her aesthetics of sympathy, but the way in which she suggests that reading can improve the way you relate to your neighbour is inherently ethical. Eliot intended the reading of her novels to produce an effect in her readers beyond the act of reading itself. She intended her readers to be changed as a result of reading her novels in two ways: they would have a better understanding of themselves, and a better understanding of the other. Central to Eliot's moral and ethical vision is the presupposition that all human beings are egoists. Her aesthetics of sympathy is directed towards the aim of moving her reader beyond egoism towards altruism. Due to our egoism, we have a limited perspective on the world, and part of Eliot's aesthetic aim is to help us perceive new things. In brief, Eliot's aesthetic of sympathy is aimed at achieving a change in her readers that will improve the way they treat other people. Any separation between aesthetics and ethics is therefore problematic when we read Eliot, because her aesthetics have a definite ethical dimension. It is therefore necessary to find ways of expressing her aesthetic aim without being either critically naïve, or neglecting her ethical aims.

In this chapter I will argue that the ethics of Eliot's art is to change her readers for the better. Her aim is for her reader to have a better understanding of him or herself, and his or her relation to the world, and his or her relation to the other. There is plenty of evidence that this is Eliot's ethics of art; it can be found in her letters, reviews, and fiction. Some literary critics would argue that this evidence is not relevant because they consider the author's life and views of her work to be extraneous to literary criticism. Other critics, however, refute this view, and enable us to take into consideration this important evidence. In section one of this chapter I will discuss the way in which ethical literary criticism, as expounded by Martha Nussbaum *et al*, enables us to refute the New Critical position that it is inappropriate to examine the relationship between works of fiction and ethical questions. In section two I will examine in detail Eliot's own comments about her art, and begin to address how exactly Eliot aims to extend her reader's sympathies, avoiding didacticism and preaching. I argue that we can understand how Eliot's fiction changes her readers without being didactic by looking at the theological motifs of incarnation, revelation, and transcendence. Nussbaum's understanding of the ethical power of fiction does not explain how this works in Eliot; for this, we need to turn to the early philosophical writings of Bakhtin.

In section three I explore the history of Eliot criticism in relation to her ethics of art. I consider how Eliot came to be perceived as an overt moraliser shortly after her death, and how developments in literary criticism have challenged this perception. There has been a tendency in Eliot criticism to overemphasise either aesthetics or ethics at the expense of the other. The responsible reader of Eliot should attempt to avoid two pitfalls: the first is paying excessive attention to what goes on in the text and paying no

attention to any extra-textual dimension; the second is paying excessive attention to the moral dimension of a literary work and avoiding a close reading of the text. The danger in focusing only on what is within the text and ignoring the wider ethical issues, is that this ignores Eliot's stated aim. To say that texts only refer to other texts, and not to life itself, clearly does not accord with Eliot's aesthetics aims. This problem is not unique to Eliot scholarship; the relationship between aesthetics and ethics is a complex one in literary critical and theoretical circles.

Aesthetics and ethics were divorced in New Criticism, an Anglo-American critical movement of the middle decades of the twentieth century, which focused on 'close reading' of literary texts.<sup>1</sup> New Criticism focused on the words on the page, and did not use any further source of information to arrive at an interpretation of a text. For example, what literary critics knew about the author's beliefs, background, or intentions, would not be brought to bear upon the interpretation. Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle, in *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism, and Theory: Key Critical Concepts*, offer this definition of New Criticism:

New criticism involved a way of reading that emphasized form – the importance of considering 'the words on the page' – rather than factors such as the life of the author and his or her intentions, or the historical and ideological context in which

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<sup>1</sup> Rick Rylance, in "The New Criticism," identifies New Criticism as an American movement of the twentieth century. He traces its origins to a group of theorists from Vanderbilt University, including John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, and Robert Penn Warren. The name of their method was 'close-reading' (or in Britain 'practical criticism'). Seminal New Critical texts include Cleanth Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (London: Methuen, 1947), John Crowe Ransom, *The New Criticism* (Norfolk, CT.: New Directions, 1941), and I. A. Richards, *Practical Criticism: A Study of Literary Judgement* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1929). See "The New Criticism," *Encyclopedia of Literature and Criticism*, Eds. Martin Coyle, Peter Garside, Malcolm Kelsall, and John Peck (London: Routledge, 1990).

In addition, see the chapter entitled "New Criticism, moral formalism and F. R. Leavis," in *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*, eds. Raman Selden and Peter Widdowson (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), 10-26.

Martha Nussbaum, in *Love's Knowledge*, says that New Critical formalism divorces aesthetics from ethical and practical issues.

the text was produced. New critics considered that such questions, while no doubt interesting, were irrelevant to a consideration of the text itself: they thought of literary texts as 'autonomous', as self-sufficient and self-contained unities, as aesthetic objects made of words. Correspondingly, new critics argued that to try to take account of the reactions or responses of readers in the context of, for example, a poem, was to introduce an alien and fundamentally extraneous factor. They even invented a term for what they saw as the 'error' involved in talking about a reader's response in discussions of literary texts: they called it the 'affective fallacy'. For new critics, then, what was important was to pay scrupulous attention to the words of texts themselves, and to go beyond the subjective impressionism of the reader's response. (11)<sup>2</sup>

This quotation identifies a number of new critical concerns, including the emphasis on the words on the page, the argument that the author's life is irrelevant to the text itself, and the fact that the reader's reaction should not be taken into account when forming an interpretation.

A New Critical reading of Eliot's novels would discuss the form or structure of her novels, as opposed to reading them in light of what Eliot herself said about aesthetics elsewhere, or her religious preferences, or her historical and cultural situation. Thus, New Criticism would not look at Eliot's letters, journals, or essays, in interpreting her fiction, and would warn of the dangers of considering the author's intention when attempting to arrive at an interpretation of one of their literary texts. New Criticism says that using what the author said elsewhere, *i.e.*, other than in the work itself, would be to fall into the 'intentional' fallacy. W. K. Wimsatt Jr. and Monroe. C. Beardsley published the influential essay, "The Intentional Fallacy" (1946) in *Sewanee Review*. A related essay, "The Affective Fallacy," argued that you could not take into account the way in which a reader might be affected by the literary work in forming an interpretation of that

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<sup>2</sup> Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle, *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory: Key Critical Concepts* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1995).

literary work.<sup>3</sup> Such a reading would deny the possibility of Eliot having an effect on her readers beyond the act of reading. However, as I will show in my discussions of *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda*, it is the very form of the novels, as well as what we learn from her essays, reviews, and letters, which suggests that we need to take Eliot's stated aesthetic aim seriously. New Criticism would not allow for Eliot's stated aim to be taken into account in interpretations of her texts. However, developments in literary theory have challenged many of the assumptions and practices of New Criticism. I am now going to look at how developments in ethical literary theory in particular have challenged these assumptions and practices. I shall focus on the work of Martha Nussbaum, as a representative of ethical literary theory. Ethical literary theory is an approach to literature that is concerned with the role that narrative fiction can play in the moral life of the reader.

Martha Nussbaum, in *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*, writes that after New Criticism:

It was assumed that any work that attempts to ask of a literary text questions about how we might live, treating the work as addressed to the reader's practical interests and needs, and as being in some sense about our lives, must be hopelessly naïve, reactionary, and insensitive to the complexities of literary form and intertextual referentiality. (21)<sup>4</sup>

In this quotation we can see that the result of New Criticism was that any approach to texts that implied or suggested that they might be 'about life' was naïve and reactionary.

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<sup>3</sup> "The intentional fallacy" (1946) and "The affective fallacy" (1949) are included in *Twentieth Century Literary Criticism: A Reader*, ed. David Lodge (London: Longman, 1972), 334-345 and 345-358.

<sup>4</sup> See "Introduction: Form and Content, Philosophy and Literature," *Love's Knowledge*, 21-2. All the subsequent quotations in this paragraph are from these pages.

Implicit in New Criticism was the idea that only this form of criticism could properly interpret a text. However, as we shall see in this chapter, Eliot did see that narrative fiction could be addressed to the reader's needs and interests, that what we read does have an effect on our lives. Eliot deliberately structured *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda* to achieve these ends, as we shall see in chapters five and six. To say that Eliot's texts are addressed to the reader, that they are in some sense about our lives, is not hopelessly naïve, or reactionary, or insensitive to the complexities of literary form. Indeed, it is the sensitivity to the complexity of Eliot's novels that prevents us from interpreting the texts in a naïve manner. Nussbaum's own work, and that of a number of other scholars interested in the intersection between literature and ethical theory, has begun to challenge the assumption that it is naïve or inappropriate to turn to literature for help in answering ethical questions. Nussbaum does not wish to do so by avoiding literary complexity and intertextual referentiality. This relates to the second pitfall that the reader should attempt to avoid: in the past Eliot's 'ethics' have been divorced from her 'aesthetics.' In other words, critics have tried to 'extract' the moral of her work, and in doing so have neglected the complexities of her texts.

This second pitfall involved in divorcing Eliot's ethics and aesthetics is drawing the conclusion that she had really specific aims and was trying to cultivate set doctrines. Eliot herself was critical of authors who were expressly didactic, and wanted to avoid this in her own work. Insufficient textual analysis led her to be perceived as an overt moraliser after her death. There is a fine line to tread between saying that Eliot's texts have something to say about our lives, and saying that the novels contain maxims by which we should live. Equally, there is a fine line to tread between close textual

analysis, and the idea that the text has no referent beyond itself. Nussbaum acknowledges that in the past some literary discourse was “insufficiently sensitive to the ways in which a literary text as a whole hangs together, both with itself and with other texts, to the play of metaphor and allusion, the self-conscious patterning of language” (21). She also says that some more recent practitioners of ethical criticism have tried to “force the text into a narrow moral straitjacket, neglecting other ways in which it speaks to its reader, neglecting, too, its formal complexities” (21). Nussbaum wishes to avoid “excessively simple theories about ‘the’ moral role of literature” (21), and any views that try to conceal literary complexities. She argues that “literary work of recent years has done an enormous amount to make readers more precisely and firmly aware of subtleties of literary structure and intertextual reference” (22). The concerns that Nussbaum has are directly relevant to interpretations of Eliot. As I have already emphasised, Eliot’s novels are complex texts that require a great sensitivity, and it is important not to conceal the complexities.

Nussbaum’s work poses a number of challenges to the student of literature, as well as to the reader of Eliot’s novels. She talks of the strange ‘absence of the ethical’ in literary theory. She has noted that literary theory has lost the sense that “we are social beings puzzling out, in times of great moral difficulty, what might be, for us, the best way to live.” She says that literature has always been concerned with this question, but that recent literary theory has lost sight of this. Her work is important for literary studies in that it asks how the reading and study of novels can help us in our ethical life. In the essay “Perceptive Equilibrium: Literary Theory and Ethical Theory,” Nussbaum talks about the desire for “writing about literature that talks of human lives and choices as if

they matter to us all" (171). She looks to "a future in which literary theory [. . .] will join with ethical theory in pursuit of the question, 'how should one live?'" Nussbaum sees that literary texts pose these questions, but that literary theory and criticism has not risen to the challenge. We cannot go back to the innocence of New Criticism, and simply ignore that the text refers beyond itself. As I have already stressed, this type of reading is insufficiently nuanced for a reading of *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda*. Nor can we pretend that the challenges posed by deconstruction and reader response criticism do not exist. I will now look at how Nussbaum argues that ethical criticism has become more sophisticated.

Nussbaum argues that the best ethical criticism, instead of "insisting that all literature must play some single, simple role in human life," instead "has insisted on the complexity and variety revealed to us in literature, appealing to that complexity to cast doubt on reductive theories." She argues:

It is, in fact, criticism that focuses exclusively on textual form to the exclusion of human content that appears to be unduly narrow. For it appears to take no account of the urgency of our engagements with works of literature, the intimacy of the relationships we form, the way in which we do, like David Copperfield, read "as if for life," bringing to the texts our hopes, fears, and confusions, and allowing the text to impart a certain structure to our hearts. (22)

So again, an approach that neglects the reader's engagement with the text would be inappropriate for Eliot's novels. As I aim to show in the rest of this chapter, Eliot believed that our engagement with her fiction would have an effect on our life. I want to articulate the nature of our engagement with Eliot's novels, and the way that Eliot's aesthetics encourage us to be aware of the importance of theological motifs and to respond to them. In my discussion of Eliot's aesthetics I will show that she takes great pains to avoid any "reductive theories" and her endeavour is to move us away from any

tendencies we have to make generalised ethical judgements. Eliot wants us to sympathise with individuals, and to understand the particular circumstances and situations they face.

Nussbaum is critical of New Criticism's argument that it is inappropriate to ask ethical questions of literature. She suggests that the novel can be a form of ethical knowledge through its emphasis on individuals and the complex situations that they face. Nussbaum argues that the novel helps us focus on individuals, emphasises contextualisation, and does not encourage us to overlook complexity. In the discussion of Eliot's relation to Strauss, Spinoza, Feuerbach, and Comte we saw that one of the important distinctions to be drawn in comparisons of her work and theirs is that novels allowed Eliot to focus more attention and respect on the individual than their more systematic thinking allowed. I will now focus on some of Nussbaum's arguments and descriptions of the way in which the novel can not only explore ethical questions *thematically*, but also, how, as a genre, the *form* of the novel can encourage the reader to pay attention to particulars and complexities. I include in this section a number of critics who agree with Nussbaum, including the novelist and philosopher Iris Murdoch.

In the Preface to *Love's Knowledge* Nussbaum argues that novels give "a certain type of priority to the perception of particular people and situations, rather than to abstract rules" (ix). She says that "stories cultivate our ability to see and care for particulars, not as representatives of a law, but as what they themselves are." This is similar to Eliot's aesthetic aim, as we will see below. Eliot adheres to the idea that we are affected by what we read, and wants to change her readers in quite explicit and specific ways. In an essay entitled "Transcending Humanity" Nussbaum says that: "The

novel as genre is committed, in its very structures and in the structures of its relationship with its reader, to the pursuit of the uncertainties and vulnerabilities, the particularity and the emotional richness, of the human form of life” (390). She says that novels “speak to the reader as a human being, they immerse them in the characteristic movements of human time and the adventures of human finitude – in a form of life in which it is natural to love particular people and to have concern for the concrete events that happen to them” (391). In “Introduction: Form and Content, Literature and Philosophy,” Nussbaum argues that the novel allows for a “much finer responsiveness to the concrete” (37) and is “more complex, more allusive, more attentive to particulars.”<sup>5</sup> We will see in our discussion of Eliot how closely her novels fit some of Nussbaum’s descriptions. Eliot wants to make her reader responsive, and keeps a persistent emphasis on “concrete” and “particular” people and situations. I argue that it is through having her reader pay attention to particulars and complexities that Eliot achieves her aesthetic aim of extending her reader’s sympathies. Also I argue that theological motifs play a large

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<sup>5</sup> This view is not unique to Nussbaum, but she is one of its most articulate proponents. See also *Renegotiating Ethics in Literature, Philosophy, and Theory*, eds. Jane Adamson, Richard Freadman and David Parker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), and David Parker, *Ethics, Theory and the Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994). David Parker in “Introduction: the turn to ethics in the 1990s,” writes that: “literature is rightly esteemed as a highly particularised, complex and richly contextualised mode of ethical reflection [ . . . ] it is able to ponder moral questions in ways unavailable to conventional philosophical discourse” (*Renegotiating Ethics*, 12). In the same essay, Parker says that further work is being done by Charles Altieri, Wayne Booth, Stanley Cavell, Cora Diamond, Richard Eldridge, Murray Krieger, Alasdair MacIntyre, Frederick Olafson, Richard Rorty, Paul Seabright, Tobin Siebers, and Leona Toker. In addition, the following journal editions are devoted to the topic of ethical criticism: *Ethics* 103 and *Ethics* 110. The main drive for this type of criticism has so far come from philosophers.

J. Hillis Miller, in *The Ethics of Reading*, writes: “Without storytelling there is no theory of ethics. Narratives, examples, stories [ . . . ] are indispensable to thinking about ethics. An understanding of ethics as a region of philosophical or conceptual investigation depends, perhaps unsurprisingly, on mastery of the ability to interpret written stories, that is, on a kind of mastery usually thought to be the province of the literary critic. If this is true it has important implications [ . . . ] for my claim that the rhetorical study of literature has crucial practical implications for our moral, social and political lives.” See Miller, *The Ethics of Reading: Kant, de Man, Eliot, Trollope, James, and Benjamin* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 3. This passage is also quoted in Pauline Nestor, *George Eliot* (London: Palgrave, 2002), 8.

part in the particulars and complexities. In our discussion of *The Mill on the Floss* we will see that Eliot commends casuistical thinking. Eliot's characters and readers learn to love and care for particular people and events that happen to them. The role that religious motifs play in this process has been overlooked by Eliot scholars.

Iris Murdoch is another novelist and philosopher who has commented on the way in which novels portray complex dilemmas of characters, and the way in which, structurally, novels help us to think ethically. Iris Murdoch contrasts the 'abstract' nature of philosophical writing to the 'messiness' of novels in which all kinds of people live, in all kinds of ways. She writes: "The traditional novel is a place where people live in all kinds of different ways, where different kinds of characters meet, where it's the deep aspects of human life that are being spoken of and not an abstract theory." Writing a novel, says Murdoch, "involves being plunged into all the details of a human life."<sup>6</sup> Similarly, the reader of novels is plunged into the details of particular lives and situations. Josephine Donovan, in *Women and the Rise of the Novel, 1405-1726*, summarises Murdoch's argument in *The Sovereignty of Good*, that a great novel teaches one to attend to the particulars of one's environment.<sup>7</sup> Donovan argues that Murdoch derives this notion of attention from Simone Weil's concept of "attentive love." Murdoch, says Donovan, argues that novelists can make us aware that the other is a being with "needs and wishes" of her own, and this awareness makes it harder to treat

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<sup>6</sup> S. B. Sagare, "An Interview with Iris Murdoch," *Modern Fiction Studies* 47.3 (Fall 2001): 696-714.

<sup>7</sup> Josephine Donovan, *Women and the Rise of the Novel, 1405-1726*, and Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970).

the other person as a thing.<sup>8</sup> Donovan summarises Murdoch's argument in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*:

The imagination that is exercised in both writing and reading a novel is thus "a moral discipline" that makes us aware of others' situations, their suffering, and their coping. Such awareness should induce not only ethical compassion or sympathy; it may also "help people not to become embittered or brutalised or stupefied by affliction."<sup>9</sup>

Eliot, I will argue, aims to induce sympathy in her readers, for her characters, and for those the reader encounters once the act of reading is over. It is significant here, as elsewhere in Murdoch's writings, that it is not just the writing of novels that is an ethical act; reading and criticising novels is also a mode of ethical reflection.<sup>10</sup>

Nussbaum argues that the act of reading can have an effect on the reader. However, her understanding of the ethical power of fiction does not explain how this process works. The notion of transcendence is essential to a coherent understanding of how a reader can be changed by his or her reading of a literary text. In the introduction I suggested that Christian theology might provide a more adequate discourse to appreciate Eliot's aesthetic aim than current literary theory. In turn, the concept of transcendence cannot fully be understood without reference to other elements of Christian doctrine, particularly the concept of the incarnation and the nature and purpose of revelation. I argue that the religious motifs of incarnation, revelation, and transcendence are the bridge between Eliot's aesthetics and ethics, and I will focus on this in my discussion of

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<sup>8</sup> Murdoch, *Sovereignty*, 66.

<sup>9</sup> See Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1992), 322, and Donovan, *Women and the Rise of the Novel*, 8.

<sup>10</sup> Simon Haines, in "Deepening the Self: The language of ethics and the language of literature" (*Renegotiating Ethics*), says that Murdoch talks about literature and moral thought, and that reading, taking seriously, and criticising literature is a mode of ethical reflection (30).

*Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda* in chapters five and six. Bakhtin provides us with the critical discourse to read Eliot's aesthetics and ethics, and I will examine his work in the next chapter.

In the rest of this chapter I will examine Eliot's own comments about aesthetics, as they are found in her essays, letters, and fiction. I will concentrate on a number of aspects of her aesthetics, including writing about non-idealised characters and expressions against overt moralising or didacticism, and trace them through her essays, letters, and fiction. There is substantial primary material that shows that Eliot had specific and definite aesthetic aims, there is critical consensus that Eliot's early critical comments and review essays match with her aesthetics, and there is internal evidence within the novels. Following on from this discussion, I offer a brief history of Eliot scholarship as it relates to Eliot's role as a teacher and moralist. Here we see the problems that occur when her ethics and aesthetics are separated. I include critical responses to Eliot's aesthetics amongst critics of her day, and amongst literary critics today. I include a discussion of how, in the years immediately after her death, Eliot came to be perceived as an overt moraliser, and look at various ways to account for this phenomenon. Whatever its causes, this perception led to a generally negative view in critical opinion about Eliot, which was only reversed as a result of post-Second World War literary criticism. None of the scholars discussed in section two discuss the role that religious motifs play in Eliot's aesthetics and ethics, and in chapter four I turn to Bakhtin to help us articulate this.

## *Eliot and aesthetics*

In this section I explore Eliot's own comments about aesthetics. There is a consensus amongst literary critics that Eliot had developed her aesthetic thinking before beginning to write fiction herself. Neil Roberts, in *George Eliot: Her Beliefs and Her Art*, argues that by the time Eliot came to write fiction she already had set ideas about the nature of art and the role of the artist. He writes about her "clear and distinct views of the role of the artist and the nature and purpose of art" (15). W. J. Harvey, in *The Art of George Eliot*, says that Eliot "had fully worked out her basic aesthetic principles" before beginning to write (36).<sup>11</sup> Similarly, Richard Stang, in *The Theory of the Novel in England, 1850-1870*, writes:

Among all the Victorian novelists, George Eliot was perhaps unique in that she formulated her ideas about life and art before she started to write her first novel. In the essays she wrote for the London periodicals from 1851-8, especially the reviews of belles-lettres for the *Westminster Review* from 1855-7, almost all her ideas about art are stated explicitly, and together with her letters, they furnish an invaluable source from which her creed as a novelist may be derived. (40)<sup>12</sup>

In this section I will focus on these essays, reviews, and letters. As Nancy Henry says, in *George Eliot and the British Empire*, these letters are "relevant intertextual material for the illumination of her fiction" (114).<sup>13</sup> Thomas Noble, in the "Introduction" to *Scenes of Clerical Life*, argues that Eliot "had thought long and carefully about the aims and methods of novelists, and thus when she came to write fiction herself she had a very

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<sup>11</sup> W. J. Harvey, *The Art of George Eliot* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1961).

<sup>12</sup> Richard Stang, *The Theory of the Novel in England, 1850-1870* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1959).

<sup>13</sup> Nancy Henry, *George Eliot and the British Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

clear idea of what she wanted to accomplish" (vii).<sup>14</sup> I agree with these literary critics, and in the following sections I aim to show that the views expressed in her review essays find expression, not only in Eliot's letters about her own fiction, but also in the fiction itself. I have subdivided this section into three. The first looks at Eliot's review essays, the second at her letters, and the third looks at comments on aesthetics that are found in her early fiction. I focus on her reviews of Charles Kingsley's *Westward Ho!* and Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*, and the essay "The Natural History of German Life." In the second subsection I explore letters that Marian Lewes wrote to her publisher John Blackwood, the Comtist Frederic Harrison, and to two friends, namely Charles Bray and Mrs. Peter Alfred Taylor. The third subsection explores the ideas about aesthetics that are contained within Eliot's early fiction, with specific reference to "Amos Barton," *Adam Bede*, and *The Mill on the Floss*. It becomes apparent that in order to increase our sympathy for the other, Eliot commends sympathy for non-idealised characters, and emphasises avoiding reductive tendencies.

### *Eliot's review essays*

Marian Evans moved to London in 1851, and was editor of the *Westminster Review* until 1854. She continued to write articles until 1857.<sup>15</sup> During these years Evans honed her

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<sup>14</sup> "Introduction," *Scenes of Clerical Life*, ed. Thomas A. Noble (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). All subsequent references are to this introduction, not to the introduction in the Clarendon edition of *Scenes*.

<sup>15</sup> In January 1857 Eliot's last *Belles Lettres* section for the *Westminster Review* was published, together with "Worldliness and Other-Worldliness: The Poet Young." At the same time, *Scenes of Clerical Life* began serialisation in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*. In 1858 Eliot declined Bessie Rayner Parkes's invitation to write for the *English Woman's Journal*, and she also resisted Dickens's invitation to publish in *All Year Round*. Subsequently, journal articles were only published in journals of which Lewes was the editor. For example, Eliot published articles in the *Pall Mall Gazette* (March-May 1865), and the *Fortnightly Review* (15 May 1865). The exception to this is "Address to Working Men, by Felix Holt,"

writing skills and employed her talents to support herself financially.<sup>16</sup> As Thomas Noble writes in the “Introduction” to *Scenes of Clerical Life*, Eliot began to write fiction “with a great deal of experience as a literary critic behind her” (vii). This literary criticism is the genesis of her own aesthetics. Three principles of Eliot’s aesthetics emerge from these reviews: the artist is a teacher; Art does not have to be about ideal characters, and Art should not be didactic. It is important to hold the tension between Eliot’s desire that art can teach, and that it should not be didactic. This has been a source of disagreement in Eliot scholarship from her contemporaries onwards.

Eliot’s review of Charles Kingsley’s *Westward Ho!* appeared in the *Westminster Review* in July 1855.<sup>17</sup> In this review Eliot complains that Kingsley makes his moral point too clear. We read:

Habit has made [Kingsley] superlatively a preacher: he drops into the homily as readily as if he had been ‘to the manner born;’ and while by his artistic faculty he can transplant you into whatever scene he will, he can never trust to the impression that scene itself will make on you, but, true to his cloth, must always ‘improve the occasion’. (126)

Eliot criticises Kingsley for underlining the moral a scene should contain, instead of letting the scene speak for itself. (As we will see in section two of this chapter, Eliot herself has been criticised for this.) She continues with a mixture of approbation and criticism:

[Kingsley] sees, feels, and paints vividly, but he theorizes illogically and moralizes absurdly. If he would confine himself to his true sphere, he might be a teacher in the sense in which every great artist is a teacher – namely, by giving us his higher sensibility as a medium, a delicate acoustic or optical instrument,

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which appeared in *Blackwood’s* in January 1868. For these details and more, see the entry for “journalist, George Eliot as” in the *Oxford Companion to George Eliot*, 180-81.

<sup>16</sup> See Gordon S. Haight, *George Eliot and John Chapman* (Hamden, CT.: Archon, 1969), for further details of this time.

<sup>17</sup> This review is included in *Essays of George Eliot*, 123-136.

bringing home to our coarser senses what would otherwise be unperceived by us.  
(126)

Eliot argues that the artist can and should be a teacher, not by overt moralising, but rather by helping us perceive new things. An important principle of Eliot's aesthetics emerges from this quotation, namely, that the role of the artist and the role of the teacher are closely connected. The artist is a teacher precisely because he or she can help us perceive new things, and not simply because he or she points out moral issues. Beryl Gray, in *George Eliot and Music*, proceeds from Eliot's review of Kingsley, and her argument that a "great artist teaches by giving us his higher sensibility as a medium, a delicate acoustic or optical instrument, bringing home to our coarser senses what would otherwise be unperceived by us," and formulates the following thesis: George Eliot's "auditory imagination (and therefore her demand on the reader's auditory imagination) was at least as vital to her as her visual imagination." Gray writes:

[T]he extent to which sound permeates and animates the novels has failed to permeate our understanding of them, and we have remained therefore partly deaf to that which George Eliot would have her own art 'teach'. For the ability to listen – to be stirred by the tones and modulations of the human voice, and to discern and respond to all forms of natural and humanly wrought harmony – invariably symbolises George Eliot's most cherished moral virtue: the capacity for human sympathy. (x)<sup>18</sup>

We will see in *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda* how Eliot's narrators' use of visual and aural metaphors helps us perceive new things. I will concentrate specifically on how Eliot helps us perceive new things visually. The principle that the artist can teach us new things is also stated clearly in "The Natural History of German Life," to which I shall

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<sup>18</sup> Beryl Gray, *George Eliot and Music* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989). There are a number of critical studies looking at Eliot and music. See also Alison Byerly, "'The Language of the Soul': George Eliot and Music," *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 44.1 (1989): 1-17; Shirley Frank Levenson, "The Use of

turn shortly. Eliot's review of Kingsley continues with an analysis of his delineation of character, or character types. Eliot dislikes Kingsley's tendency to "hold up certain persons as models" (129). She complains that they are too "exemplary" for the reader to like, and that Kingsley makes them "texts" to "preach from" (129). She says that Kingsley's "parsonic habit" prevents him from creating truly human characters (129).<sup>19</sup>

A second principle of Eliot's aesthetics that emerges from this review is that art does not always have to deal with exemplary characters. She says "human beings, human parties and human deeds are made up of the most subtly intermixed good and evil" (130). We shall see Eliot's concern for human character in "Amos Barton" and *Adam Bede*. A third principle is that overt theorising is neither recommended nor desirable. Richard Stang, in *The Theory of the Novel in England, 1850-1870*, writes: "Running through all her reviews is a continual condemnation of didacticism and the moral exhortations of her contemporaries" (43). In her literary criticism, her letters, and her fiction, she warns against didacticism and the making of facile moral judgements. As I mentioned earlier, one of the dangers incurred when we divorce Eliot's aesthetics and her ethics, is that she can be seen to be a didactic moralist. Eliot does want her novels to 'teach' her readers, but through the medium of fiction, not through moral aphorisms.

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Music in *Daniel Deronda*," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 24 (1969): 317-34; and Phyllis Weliver, "Music as a sign in *Daniel Deronda*," *The George Eliot Review* 27 (1996): 43-48.

<sup>19</sup> Terry Wright, in *Theology and Literature*, comments on Eliot's review of Kingsley: "Eliot could not resist the temptation to laugh at the crude didacticism evident in such 'oracular' novels. She poked fun at *Westward Ho!*, for example, in which the 'preacher' in Kingsley so often overcomes the 'painter', the author labelling his heroes and villains with a clumsy force which was an insult to his readers' judgement" (115).

Eliot's review of Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* appeared in the *Leader*, 21 July 1855.<sup>20</sup> This review starts with the same dislike of the easy separation into good and bad characters and overt moralising that we saw in her review of Kingsley. She condemns this trend in Goethe's detractors. Of Goethe she writes:

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. (146)

Eliot questions whether *Wilhelm Meister* is an “immoral” book (144). She says: “But we question whether the direct exhibition of a moral bias in the writer will make a book really moral in its influence” (145). She argues that children lose interest in a story the moment they detect any “intention to moralise” (145) and the same is true for adult readers. Eliot argues that direct moralising is ineffective for children and adults alike. Rather, Eliot states that the task of the novelist is to “call forth our best sympathies” (146).

Eliot's essay “The Natural History of German Life” was published in the *Westminster Review*, in July 1856.<sup>21</sup> In this essay Eliot gives an insight into how the artist can teach us, and that is by helping us perceive new things. Eliot offers the following comment on the role of the artist:

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 a 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. (270)

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<sup>20</sup> This review is included in *Essays of George Eliot*, 143-147.

<sup>21</sup> This essay is included in *Essays of George Eliot*, 266-299.

This quotation highlights a number of recurrent concerns of Eliot's aesthetics. Eliot saw her task as a novelist being to extend her reader's sympathies. The artist can thus surprise the reader into attending to that which is apart from him or herself. She, as a novelist and artist, is not trying to make "generalizations" or use "statistics" to win or extend her readers' sympathies. We will see this refusal to make generalizations again when we look at her aesthetics in *The Mill on the Floss*. The novel as a genre focuses on concrete and particular individuals. Eliot continues:

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 humour in the life of our more heavily-laden fellow-men, should be perverted, and turned towards a false object instead of the true one.<sup>22</sup> (271)

In this quotation we see that Eliot ties the doctrine of sympathy and realism together. Realism and sympathy have a social aspect to them, and are class-conscious. It is important, says Eliot the reviewer, not to distort the representation of working-class people. The artist has a moral responsibility to portray people as accurately as possible. We need to sympathise with people as they are and not as we should like them to be. We will see that this same concern for truthfulness informs Eliot's aesthetics in "Amos Barton" and *Adam Bede*. Realism and truthfulness are subservient to sympathy within Eliot's aesthetics.

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<sup>22</sup> Similarly, in "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists" (*Westminster Review*, October 1856), Eliot berates female novelists for the lack of truthfulness in terms of plot and language. They are not writing because they need the money, but are writing out of vanity. The essay is included in *Essays of George Eliot*, 300-324.

In these three essays we see a remarkable continuity in Eliot's aesthetics and a number of key principles emerge: art must represent people truthfully, art can represent flawed human beings, didacticism should be avoided, and the aim of art is to increase the reader's sympathies for his or her fellow human beings. Eliot understands sympathy to be a corrective to our egoism and our limited perspective. Sympathy enables us to attend to that which is other than the self. And this is done by helping us perceive new things. There is a narrative comment in *Adam Bede* which neatly expresses this sentiment. Adam's suffering, his acquaintance with "deep sorrow," has led him to see things more clearly (Book 6, chapter 54, 492).<sup>23</sup> He feels that the "fuller life" which his experience of suffering has brought is worth the "personal share of the pain" (chapter 54, 491). The narrator adds that it is not "possible for a man with cataract to regret the painful process by which his dim blurred sight of men as trees walking had been exchanged for a clear outline" (491). Dinah helps Adam to "see things right" and the narrative comments produce a similar effect in the reader (492). Eliot saw sympathy as an ability that we can cultivate and grow, an ability that reading literature can foster.

There is critical agreement that sympathy is a vital component of Eliot's aesthetics, even if there is disagreement about its source. Literary critics, including Neil Roberts, Karen Chase, Suzanne Graver, and John McGowan, agree that sympathy is important for Eliot's aesthetics. Neil Roberts argues that sympathy is a "crucial" word in her moral and aesthetic vocabulary. Karen Chase, in *George Eliot, Middlemarch*, accurately identifies that sympathy is at the centre of Eliot's aesthetic and moral doctrine. She writes:

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<sup>23</sup> George Eliot, *Adam Bede*, ed. Carol A. Martin (Clarendon: Oxford, 2001). All subsequent references

The word poised at the center of George Eliot's aesthetic as of her moral doctrine is "sympathy," a word that retains for her a rich power of implication far beyond our pale ordinary uses of the term. In *Middlemarch* as in her critical writings, it suggests a fundamental human gesture – an overwhelming of instinctive egoism, a turning outward to the world beyond the self, a meeting and a mingling and a merging with another self, another center of another world. (42)<sup>24</sup>

I agree with Chase that sympathy is central to Eliot's aesthetic and to her moral doctrine. However, I disagree with Chase's suggestion that it is a "fundamental human gesture." This suggests that it is an inherent part of human nature. If this were the case there would not be the need for novels with the aim of extending our sympathies. Neither do I agree that it is a "meeting," "mingling," or "merging" with another person. The relationship between self and other in Eliot's fiction is complex, but Bakhtin's concepts of non-alibi in being, excess of seeing, and his understanding of self/other relations give us a lot of help in understanding Eliot's texts. We will see how this works out in the chapters on *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda*.

Suzanne Graver, in *George Eliot and Community: A Study in Social Theory and Fictional Form*, argues: "So important was an aesthetic of sympathy to George Eliot that she justified her life and her art according to its ethic" (265). Graver makes the connection between the ethic and the aesthetic, but not the role that theological motifs play in the process. John McGowan, in *Representation and Revelation: Victorian Realism from Carlyle to Yeats*, writes: "morally, sympathy functions as the only escape from a solipsism that not only insures a limited knowledge of the world but also an inability to improve the life of others and oneself." He goes on to say that "rhetorically,

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are to this volume.

<sup>24</sup> Karen Chase, *George Eliot, Middlemarch* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

the author requests our sympathy as she works to persuade us to accept her vision of the real and how our lot might be best endured and/or improved" (135-6).<sup>25</sup>

Ellen Argyros, in "*Without Any Check of Proud Reserve*": *Sympathy and Its Limits in George Eliot's Novels*, argues that as Eliot moved from essayist to novelist she moved from describing or praising sympathy as a practice that others engage in, to a notion that sympathy must be actively evoked for others. She argues that Eliot had an increasing awareness that sympathy has a performative dimension to it. Argyros argues that in the essays on Young and Cumming, Eliot is "unabashedly judgmental" (69), that she shows "disdain for maxims" (70), and that she particularly dislikes Young's didacticism (81). Argyros writes:

What differentiates Eliot the essayist from Eliot the novelist is that the maturer woman recognises the performative dimension of sympathy: the fact that sympathy is not just an idea to be described but a moral emotion to be evoked and that this performative dimension cannot function within the context of polemical journal writing but requires a fictional context in order for this performative dimension to be dramatised. (71)

Argyros makes an important observation here: that there is a performative dimension to sympathy. In my discussions of *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda* I will show that the ethics of Eliot's art is such that this performative dimension of sympathy extends not just to Eliot's presentation of her characters, but also how the reader relates to others beyond the text. In her review of Young, Eliot offers the following conclusion:

In Young we have the type of that deficient human sympathy, that impiety towards the present and the visible, which flies for its motives, its sanctities, and its religion, to the remote, the vague, and the unknown: in Cowper we have the type of that genuine love which cherishes things in proportion to their nearness, and feels its reverence grow in proportion to the intimacy of its knowledge.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> John McGowan, *Representation and Revelation: Victorian Realism from Carlyle to Yeats* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1986).

<sup>26</sup> "Worldliness and Other-Worldliness: The Poet Young," *Essays of George Eliot*, 335-385.

We will see how this works out in the chapters on *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda*. In the chapters on these novels I shall look at how the religious motifs of incarnation, revelation, and transcendence are operative within Eliot's aim of extending her reader's sympathies. I will see how sympathy functions as a means of avoiding solipsism on both an intra-textual and an extra-textual level. Eliot has her characters learn the importance of sympathy, and the same applies for the reader. In the next subsection we will see these same principles expressed in Eliot's letters.

### *Eliot's letters*

In this second subsection I have selected four letters in which Eliot discusses aesthetics. These are not the only letters in which Eliot comments on aesthetics, but they are a representative selection. Even before she started to write fiction, Eliot shared the presupposition that we are changed by what we read. In a letter to Maria Lewes, dated 16 March 1839, she wrote:

We cannot, at least those who read to any purpose at all, we cannot I say help being modified by the ideas that pass through our minds. [. . .] We are each one of the *Dramatis personae* in some play on the stage of life – hence our actions have their share in the effects of our reading.<sup>27</sup>

The four letters I have selected each reveal something of Eliot's thought about how our reading can affect our lives, and in particular about her hopes for the effect that her fiction will have on her readers, and how the artist is a teacher and can help us perceive new things.

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<sup>27</sup> GEL 1, 23.

The first letter that I want to look at is Eliot's letter to Charles Bray, dated 5 July 1859. This letter reveals that Eliot wants her writing to have an "effect" on her readers, and that that moral effect is to enlarge her reader's sympathies. She writes:

If Art does not enlarge man's sympathies, it does nothing morally ... opinions are a poor cement between human souls and 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.<sup>28</sup>

We see that she considers "opinions" are ineffective in enlarging man's sympathies with one another, and consequently her aim is to help us "imagine" and "feel" the pains and joys of those who differ from us.<sup>29</sup> We see an emphasis on non-ideal and non-exemplary characters. All her characters are "struggling erring human creatures." In chapter two, when discussing Eliot's relationship to the Religion of Humanity, we saw that Eliot in no way proposed humanity as a subject for worship. The extra-textual element or ethical dimension of this aesthetic is recognised by Mary Ellen Doyle, in *The Sympathetic Response: George Eliot's Fictional Rhetoric*. She writes: "[Eliot] wishes to influence the intellectual and emotional attitudes of real readers toward other real people in the real world outside her books" (1).<sup>30</sup> This is an explicit statement of Eliot's ethical practice.

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<sup>28</sup> GEL 3, 111.

<sup>29</sup> Janice Carlisle, in *The Sense of an Audience: Dickens, Thackeray, and George Eliot at Mid-Century*, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1981), argues that at this point in its history, the novel's "moral intentions and their implications" were "insistently at the forefront of its aesthetic." She writes: "It is a commonplace of literary history that Victorian novelists inherited the romantic belief in the power of the sympathetic imagination. Their confidence in their ability to affect their audience rests on their faith in the reader's innate capacity to feel with and for the characters in their stories" (2 and 5).

<sup>30</sup> Mary Ellen Doyle, *The Sympathetic Response: George Eliot's Fictional Rhetoric* (Rutherford, NJ.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1981).

Eliot's letter to Frederic Harrison, dated 15 August 1866, was written as a response to Harrison's letter of 19 July 1866, in which he detailed his "old fancy," his dream, "that the grand features of Comte's world might be sketched in fiction."<sup>31</sup> In her reply Eliot talks explicitly and at length about aesthetic teaching, once again disclaiming an interest in teaching through overt moralising:

That is a tremendously difficult problem which you have laid before me, and I think you see its difficulties, though they can hardly press upon you as they do on me, who have gone through again and again the severe effort of trying to make certain ideas thoroughly incarnate, as if they had revealed themselves to me first in the flesh and not in the spirit. I think aesthetic teaching is the highest of all teaching because it deals with life in its highest complexity. But if it ceases to be purely aesthetic – if it lapses anywhere from the picture to the diagram – it becomes the most offensive of all teaching. Avowed utopias are not offensive, because they are understood to have a scientific and expository character: they do not pretend to work on the emotions, or couldn't do it if they did pretend. I am sure, from your own statement, that you see this quite clearly. Well, then, consider the sort of agonizing labour to an English-fed imagination to make art a sufficiently real back-ground, for the desired picture, to get breathing, individual forms, and group them in the needful relations, so that the presentation will lay hold on the emotions as human experience – will, as you say, "flash" conviction on the world by means of aroused sympathy.<sup>32</sup>

Eliot sees that aesthetics involves an element of teaching, with the aim of arousing sympathy, but here she argues that it not achieved by directing the reader to diagrammatic statements. Art needs to be about complexities. We will see how this works in *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda* by examining the religious motifs of incarnation, revelation, and transcendence.

There are a number of similarities between this letter and the one Eliot wrote to John Blackwood, dated 12 November 1873. This letter discusses Alexander Main's

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<sup>31</sup> A selection of the correspondence between Frederic Harrison and Marian Lewes is reproduced in *George Eliot: Selected Essays, Poems and Other Writings*, eds. A. S. Byatt and Nicholas Warren (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990), 241-257. For further details the reader is referred to the *GEL*.

<sup>32</sup> *GEL* 4, 300-1.

project to publish *Wise, Witty, and Tender Sayings in Prose and Verse Selected From the Works of George Eliot*, a book of extracts selected from her writings. Eliot writes:

Unless my readers are more moved towards the ends I seek by my works as wholes than by an assemblage of extracts, my writings are a mistake. I have always exercised a severe watch against anything that could be called preaching, and if I have ever allowed myself in dissertation or in dialogue [anything] which is not part of the *structure* of my books, I have there sinned against my own laws.

We see Eliot's concern to avoid preaching and theorising, as well as the concern to move her readers by her works as a whole, rather than through extracted quotations or extrapolations. The structure of her work, *i.e.*, the work as an aesthetic whole, is the way in which Eliot seeks to move her readers:

Unless I am condemned by my own principles, my books are not properly separable into 'direct' and 'indirect' teaching.<sup>33</sup>

Eliot does not want her readers to be able to draw an easy moral from her fiction, and we will see this later when I discuss *The Mill on the Floss*.

A fourth letter in which George Eliot emphasises her aesthetic teaching is her letter to Mrs. Peter Alfred Taylor, dated 18 July 1878. Eliot writes:

My function is that of the *aesthetic*, not the doctrinal teacher – the rousing of the nobler emotions, which make mankind desire the social right, not the prescribing of special measures, concerning which the artistic mind, however strongly moved by social sympathy, is often not the best judge. It is one thing to feel keenly for one's fellow-beings; another to say, "This step, and this alone, will be the best to take for the removal of particular calamities."<sup>34</sup>

Once again we see Eliot's resistance to prescribing special measures. It is not the prescription of a set of rules that is important, but the particular circumstances that a novel presents that allow us as readers to consider the particularities of a case. She

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<sup>33</sup> GEL 5, 459.

<sup>34</sup> GEL 7, 44.

argues that it is important to feel for one's fellow human beings, but that does not extend to dictating or advising them what to do.

In these letters, written over a period of almost twenty years, we see continuity in Eliot's aesthetic thinking, and similarities to the arguments expressed in her review essays.<sup>35</sup> This section has been concerned with Eliot's comments about her own writing. We see that as an artist she aimed to produce an effect on the reader, that that effect was to produce or evoke sympathy in the reader for his or her fellow human beings, that she aimed to achieve this not by preaching or direct moralising, but by an emotional response to her work as a whole. In the chapters on *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda* we will see that Eliot received letters witnessing that her aesthetic was having the desired effect on her readers. It is now time to look at Eliot's comments about aesthetics that are found in her early fiction.

### *Eliot and the aesthetics of the early fiction*

In this subsection I concentrate on Eliot's early fiction, with specific reference to "Amos Barton," *Adam Bede*, and *The Mill on the Floss*. I have chosen to focus on Eliot's aim of extending her reader's sympathies, with reference to her presentation of character and her desire to resist theorising. I focus on "Amos Barton" and *Adam Bede* in my discussion of Eliot's representation of character, and I focus on *Adam Bede* and *The Mill on the Floss* in my discussion of her desire to resist theorising. In these discussions also,

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<sup>35</sup> Thomas Noble, in his Introduction to *Scenes of Clerical Life*, says that Eliot returned to these views of art and morality and the connection between the two throughout her career (*vii*).

we find Eliot hinting that her aesthetic has ethical implications, and she calls her reader to respond to the other on a textual level, but also beyond the text.

### *Eliot's representation of character*

The aim of Eliot's fiction is to help the reader understand people in a deeper way. It is clear that at this early stage in her writing career there is an extra-textual referent to her aesthetics. From the narrator's comments about character that are found in "Amos Barton" and *Adam Bede*, we see that Eliot is quick to point out that her fiction is not concerned with extraordinary characters and extraordinary events. In chapter 5 of "Amos Barton" we are told that he is:

in no respect an ideal or exceptional character, and perhaps I am doing a bold thing to bespeak your sympathy on behalf of a man who was so very far from remarkable, – a man whose virtues were not heroic, and who had no undetected crime within his breast; who had not the slightest mystery hanging about him, but was palpably and unmistakably commonplace. (chapter 5, 41)<sup>36</sup>

Amos Barton is not a remarkable character, but the narrator nonetheless seeks our sympathy on his behalf. Indeed, he is a "struggling erring human creature." Thomas Noble argues that one element of Eliot's artistic credo is her insistence upon the importance, as a subject for serious literature, of the lives of commonplace men and women, and the novelist's moral obligation to give a true picture of those lives.<sup>37</sup>

We see the same concern not to overlook ordinary people in *Adam Bede*. In chapter 17 the narrator speaks of ordinary people doing ordinary tasks, and says that we should not overlook them in art:

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<sup>36</sup> George Eliot, *Scenes of Clerical Life*, ed. Thomas A. Noble (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985). All subsequent references to this volume will be in the text.

<sup>37</sup> See Noble, Introduction to *Scenes*, viii.

There are few prophets in the world; few sublimely beautiful women; few heroes. I can't afford to give all my love and reverence to such rarities: I want a great deal of those feelings for my every-day fellow-men, especially for the few in the foreground of the great multitude, whose faces I know, whose hands I touch, for whom I have to make way with kindly courtesy. (chapter 17, 168)

Eliot's aim is to make her readers sympathetic to the "every-day fellow-men" they meet, and not "prophets," "sublimely beautiful women," and "heroes." In chapter 7 of "Amos Barton" the narrator tells us:

I wish to stir your sympathy with commonplace troubles – to win your tears for real sorrow: sorrow such as may live next door to you – such as walks neither in rags nor in velvet, but in very ordinary decent apparel. (chapter 7, 56)

Once again we are encouraged to move beyond the textual example Eliot sets before us in her narrative. Similarly, in *Adam Bede*, the narrator wants to win our sympathy for those we live amongst. In chapter 17 the narrator talks in detail about the people she is writing about:

These fellow-mortals, every one, must be accepted as they are: you can neither straighten their noses, nor brighten their wit, nor rectify their dispositions; and it is these people – amongst whom your life is passed – that it is needful you should tolerate, pity, and love: it is these more or less ugly, stupid, inconsistent people, whose movements of goodness you should be able to admire – for whom you should cherish all possible hopes, all possible patience. And I would not, even if I had the choice, be the clever novelist who could create a world so much better than this, in which we get up in the morning to do our daily work, that you would be likely to turn a harder, colder eye on the dusty streets and the common green fields – on the real breathing men and women, who can be chilled by your indifference or injured by your prejudice; who can be cheered and helped onward by your fellow-feeling, your forbearance, your outspoken, brave justice. (chapter 17, 165-6)

This passage reveals the explicit *purpose* of Eliot's realism: we need to accept, tolerate, love and pity one another. Her aim is the exact opposite of turning a harder, cold eye on people. We are to love others not because of their inherent loveliness, but because we

are in a position to exercise the faculty of sympathy. David Parker, in an essay entitled “Bound in Charity”: *Middlemarch*,” in *Ethics, Theory and the Novel*, writes:

For George Eliot, ‘fellow-feeling’ is not the imposition of wishful rose tints on my neighbour’s factual ugliness; it is rather understanding him or her in a deeper way, one that is not blinkered or distorted by an excessively individualistic self/other binarism. (80)

Her novels do not try to hide the “factual ugliness” but they do try to extend the reader’s sympathy and help the reader understand other people in a deeper way.<sup>38</sup>

Eliot’s aim is that we continue to exercise our capacity for sympathy beyond the reading of her texts. The narrator of *Adam Bede* says that he likes Dutch paintings:

It is for this rare, precious quality of truthfulness that I delight in many Dutch paintings, which lofty-minded people despise. 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 of absolute indigence, of tragic suffering or of world-stirring actions. (Chapter 17, 166)

Here we see again the emphasis on ordinary people with a “homely existence” rather than a life of “world-stirring actions” and the emphasis on art’s ability to be a source of sympathy for our fellow human beings. In the next section I look at how Eliot discusses

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<sup>38</sup> Eliot’s contemporary, the critic E. S. Dallas, comments on her ability to help us sympathise with others, despite their faults. In a review of *Silas Marner*, 29 April 1861, he writes:

“She has given dignity to the life of boors and peasants in some of our bucolic districts, and this not by any concealment of their ignorance, follies, and frailties, nor by false colouring, bombastic sentiment, and exceptional events, but by a plain statement of the everyday of the people. The charm of George Eliot’s novels lies in their truthfulness. Nothing is extenuated nor aught else set down in malice. We see the people amid all their grovelling cares, with all their coarseness, ignorance, and prejudice – poor, paltry, stupid, wretched, well-nigh despicable. This mean existence George Eliot raises into dignity by endowing it with conscience and kindness. There is nothing glittering about it. Here we have no mock heroics. There is not the slightest attempt to represent [. . .] the passing pedlar as a poet wanting the accomplishment of verse. The personages of the tale are common, very common people [. . .].” Dallas says that Eliot makes us “feel a warm interest in all their petty concerns and humble endeavours.” See *George Eliot: The Critical Heritage*, ed. David Carroll (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971), 179-185.

art's ability to bring out our sympathies, without the necessity of being too didactic or moralising.<sup>39</sup>

### *Eliot and anti-didacticism*

Eliot wants to prevent her readers from condemning and approving at a glance, and wants to change the very way that we judge people, to change our perspective on the way we judge others and the world. Eliot aims to increase our sympathy for characters once we know why they act the way they do. This is one of the key ways she extends our sympathy in *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda*. She wants to disturb our prepossessions and shake our confidence.

In section one we saw that in her review of Kingsley's *Westward Ho!* Eliot condemned his easy separation of characters into good and bad, or right and wrong. Eliot expresses this same dislike of separating characters into good and bad in *Adam Bede* and *The Mill on the Floss*. In chapter 17 of *Adam Bede*, the narrator writes:

It is so very rarely that facts hit that nice medium required by our own enlightened opinions and refined taste! Perhaps you will say, "Do improve the facts a little, then; make them more accordant with those correct views which it is our privilege to possess. The world is not just what we like; do touch it up with a tasteful pencil, and make believe it is not quite such a mixed entangled affair. Let all people who hold unexceptionable opinions act unexceptionably. Let your most faulty characters always be on the wrong side, and your virtuous ones on the right. Then we shall see at a glance whom we are to condemn, and whom we are to approve. Then we shall be able to admire, without the slightest disturbance of our prepossessions: we shall hate and despise with that true ruminant relish which belongs to undoubting confidence." (Chapter 17, 165)

The tone in this quotation is one of studied exaggeration. The narrator is not advocating but mocking these suggestions. The narrator mocks such "enlightened opinions" and

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<sup>39</sup> Noble similarly recognises that she is critical of didacticism, in the Introduction to *Scenes (vii-viii)*.

“refined taste” precisely because they fail to appreciate that life is a “mixed entangled affair.” Good and bad are not so easily distinguished in life, as they are in the types of fiction that Eliot’s narrator is here mocking. And the narrator does wish to ‘disturb’ our ‘prepossessions’ and shake our ‘confidence’ in order to enable us to have more feeling for others. This will be important when we look at *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda*. The narrators of these novels suggest the difficulty involved in judging people by actions – we do not know their motives, and sometimes actions that look wrong to outsiders were prompted by the best motives. Eliot also shows how external decisions and things can affect our actions.

In *The Mill on the Floss* the narrator comments on the inappropriateness of “maxims” to the “mysterious complexity of our life.”<sup>40</sup> She writes:

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 judgement solely by general rules, thinking that these will lead them to justice by a ready-made 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. (Book 7, chapter 2, 438)<sup>41</sup>

The narrator warns us against “maxims,” “formulas,” “ready-made patent general rules,” and says that we need the “insight” that comes from a “wide fellow-feeling with all that is human.” The narrator of *The Mill on the Floss* says:

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<sup>40</sup> George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, ed. Gordon S. Haight (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980). All subsequent references are to this edition.

<sup>41</sup> For a discussion of Eliot’s use of maxims see Susan Sniader Lanser, “Woman of Maxims: George Eliot and the Realist Imperative,” *Fictions of Authority: Women Writers and Narrative Voice* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 81-101.

The casuists have become a by-word of reproach; but their perverted spirit of minute discrimination was the shadow of a truth to which eyes and hearts are too often fatally sealed – the truth, that moral judgements must remain false and hollow, unless they are checked and enlightened by a perpetual reference to the special circumstances that mark the individual lot. (Book 7, chapter 2, 437-8)

In chapter one we saw that casuistry played a part in the rise of the novel. We saw that the novel allows for forms of ethical thinking that avoids maxims and formulas. I explore the role that theological motifs play in the process of ethical thinking and the aesthetics of Eliot's novels in chapters five and six.

We have seen a continuity of aesthetic thought from Eliot's early essays through to her early fiction. We have seen that she is keen to emphasise the ordinariness of her characters, her dislike of overt moralising, and her endeavour to extend her readers sympathies. In the next section I am going to look at how contemporary critics of Eliot viewed her as a teacher, and how critics today view her. Eliot wanted to teach, but not by simplistic and overt moralising.

### *Critical responses to Eliot's aesthetics and ethics*

In this section I review briefly the history of Eliot criticism that has discussed her roles as artist and teacher. I have divided the section into two, and look firstly at how Eliot's contemporaries viewed her work, and secondly at how literary critics today read her work. In the history of Eliot scholarship there has been a tension between Eliot's desire that the artist can teach, and the dangers of didacticism. In section one I look at how contemporaries of Eliot understood her aesthetics. I begin with one of E. S. Dallas's critical comments on Eliot, before widening the discussion to consider how she became to be perceived as an overt moralist. I consider the way in which a number of factors

contributed to this perception and its influence on Eliot's critical reputation. In section two I look at how some contemporary critics suggest ways in which Eliot can be considered a teacher.

### *Eliot the moral teacher*

Eliot's contemporary, E. S. Dallas argued that she was not a didactic moralist. For example, in *The Times*, 29 April 1861, he wrote:

Hers is a very spiritual nature, and she cannot choose but regard life from a very lofty point of view. But her novels are true novels, not sermons done into dialogue. The moral purpose which is evident in her writing is mostly an unconscious purpose. It is that sort of moral meaning which belongs to every great work of art, and which no elevated mind can get rid of. She tells a simple story without the least idea of inculcating any copy-book lesson, but by merely elevating the reader to her mount of observation she cannot fail to suggest to the mind some profound reflections.<sup>42</sup>

I agree with Dallas that Eliot is not trying to write sermons, and is not guilty of the very charges she laid against Kingsley. He also articulates, through the visual metaphor of the "mount of observation," how Eliot's aim was to help us perceive new things. However, I do not agree with Dallas that the moral purpose of Eliot's novels is an "unconscious" one. It seems evident from what we have said about Eliot's aesthetics up to now that the reverse is true. Eliot had a conscious moral purpose in her art – to extend her reader's sympathies. Eliot employs complex narrative devices in order to 'elevate' her reader to her point of observation, and to help him or her perceive new things. A close reading of this quotation highlights a whole area of critical discussion. A review of the critical history of Eliot's literary reception and reputation reveals that there is a tension between

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<sup>42</sup> See *Critical Heritage*, 185.

whether she should be considered primarily as a philosopher or as an artist. During her lifetime Eliot enjoyed popularity with critics and readers alike, but in the decades after her death, her literary reputation was challenged and became diminished. A number of reasons have been suggested for this, and Eliot and/or George Henry Lewes, consciously or unconsciously, may be responsible for some of these. They include the nature of the Sunday afternoon gatherings at the Priory, Alexandar Main's publication of the *Wise, Witty, and Tender Sayings of George Eliot in Prose and Verse*, Eliot's letters to individuals, the biography produced by J. W. Cross, and the personal testimonies of F. W. H. Myers and Charles Bray.

Rosemarie Bodenheimer, Elaine Showalter, and Deirdre David all argue that during her fifties 'George Eliot' was gradually transformed into an institution or myth.<sup>43</sup> The Sunday afternoon gathering that the Leweses held at their north London home were part of this process. Deirdre Davies argues that Eliot was encouraged to believe in her own "mythologised reputation" through the stream of visitors who would sit at her feet and seek "words of wisdom" from the woman who was the "intellectual matriarch to a tribe of admirers" (170). James Champion, in "George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*: Imaginative Communion and the Critical Imperative," writes: "I concur with George Levine when he says that 'the image' of Eliot on such an occasion, 'bending forward, listening . . . with selfless and disciplined attention to her admiring visitors, corresponds precisely to the moral and intellectual ideal that informs her novels'" (290). Dorothea Barrett, in *Vocation and Desire*, talks of a "concerted effort on the part of both George

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<sup>43</sup> See Dorothea Barrett, *Vocation and Desire: George Eliot's Heroines* (London: Routledge, 1989), Rosemarie Bodenheimer, *The Real Life of Mary Ann Evans*, and Deirdre Davies, *Intellectual Women and*

Henry and Marian Lewes to manufacture and disseminate an image of George Eliot that would be powerful, morally authoritative, and spotless enough to erase the prior image of Marian Lewes.” Barrett goes on to explain:

This can only be understood in the context of the severe disapprobation she had suffered all her life, for being plain, for being passionate, for being intellectual, and above all for being unmarried. The initial creation of the sibyl image was the means by which an embattled woman, whose character and circumstances threatened the dominant ideology, gained peace, power, and acceptance in Victorian England. (5)

Barrett is suggesting that the persona of ‘George Eliot’ was an antidote to the figure of Marian Evans who had scandalised society by her free-thinking and her free-living. This persona of the Sunday gatherings also was present in her response to certain individuals who wrote to her. Kathryn Hughes, in her biography *George Eliot: The Last Victorian*, writes that men and women from around the world wrote to Eliot begging for advice about the most personal matters, from marriage through God to their own poetry. She suggests that they saw Eliot as one who “seemed to understand the pain and difficulty of being alive in the nineteenth century” (4). In both the Sunday afternoon gatherings and the letters she wrote, there seems to be a blurring of the persona of ‘George Eliot’ with the person of Marian Lewes.

Alexandar Main’s publication of *Wise, Witty, and Tender Sayings of George Eliot*, a collection of extracted quotations from her novels, was another contributing factor to Eliot’s reputation as a sage or sibyl. Eliot was aware of the danger inherent in such a book of extracts, as is evident in the letters we discussed earlier in this chapter. She was aware that this book would isolate her words and remove them from their

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*Victorian Patriarchy: Harriet Martineau, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, George Eliot* (London: Macmillan, 1987).

original literary and narrative context. In the section on her letters we saw that Eliot wished her readers to be moved by her work as a whole, and not by phrases or sayings taken out of context. Again we see the dangers of divorcing ethics and aesthetics; it is against Eliot's aim of having her works achieve their aim as wholes rather than as a collection of sayings.

The publication of J. W. Cross's biography of Eliot was another contributing factor to her being perceived as an overt moralist. Dorothea Barrett argues that Marghanita Laski, in her acerbic biography *George Eliot and her World*, claims that the Cross biography was "disastrous" for Eliot. Barrett quotes Laski:

[I]n attempting to conceal not merely possible scandal but the smallest flaw, he presented only a whited sepulchre; and it is impossible to feel confident that all the whitewash has yet been removed. This hagiolatrous biography was more than contemporaries could stomach, and George Eliot's literary reputation, till then almost supreme, almost immediately slumped. (117)<sup>44</sup>

In the introduction to volume one of *The George Eliot Letters* Haight quotes Gladstone's opinion of Cross's *George Eliot's Life: As Related in Her Letters and Journals* (1885): "It is not a Life at all [. . .] It is a Reticence in three volumes" (xiv). Haight says: "[Cross] created a George Eliot who never really existed [. . .]. The legend of lofty seriousness, fostered in the beginning by Lewes, became through Cross's efforts so firmly fixed that it coloured her reputation as a novelist" (xv). Haight also quotes William Hale White's letter to the *Athenaeum*, 28 November 1885, which says that Cross's work has made her too "respectable" (xv). Graham Handley, in *George Eliot: A Guide Through the Critical Maze*, writes: "The careful excision of anything damaging – some would say humanising – perpetuated the myth of a sententious, moralising and

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<sup>44</sup> Marghanita Laski, *George Eliot and her World* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1973). See also Barrett,

largely humourless George Eliot. In this way Cross unintentionally but undoubtedly contributed to her failing reputation" (1).<sup>45</sup> Barrett also blames F. W. H. Myers and Charles Bray, because their personal testimonies presented Eliot as being overly serious (7).

Whatever the reasons behind the construction of 'George Eliot' as a sibyl or sage, the result was that in the years following her death her literary reputation suffered a decline. Karen Chase in *Middlemarch*, and Joan Bennett in *George Eliot: her Mind and her Art*, record the decline in critical opinion, citing the negative critical attitudes of James, Shaw, Ford, Bennett, Forster, T. S. Eliot, George Saintsbury, Sir Leslie Stephen, and W. J. Dawson.<sup>46</sup> Two of those quoted by Karen Chase are relevant to my discussion. Ford Madox Ford, in *The Critical Attitude*, writes:

Taking herself with an enormous seriousness, she dilated upon sin and its results, and so found the easy success of the popular preacher who deals in horrors. She desired that is to say, to be an influence: she cared in her heart very little whether or not she would be considered an artist. (56)<sup>47</sup>

This quotation is revealing in that Ford Madox Ford saw Eliot as a "preacher," an "influence", who little cared whether or not she would be considered an artist. In this vitriolic review Ford describes Eliot as a "debatable writer," whose books are "without any form, her style entirely pedestrian and her solemnity intolerable" (55). He concludes: "And she has as an artist no existence whatever" (57). The idea of Eliot being more of a philosopher than an artist is similarly present in Henry James's

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*Vocation and Desire*, 6-7.

<sup>45</sup> Graham Handley, *George Eliot: A Guide Through the Critical Maze* (Bristol: The Bristol Press, 1990).

<sup>46</sup> See Karen Chase, *Middlemarch*, 91, and Joan Bennett, *George Eliot: her Mind and her Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1948).

<sup>47</sup> Ford Madox Ford, "English Literature of To-day - 1," *The Critical Attitude* (London: Duckworth & Co., 1911), 55-78.

assessment of her. In "The Life of George Eliot," in *Partial Portraits*, he writes that for Eliot the novel was "not primarily a picture of life, capable of deriving a high value from its form, but a moralised fable, the last word of a philosophy endeavouring to teach by example" (50).<sup>48</sup> He continues:

We feel in her, always, that she proceeds from the abstract to the concrete; that her figures and situations are evolved, as the phrase is, from her moral consciousness, and are only indirectly the products of observations. (51)

He argues that for Eliot the novel was a "moralised fable" or an attempt to "teach by example."<sup>49</sup> These two quotations are indicative of a strand of Eliot criticism that has attempted to deny her formal achievements. They are quotations that show the lowest depth of her critical reputation. Only with the publication of Barbara Hardy's *The Novels of George Eliot: A Study in Form* in 1959 and W. J. Harvey's *The Art of George Eliot* in 1961 did Eliot achieve recognition for the art of her fiction and its formal achievements. These works paved the way for critical reassessments of Eliot's novels in terms of style and form. Similarly, after the Second World War, Eliot's literary reputation was restored on another front. Karen Chase argues that a reversal of fortune in Eliot's literary reputation began with the work of F. R. Leavis. She writes: "After the trauma of the Second World War critics began to rediscover the qualities of moral concern – rather than didactic moralising – and intellectual analysis in Eliot's work." Graham Handley agrees that Leavis was transitional in asserting unequivocally Eliot's primacy in English fiction (2). Having seen some tensions and seeing problems that

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<sup>48</sup> Henry James, "The Life of George Eliot," *Partial Portraits* (Westport, CT.: Greenwood Press, 1970). This book was originally published by Macmillan and Co. in 1888.

<sup>49</sup> In *George Eliot: An Intellectual Life*, Valerie A. Dodd argues that the awareness that Eliot was an 'intellectual turned novelist' affects the interpretation of her novels in three ways. First, she has been lauded as a sage articulating universal truths. Second, her imagination has been seen to operate in terms of

arise when aesthetics and ethics are divorced, we are now going to look at four critics who view her as a teacher: Suzanne Graver, Marilyn Higuera, Dorothea Barrett, and David Carroll. Each of these critics recognises that there are extra-textual elements of Eliot's aesthetics, but not the role that religious motifs play.

### *Eliot and extra-textual ethics*

Suzanne Graver, in *George Eliot and Community*, argues that Eliot achieves the extension of her reader's sympathies through collaboration between the reader and the text. Graver's interpretation of Eliot might be classified as forming part of the 'history of ideas' approach to Eliot's texts. Graver situates Eliot's work amongst a tradition of social thought that was preoccupied with the rediscovery of community. She compares Eliot's work with the writings of Strauss, Feuerbach, Comte, Herbert Spenser, and J. S. Mill. She writes that Eliot's aesthetic can be traced back to the Romantic belief (proposed by Wordsworth and Shelley) that art has the power to enlarge the reader's capacities for sympathetic response, and sought to effect so comprehensive a change of sensibility as ultimately to change society. Graver proceeds to list a number of ways in which Eliot fosters this collaboration between the author and the reader:

As an artist, George Eliot attempted to enlarge the experience of her readers and to alter their perceptions, in part by creating characters who experienced such changes as those she would ideally have her readers undergo, or such failings as might bring her readers to a fuller understanding of the human limitations and social conditions that inhibit the fellowship she wanted her readers to experience as a felt need. (10)

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a conflict between her intellect and emotions. Third, her novels have been analysed as vehicles for the discussion of philosophical ideas. See *An Intellectual Life* (London: Macmillan, 1990), 1.

This is an important interpretation of Eliot's aesthetics, but Graver does not mention the role that incarnation, revelation, and transcendence play in either the characters' lives, or in the interaction between the reader and the text. Graver's situating of Eliot within the context of social theory that seeks to transform society means that religion is neglected as a matter of course, since the social theorists with whom she compares Eliot were themselves anti-Christian. Other ways in which Graver sees Eliot fostering the collaboration between author and reader include criticism of "conventional ways of thinking, acting, and responding," "not only leading, guiding, and persuading her readers to sympathetic assent, but also encouraging, perhaps even provoking, them to engage in critical probing and questioning," and the "narrator's direct addresses to the reader."

Similarly, Marilyn Higuera, in "Prelude to Vocation," outlines some of the methods Eliot uses to extend her reader's sympathies.<sup>50</sup> These involve "musing questions," as well as "commentaries on her characters, commentaries on human nature in general, and direct exhortations to the reader." Higuera argues:

Examples of her attempts to involve and educate us, directly and indirectly, abound. She appeals often to us, urging us to reflect on our reactions, criticize them, possibly alter them. She continually exhorts us to be more sympathetic. Most novelists want readers to feel connected to their characters. Eliot's narrator reaches even beyond the book, though. Her educative task includes getting us to perceive sympathy as a moral act, in our lives as well as our reading. (24)

Here we see that Eliot wants to have an effect on her reader beyond the confines of her book. Higuera's article is thought-provoking in the conclusions that it reaches, but I believe that more work needs to be done in this area. Higuera argues that Eliot finds her

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<sup>50</sup> Marilyn Higuera, "Prelude to Vocation," *The St. John's Review* 44.3 (1998): 1-27.

“epos” in reforming novel-readers’ sensibilities (26), and in the chapters on *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda* I hope to show explicitly how Eliot does this, and the role that the theological motifs of incarnation, revelation, and transcendence play in this process.

Another critic who articulates this extra-textual element to Eliot’s aesthetics is David Carroll. In “George Eliot: The Sibyl of Mercia,” Carroll argues that Eliot’s aim is to encourage the reader to generalise what is happening in the text into a different and larger context. Carroll argues that the narrative commentary is essentially a bridge between the fictional and real worlds, insisting that the two are adjacent, continuous, overlapping, and that their problems are common (19). Carroll says that it is evident from Eliot’s writing that she is “fascinated with all the various forms of wisdom literature – the aphorism, the proverb, the adage, the epigram, the motto, the moral essay – all those attempts to encapsulate the fruits of experience in a few memorable words” (16). But he says that the context in which they are placed means that we should not read them in abstract, but work out for ourselves how we are to interpret them in different contexts. He writes: “they are moral hypotheses suspended in the novels, interpreting and being tested by the surrounding fictional reality” (19). Carroll says that the purpose of the following quotation from *Felix Holt*, “Very close and diligent looking at living creatures, even through the best microscope, will leave room for new and contradictory discoveries,” should make it clear that in Eliot’s narrative the purpose “is clearly to encourage an alert and sustained scrutiny in the reader” (19). Carroll sees a tension in Eliot “between a desire to encapsulate truth and an uneasiness about doing so in her writing and [argues] that it accounts for several very significant features of her

work” (16). Within the fiction Eliot is constantly contextualising moral issues, and we should be wary of any approach to her novels that aims to decontextualise her ‘ethics.’

Felicia Bonaparte, in *The Triptych and the Cross: The Central Myths of George Eliot's Poetic Imagination*, writes that Eliot had “frank designs on her readers’ souls.” She acknowledges a difficulty in talking about this aspect of Eliot’s art, because of the ridicule suffered by Victorian literature in the last decades of the nineteenth century and first decades of the twentieth century. But Bonaparte wants to suggest that Eliot’s “great moral passion” is where her genius lays (31-2).<sup>51</sup> Bonaparte also acknowledges that if one wishes to talk about Eliot and ethical issues, it is necessary to confront whether or not she is a “preacher” (32). She offers this comment:

If we have thought Eliot didactic, it is only because we have not probed her moral vision far enough. It is wise to remember that Eliot’s moral vision has seemed to us increasingly subtler, less didactic, as we have moved in the past hundred years from the surface of her fiction – where it once seemed to us that she was preaching the simple Christian truisms – to its less obvious implications. The deeper we go, the clearer it is that it is not maxims and aphorisms that Eliot offers us [. . .]. (33)

I want to discuss how Bakhtin helps us probe Eliot’s moral vision in chapter four, and the moral visions of *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda* in chapters five and six.

Dorothea Barrett, in *Vocation and Desire*, argues that if one comes to Eliot’s novels with preconceived ideas that she is moralist, that is what one finds: “Reading with the preconceived idea that her work is conservative and didactic, one inevitably selects and prioritizes elements that support that preconception.” However, Barrett proposes that rather than reading Eliot’s novels as “a series of elaborate moral fables” we can read them as a “protean vision of the dialectical engagement of human realities

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<sup>51</sup> Felicia Bonaparte, *The Triptych and the Cross: The Central Myths of George Eliot's Poetic Imagination* (New York: New York University Press, 1979). This book offers a close study of Eliot’s *Romola*.

and possibilities.” Barrett argues that Eliot’s novels are “dialectical, turbulent, polyphonic, and open-ended in their structures, quite the opposite, in fact, of the controlled and didactic masterpieces that the sibyl image has encouraged readers to expect” (1).

I agree with much of what Graver, Higuera, Carroll, Bonaparte, and Barrett say, but they omit to make any reference to the role that Christian theological motifs play in this process. And this, to my mind, constitutes a weakness in their argument. Because of their own interest in specific areas of Eliot’s work, or their specific situating of her work in comparison to other thinkers of her age, they neglect the religious motifs that are current in her fiction.

### *Conclusion*

I began this chapter with a discussion of the dangers involved in divorcing Eliot’s aesthetics and ethics. I argued that there were two dangers that need to be avoided. The first is to avoid discussing only what happens within the texts because this neglects Eliot’s stated aesthetic aim. The second danger to avoid is only discussing the moral issues, and divorcing them from their aesthetic context. This route leads to Eliot being perceived as an overt moraliser. I looked at how developments in ethical literary theory were helping avoid both of the dangers. The work of Martha Nussbaum advocates an ethical literary theory which takes seriously the idea that a reader can be changed by the act of reading a literary text, and at the same time offers a sophisticated analysis of literary texts.

One of the connections between Nussbaum and Eliot is that they both think that the act of reading matters, and that a change can occur in the reader as a result of reading. Martha Nussbaum discusses narrative fiction's ability to change the reader. In *Love's Knowledge* she writes about novels and the way people are changed through reading them, through paying attention to the particularities of an individual situation.<sup>52</sup> "Reading for Life" is a review essay of Wayne Booth's *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*. Nussbaum begins the essay with a description of the literary friendships that novels offer the fictional David Copperfield, and follows with this polemic:

People care for the books they read; and they are changed by what they care for – both during the time of reading and in countless later ways more difficult to discern. (231)

Here Nussbaum makes very clear her polemic that people are changed by the books they read, both during the time of reading, and after the act of reading has stopped. However, it is unfortunate that Nussbaum does not engage with Eliot in her own work. This omission is surprising since Nussbaum deals not only with Eliot's contemporary, Dickens, but also with her successor, Henry James. But more importantly, Nussbaum's own work, and the way it relates to other literary texts, could be enhanced if it engaged with Christian theology.<sup>53</sup> The problem with recent ethical literary theory is that it wants to suggest that the reader is changed by reading a literary text, but ignores the concept of

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<sup>52</sup> Josephine Donovan says that Martha Nussbaum has enumerated a similar theory in *Poetic Justice* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), linking the novel and the moral sensitivities it encourages to the practice of law and the formation of public policy. Nussbaum reflects: "our society is full of refusals to imagine one another with empathy and compassion" and considers that this kind of moral imagination can be fostered by novels (*xvii*). See also Donovan, 8.

<sup>53</sup> For further discussion of Nussbaum's failure to engage with Christianity, see Fergus Kerr, *Immortal Longings* and Gregory L. Jones, "The Love Which *Love's Knowledge* Knows Not."

transcendence. However, the idea that a text can have an effect on the reader is incoherent without the aid of theological discourse about incarnation, revelation, and transcendence. Bakhtin not only allows theological discourse, but his ethic and aesthetic theories are based on theological motifs.

In what follows, I argue that the language and conceptuality that Bakhtin offers can help us to understand what Eliot was hoping to achieve. I suggest that Bakhtin's early philosophical essays provide a number of critical tools for analysing Eliot's novels, and for looking at how theological motifs of incarnation, revelation, and transcendence function, thematically and structurally, in her novels. There are a number of similarities between Bakhtin and Eliot: they both thought the act of reading was important, both were ethical thinkers, both were anti-theoretical, against there being one rule for all, and both believed the novel exemplified this; further, both had a specific understanding of the human person in time and space, and both use theological concepts. This joint interest in ethics and aesthetics is of crucial importance, and we see that there are a number of ways in which Bakhtin's work on ethics and aesthetics provides a lens to a reading of Eliot's novels, providing criteria for assessing the role that incarnation, revelation, and transcendence play in Eliot's ethics and aesthetics. The motif of incarnation is central to both their works.

I draw on three concepts found in Bakhtin's early writings, answerability, non-alibi in being, and excess of seeing, and look at how they help us read Eliot's novels. In the introduction we saw that Bakhtin wrote the following:

I have to answer with my own life for what I have experienced and understood in art, so that everything that I have experienced and understood would not remain ineffectual in my life.

In the next chapter I am going to look at three of Bakhtin's concepts that are found in his early philosophical essays. They help us make sense of the argument that the novel is about particular people. And in connection with Eliot's aesthetic aim of extending her reader's sympathies, we see that it helps us articulate something of a narrative ethic, or ethics of reading.

A responsible critic of Eliot cannot ignore certain emphases in her work together with specific comments made by her. New reading techniques have taken us so far in appreciation of the relation of Eliot's ethics and aesthetics. However, I want to argue that more needs to be reclaimed of Eliot's own express intent and ways of writing, in order to appreciate these more fully. I want to argue not only that literature can be a mode of ethical thinking, nor that what we read can have an effect on us, but also that we are answerable for what we read. Thus, a fuller appreciation of Eliot's ethics and aesthetics, best captured in her use of the term sympathy, entails an active response/answerability on the part of the reader. It is difficult to find the critical discourse to express this. I argue that the language and conceptuality that Bakhtin offers in his early philosophical essays can help us understand what Eliot was hoping to achieve in her ethics of art.

## **Chapter Four: Incarnation and non-alibi in being, excess of seeing, and self/other relations in *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* and “Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity”**

This thesis explores Eliot's ethics of art, namely her aim to extend her reader's sympathies through his or her engagement with Eliot's fiction. In the introduction, I intimated that a responsible critical approach to Eliot's novels needs to be sensitive to her aesthetic of challenging and changing the reader. In chapter three I gave a detailed consideration of Eliot's aesthetics, with a particular emphasis on her aim of extending her reader's sympathies. I argued that her aesthetic aim was consistent throughout her literary career; review essays, letters, and her early fiction all attest that Eliot saw that her task as an artist was to extend her reader's sympathies. In the introduction and chapter three, I suggested that Eliot's aesthetics presuppose certain things about her readers and about human beings. The end goal of extending her reader's sympathies is aimed at combating the essential and fundamental egoism of the human being. Egoism manifests itself in wrong thinking about our position in the world, and wrong thinking about our relationships with the other. Wrong thinking with regards to the other involves putting yourself and your claims above that of the other, or attempting to subsume the other's interests within one's own. Eliot's artistic aim, then, is to lead us towards right thinking about our position in the world, and towards right thinking about our relationships with others. The purpose of sympathy is to counter our egoism and our moral stupidity, and Eliot aims to move us from egoism towards altruism. Eliot's sympathy is, says Karen Chase in *George Eliot, Middlemarch*, “an overwhelming of

instinctive egoism” (42). Our egoism is portrayed in visual metaphors and images throughout Eliot’s fiction; egoists look in mirrors, are short-sighted, and interpret events from a limited perspective. Eliot has her characters and her readers move from this limited perspective. Her goal is for her characters and her readers to transcend their limited perspective on the world. We are to learn to see things from the perspective of the other. Eliot’s aesthetics are both relational and incarnational. They are incarnational in the sense that they are dependent on the self’s realisation and acceptance of his or her unique position in time and space, and the according responsibilities that go with that position. Also, the self must recognise and accept that the other is unique in his or her position, and act accordingly toward him or her. In the next paragraph I draw out how this aesthetic has ethical implications.

This aesthetic is ethical because it is designed to affect the way we understand ourselves in relation to the world and in relation to the other. Eliot’s aim is to make her reader sympathise with “every-day fellow-men” (*Adam Bede*), and to stir her reader’s “sympathy with commonplace troubles” such as might “live next door to you” (“Amos Barton”). Her argument is that art and literature can surprise even “the selfish into that attention to what is apart from themselves” (“The Natural History of German Life”). She wants her art to encourage her reader to “tolerate,” “pity,” and “love” those amongst whom our lives are passed (*Adam Bede*). We are to “accept” people. Sympathy is aimed at avoiding “indifference” and “prejudice” (*Adam Bede*). It is about patience and forbearance.

Bakhtin’s concept of answerability helps us articulate the ethical dimension of Eliot’s aesthetics because he argues that the reader must be responsible or answerable

for what he or she has read. Eliot's aesthetic of extending her reader's sympathy, and her desire to avoid didacticism in the process, makes fuller sense when read through the lens of Bakhtin's early philosophical essays. In the introduction I argued that Bakhtin and Eliot have a shared interest in ethics and aesthetics. As Marijke Rudnik-Smalbraak writes, in "The One and Another: George Eliot's Dialogic Incarnations," "both authors, Bakhtin and Eliot, assign a central role to ethics in their thinking and writing, and to the ways in which ethics and aesthetics are interconnected" (501). Bakhtin, in "Art and Answerability," says that we need to be answerable for what we read. Similarly, Eliot's aesthetics call for her readers to be responsible and answerable for their reading of her fiction. In order to facilitate a better understanding of the role that sympathy plays in Eliot's aesthetics and ethics, I propose that we need to pay more attention to the role of Christian motifs in Eliot's novels. In addition, I propose that a study of Bakhtin's conceptions of non-alibi in being, excess of seeing, and self/other relations can help facilitate this understanding. A detailed study of Bakhtin's ethics and aesthetics, and the connections between them, can help us explore the intersection between Eliot's aesthetics and ethics, and the extra-textual element of her aesthetics. We will see that incarnation is central to the aesthetics and the ethics of both authors. Eliot is not a moral relativist, but moves towards an incarnational ethics in her fiction.

Eliot's aesthetic of sympathy operates on an intra-textual and extra-textual level. These two are obviously related. Eliot's aesthetics call for us to be responsible and answerable. By getting us to respond to her fiction, she encourages us to respond better to those around us; right reading leads to right living. Eliot's call upon her readers is that they have a right perspective on the world, and a right perspective on the other.

This chapter has two sections, and is structured around the motif of incarnation. The first section reviews why the motif of incarnation has been overlooked in Eliot's novels. The second section focuses on Bakhtin's use of the motif of incarnation in his understanding of the human person, and the significance of this for his ethics and aesthetics.

### *Eliot and incarnation*

Eliot was not an Evangelical Christian, but the motif of incarnation is present in her fiction, and has not been described adequately. When I talk about the motif of incarnation in Eliot, I refer to her understanding of the human person, *i.e.*, the human person is situated in time and space. The reader is also, for the time of reading, incarnated in the text, and is also incarnated in real time and space once the act of reading is over. The motif of incarnation forms a constituent feature of the design of Eliot's texts both within the text, and beyond the text. This thesis reappraises Eliot's aesthetics of sympathy and the role that theological motifs play in this process. Incarnation is not an outmoded motif; it is central to her aesthetics. Some of the reasons for the critical neglect of religious motifs stem from the cultural climate of 'Literature and Theology' today, and others from reading Eliot's novels through a biographical lens and seeing them as vehicles for the propagation of the Religion of Humanity. In chapter two I argued that literary criticism which focuses on the influence of Strauss, Spinoza, Feuerbach, and Comte on Eliot's life and fiction involves a number of problems. The critical neglect of religious and theological motifs in Eliot's fiction is a result of conflating Eliot's own religious biography with a reading of the novels, *i.e.*, because

Eliot moved away from Evangelical Christianity it is sometimes assumed that the novels are either not concerned with religion in any way, or that they can only be read through a lens that is dismissive of Christianity. It is easy to overlook the motif of incarnation in Eliot's work if you are intent on proving that she was influenced by someone who denied the very possibility of Christ's incarnation. In discussions of the influence of Strauss, Spinoza, Feuerbach, and Comte on Eliot, there is little discussion about the different genres of writing, *i.e.*, little discussion of the fact that Eliot was a novelist, and Strauss, Spinoza, Feuerbach, and Comte were philosophical or theological writers. Critics have not examined the structural role that incarnation, revelation, and transcendence play in the author-reader-text relationship. Religious motifs play a significant part in Eliot's aesthetic aim, on both an intra-textual and an extra-textual level.

The nature of Eliot's emphasis on the individual is one source of the conflict between her and the philosophers and theologians she translated. In chapter three we saw that the individual is important in Eliot's aesthetics. Her aesthetic aim stresses the importance of "individual suffering and individual joy."<sup>1</sup> Literary critics have noted this conflict of interest over the nature and status of the individual in Eliot's novels and the work of Feuerbach and Comte. Much of the criticism of Eliot's work in relation to theology has concentrated on her relationship with these writers, but, once again, not enough work has been done on the different styles and what that means for Eliot's aesthetics. In particular, I agree with Peter C. Hodgson's thinking that Strauss's emphasis on humanity rather than individual human beings is unhelpful in reading

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<sup>1</sup> See *GEL* 2, 402-4.

Eliot's novels. The novel is better suited to individual human beings and Bakhtin is therefore more helpful than Strauss, precisely because of his presentation of the human being's incarnated position in time and space. We also saw that there are important differences between the genre and style of Eliot and Feuerbach. Kerry McSweeney, in *Middlemarch*, criticises Feuerbach's style and says that he is a more "crude" (in the sense of less stylistically sophisticated) writer than Eliot (33). Hodgson says Feuerbach's writing is "too predictable," "too unnuanced," "too prosaic," and "too insensitive" (160-61). Feuerbach does not give attention to the "concrete and particular," and the details of an individual life. His writing is too systematic and does not pay enough attention to the individual. There is a gap between theological and philosophical systems and the novel.

The novel has more scope for nuances than philosophy, and can give attention to the concrete and particular. In chapter three we saw that Martha Nussbaum and Iris Murdoch argue that the individual is important in the novel. Nussbaum argued that the novel helps us care for particulars, and for the particular circumstances in which an individual finds him or herself, and Murdoch argued that novel reading and novel writing plunges one into the details of life. As a novelist Eliot is able to make us care for individuals and particular circumstances in ways that are unavailable to philosophers and theologians. Hodgson also argues that Eliot was not inclined to worship or idolise human beings. She did not want to venerate human beings, but to increase our sympathy for one another. Terry Wright and Helena Granlund point out a very useful differentiation between Comte and Eliot's thinking on humanity; Comte did not have sympathy for humanity as a whole, whereas Eliot presented mediocre characters, and

asked for our sympathy. In short, I argue that Eliot's relation with these thinkers is neither the only nor the best way to view the religious and theological motifs in her novels.

In section three of chapter two I examined four other ways in which Eliot's relationship to Christianity has been explored, *i.e.*, her use of biblical language, her presentation of Dorothea, her sympathetic treatment of Dissent and Evangelicalism, and the way in which contemporary theologians have examined her work. Despite literary criticism that examines Eliot's use of biblical language in general and in specific passages, there is still more to be said about her relation to Christianity, and the motifs of incarnation, revelation, and transcendence. Lisa Balthazar argues that Eliot's writings show her high regard for the Bible as an ethical source, but does not expand on this. I want not only to discuss Eliot's use of biblical language, but also to assess the role that theological motifs play in her aesthetics. Theological motifs form a bridge between aesthetics and ethics. Barry Qualls argues that Eliot uses biblical contexts and structures in the novel and I hope to draw this out in chapters five and six. I argued that criticism of these areas does not give a full analysis of the motifs of incarnation, revelation, and transcendence that are found in *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda*. Although some critics point to Eliot's sympathetic portrayal of religion, or religious figures in her fiction, this is on a thematic level. Religious themes are explored on a superficial level. In my discussion of Eliot and theologians, I looked at the work of Hodgson and Mary Grey. I argued that they are less interested in examining the religious motifs that are found in Eliot's fiction, than they are in mining her work to help them in their own theological reflection. The question of whether literary texts can be mined for

theological truths is beyond the scope of my discussion. None of these four approaches consider the link between Eliot's aesthetics and ethics, and the role that religious motifs play in this. This lack of good critical commentary on Eliot's use of religious motifs is the reason for my Bakhtinian reading of *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda*. I now turn to examine in detail the role that the motif of incarnation plays in Bakhtin's early philosophical essays.

### *Bakhtin and incarnation*

Bakhtin scholars have begun to pay more attention to religious motifs in his work in general, and to incarnation in particular. Previous scholarship in the West has "ignored" or "fiercely contested" the religious dimension of Bakhtin's work, say Susan M. Felch and Paul J. Contino in *Bakhtin and Religion: A Feeling for Faith* (1).<sup>2</sup> The previous neglect of religion in Bakhtin's work is another illustration of the unwillingness of the academy to engage with Christian thinking. In this section I draw on the recent studies by Ruth Coates and Alexandar Mihailovic, which focus on Christian motifs and theological discourse in Bakhtin. Their books are *Christianity in Bakhtin: God and the exiled author*, and *Corporeal Words: Mikhail Bakhtin's Theology of Discourse*.<sup>3</sup> As Bakhtin scholars, neither Coates nor Mihailovic are directly concerned either with interdisciplinary work between literature and theology, or with critical readings of

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<sup>2</sup> Susan M. Felch and Paul J. Contino, eds. *Bakhtin and Religion: A Feeling for Faith* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2001).

<sup>3</sup> Ruth Coates's *Christianity in Bakhtin: God and the exiled author* is reviewed by G. Tihanov in *Russian Review* 59:2 (April 2000): 294-295, and by M. Everitt in *Expository Times* 111.1 (October 1999): 35. Alexandar Mihailovic's *Corporeal Words: Mikhail Bakhtin's Theology of Discourse* is reviewed by Denis Crnkovic, in *Slavic and East European Journal* 42:3 (Fall 1998): 551-552, and by Sidney Monas, in *Russian Review* 57:4 (Oct 1998): 627-628.

Eliot's novels. However, their work provides a substantial groundwork for my reading of Eliot's novels, and I accept their conclusions and build on them. Their study of the motif of incarnation in Bakhtin provides a framework for my study of the neglected religious motifs in Eliot's aesthetics. Incarnation is central to Bakhtin's ethics and aesthetics and central to the three concepts that I am going to look at in this chapter.

Coates begins *Christianity in Bakhtin* with the premise that the Christian motifs in Bakhtin's work have been overlooked. In her monograph she focuses exclusively on Christianity.<sup>4</sup> She writes:

[A]lthough Bakhtin has been appropriated for a wide variety of critical and literary theoretical positions, ranging from Marxism to post-structuralism, it has been generally assumed that he is a secular thinker even where it has been accepted that he was a religious man. I believe that this assumption stands in need of some correction. (1)<sup>5</sup>

Coates is not arguing that Bakhtin is a theologian, or that he is a Christian philosopher or literary theoretician. She argues that he is not a systematic theologian because certain elements of the Christian kerygma are highlighted by him, while others are neglected. She identifies the highlighted elements as being Creation, Fall, and Incarnation, and neglected elements as being Resurrection and Judgement. Coates says that because Bakhtin's Christianity, as it is manifested in his texts, does not conform fully to any of its traditional systematic-theological renderings, it is "more proper to speak of 'Christian motifs' than of 'Christianity' or 'Christian theology' in Bakhtin's work" (21). She argues that he is, rather, a philosopher whose work is fed by certain aspects of the

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<sup>4</sup> Coates does not engage with Bakhtin scholars who would disagree with her, but she does provide a thorough review of secondary material on Bakhtin that has neglected Christianity and Christian motifs, 9-20.

<sup>5</sup> Implicit in this observation is the incongruity that suggests that Bakhtin can be a secular thinker and a religious man at one and the same time.

Christian vision of and for the world (21-2). Coates relies on textual rather than biographical evidence as a reason for looking at his writings and Christianity. Her methodology is one of close reading: "I consider certain Christian elements to be 'there' in Bakhtin's text and endeavour to make the reader aware of them in what is essentially an exercise in close reading, an 'immanent' exploration of Bakhtin" (21). She argues that there is a "coherent theistic framework to Bakhtin's aesthetic theory" (84). My reading of Eliot follows a similar methodology; I consider the motifs of incarnation, revelation, and transcendence to be 'there' in her texts, and I offer a close reading of *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda* in chapters five and six.

Mihailovic has similarly noted the presence of theological motifs in Bakhtin's work. Like Coates, Mihailovic also says there is biographical evidence for looking at Bakhtin in relation to Christianity, but he too relies on textual evidence.<sup>6</sup> Both recognise the importance of incarnation. Mihailovic begins *Corporeal Words* with this statement:

Although many scholars have speculated about the influence of Eastern Orthodox religious thought on Mikhail Bakhtin's life and work, few have been moved to examine it in detail. (1)

Mihailovic argues that on the basis of textual evidence there is a compelling reason for regarding Bakhtin's relation to theology as being central to his work (4). He says that "there is much in Bakhtin's criticism that does lend itself to theological paradigms" (1). For him, "The reverberations of diction with christological overtones are audible in virtually every piece Bakhtin wrote" (7). He writes about:

[T]he sheer density, paradigmatic clarity, and deliberate orchestration of Bakhtin's theologically inspired terms and conceptual categories [. . .].

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<sup>6</sup> Galin Tihanov observes that one of the differences between Coates and Mihailovic is the different emphasis that they place on Bakhtin's relation to Orthodoxy. See his review of *Christianity in Bakhtin* in *The Russian Review* 59:2 (April, 2000), 294.

Theological categories and terms recalling christology in general and Trinitarianism in particular emerge in almost every essay in Bakhtin's long and varied career. (4-5)

Mihailovic suggests that Russian critics of Bakhtin have traditionally been more attuned to religious aspects of his work than those in the West. However, the work of Coates and Mihailovic is beginning to reverse this trend. Bakhtin scholars are beginning to recognise that Christianity is an integral part of Bakhtin's thinking. More specifically, incarnation is part of his thinking. I will discuss the role that intra-trinitarian relations and the Chalcedon formulation concerning Christ's divinity and humanity play in Bakhtin's writings. I now discuss three of Bakhtin's concepts: non-alibi in being, excess of seeing, and self/other relations. I situate this discussion within Bakhtin's understanding of the human person, as it is presented in his philosophical essays, *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* and "Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity."<sup>7</sup>

### *Non-alibi in being and incarnation*

In this section I examine Bakhtin's understanding and description of the human being in time and space. His early essays contain specific descriptions of the human being in time and space. Bakhtin is keen to stress the uniqueness of every human being. I look at two lengthy descriptions that are found in *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* and unpack some of their ethical and aesthetic implications. In the course of this discussion of Bakhtin's understanding of the human person I articulate what he understands by 'non-alibi in being,' 'excess of seeing,' and 'self/other relations.'

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<sup>7</sup> *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*. Trans. Vadim Liapunov. Eds. Vadim Liapunov and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993), and "Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity," *Art and*

*Toward a Philosophy of the Act* centres on the principle of the individual person situated in a particular and unique place in time and space. Bakhtin writes:

I, too, participate in Being in a once-occurrent and never-repeatable manner: I occupy a place in once-occurrent Being that is unique and never-repeatable, a place that cannot be taken by anyone else and is impenetrable for anyone else. In the given once-occurrent point where I am now located, no one else has ever been located in the once-occurrent time and once-occurrent space of once-occurrent Being. And it is around this once-occurrent point that all once-occurrent Being is arranged in a once-occurrent and never-repeatable manner. That which can be done by me can never be done by anyone else. The uniqueness or singularity of present-on-hand Being is completely obligatory. (40)

This is more than a physical (spatial and temporal) description of the human being. It is also an ethical and relational description. The uniqueness and responsibility are tied together, and Christ is a perfect exemplar of someone who recognises his uniqueness and acts responsibly in light of that. In *Christianity in Bakhtin* Coates says:

Whenever Christ is mentioned in Bakhtin's early work [. . .] it is to put him forward as a perfect model of the ideal which Bakhtin is setting out. In 'Philosophy of the Act' [*sic*] he is said to epitomise the subject aware of his or her unique position in being and act responsibly in the light of it. (34)

In the previous quotation from *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* we saw that each human being is unique. In the quotation from Coates we see how the combination of uniqueness and responsibility is tied directly to Christ. The relation between uniqueness and responsibility is crucial to Bakhtin's ethics and aesthetics, and is tied directly to the person and work of Christ. We will see that for Eliot there is a similar relation between the unique individual and his or her responsibility that moves towards an incarnational ethics. What is of specific interest is not just this uniqueness, but the responsibility that stems from it. Coates discusses connections between this uniqueness and moral

responsibility: "Bakhtin's understanding of moral responsibility is based on the historical (spaciotemporal) irreplaceability of the subject" (33). She writes:

Responsibility is crucial to Bakhtin's conception of the act and is based on the fact of our uniqueness as an 'I', on what Bakhtin calls our 'non-alibi in being', from which it follows that 'what can be accomplished by me cannot ever be accomplished by anyone else'. Faced with this fact I can either ignore it, or acknowledge it and structure everything around an awareness of my moral responsibility for my unique actions. (28)

Coates ties this understanding of the individual in time and space with Christianity. She writes:

I believe Bakhtin's concern with the moral implications for individual human beings of their concrete, spatiotemporal and historical existence to be inspired primarily by the Judaeo-Christian world-view [. . .]. (34)

In the rest of this section we see that this moral responsibility is to the other, and is most vividly expressed by Bakhtin in visual metaphors. Our actions and responsibilities flow from this position. We cannot act "as if" we were anyone else, or pretend to be someone we are not. Because of our uniqueness we are morally obligated to act. We are, says Bakhtin, answerable for our uniqueness. This line of thinking differentiates Bakhtin from Kant.<sup>8</sup> Bakhtin does not want us to act as if our actions were to be valued the same in every imaginable context; he wants our act to be specifically related to the time and place in which we live. His 'Philosophy of the Act' arises from the phenomenon of our situatedness, rather than from any abstract position or abstract reasoning.

Michael Holquist, in the foreword to *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, distinguishes Bakhtin's writings on ethics from those of Kant. He describes the essay as

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(Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), 4-246.

<sup>8</sup> Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist discuss the relation between Bakhtin and Kant in "The Influence of Kant in the Early Work of M. M. Bakhtin," *Literary Theory and Criticism (Festschrift for René Wellek)*, ed. Joseph P. Strelka (New York: Peter Lang, 1984), 299-313.

“an attempt to detranscendentalize Kant, and more particularly to think beyond Kant’s formulation of the ethical imperative” (*ix*). Holquist writes:

But Kant’s ethic leaves something important out, according to Bakhtin. The system is highly abstract: it gains in authority by marking a distance from the specific, the local – anything, in other words, that has an odor of the subjective about it. Bakhtin in this volume is seeking to get back to the naked immediacy of experience as it is felt from within the utmost particularity of a specific life. (*x*)

Rather than act “as if” the same principle applied in every situation, we are to act in light of our “non-alibi”; and this is centred on the incarnation of Christ. What distinguishes Bakhtin’s thinking from that of Kant is Bakhtin’s stress on Christ’s incarnation, and its significance for the ethical behaviour of individual human beings. Bakhtin’s philosophy is specifically tied to Christ’s incarnation, and in this way is definitely not abstract. As Ruth Coates says: “the Incarnation informs and theologically legitimates Bakhtin’s consistent preference for the concrete world of human experience against abstract concepts, for what we may term an ‘incarnational’ view of truth. In ‘Philosophy of the Act’ [*sic*], as we have seen, Bakhtin lays great emphasis on the necessity for theoretical truth to be incorporated into spatiotemporal reality if it is to become living and binding upon individuals” (35). Coates says that incarnation in Bakhtin’s work is the antidote to abstraction (34).

Alan Jacobs, in an essay entitled “Bakhtin and the Hermeneutics of Love,” also recognises that the motif of incarnation is at the centre of Bakhtin’s concept of answerability.<sup>9</sup> He argues that recognising that one is unique is a necessary but not sufficient step towards answerability. He argues: “answerability is achieved only when I

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<sup>9</sup> Alan Jacobs, “Bakhtin and the Hermeneutics of Love,” *Bakhtin and Religion*, 25-45.

recognize that the 'fact of uniqueness' imposes a responsibility upon me that I cannot avert. When I acknowledge my responsibility and act upon it – whether in a conversation with a friend or in reading a novel [. . .] this is the incarnated deed" (34). This answerability can be directed towards the human other and toward literary texts. We will see how non-alibi in being and excess of seeing are concepts that can be as readily applied to the understanding and interpretation of literary texts as they can to the understanding and interpretation of people.

To understand the link between uniqueness and responsibility and its relation to Christianity further, it is necessary to quote at length from *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*. Bakhtin refers to our 'non-alibi in Being':

Furthermore, what is also given here in a non-fused yet undivided form is both the moment of my passivity and the moment of my self-activity: [1] I find myself in Being (passivity) and I actively participate in it; [2] both that which is given to me and that which is yet to be achieved by me: my uniqueness is given, yet at the same time it exists only to the extent to which it is really actualized by me as uniqueness – it is always in the act, in the performed deed, *i.e.*, is yet to be achieved; [3] both what *is* and what *ought* to be: I *am* actual and irreplaceable, and therefore *must* actualize my uniqueness. It is in relation to the whole actual unity that my unique ought arises from my unique place in Being. I, the one and only I, can at no moment be indifferent (stop participating) in my inescapably, compellingly once-occurrent life; I must have my ought. In relation to everything, whatever it might be and in whatever circumstances it might be given to me, I must act from my own unique place, even if I do so only inwardly. My uniqueness, as compelling non-coinciding with anything that is not *I*, always makes possible my own unique and irreplaceable deed in relation to everything that is not *I*. That I, from my unique place in Being, simply know and see another, that I do not forget him, that for me, too, he exists – that is something only I can do for him at the given moment in all of Being: that is the deed which makes his being more complete, the deed which is absolutely gainful and new, and which is possible only for me. This productive, unique deed is precisely what constitutes the moment of the ought in it. The ought becomes possible for the first time where there is an acknowledgement of the fact of a unique person's being from within that person; where this fact becomes a center of answerability – where I assume answerability for my own uniqueness, for my own being. (41-2)

This extract is extremely important for Bakhtin's understanding of the role of incarnation in ethics and aesthetics. A key phrase is "non-fused yet undivided." This is a verbal echo of the Chalcedon formulation that Christ's human and divine natures exist in one person, "without confusion, without change, without division, without separation." In a rhetorically striking move, Bakhtin likens the human being in time and space, and his or her ensuing responsibility, to the two sides of Christ's nature. Our uniqueness and our moral responsibility are like the human and divine nature of Christ, *i.e.*, non-fused, yet undivided. Just as Christ's two natures cannot be separated so we can not separate our uniqueness from our answerability and responsibility. This constitutes 'oughtness' or 'answerability.' Incarnation is thus at the heart of Bakhtin's concept of answerability. Charles Lock, in "Bakhtin and Tropes of Orthodoxy," writes:

the central paradigm of Bakhtin's thinking is the Incarnation as understood in patristic and Orthodox theology. The formula affirmed at the Council of Chalcedon in 451, that the person of Christ is a hypostasis of two natures, divine and human – "without confusion, without change, without division, without separation" – serves Bakhtin as a paradigm for the dialogical: two voices in the hypostasis of one word. (98)<sup>10</sup>

Lock argues that this allusion to the Chalcedon formulation of Christ's divinity clearly links non-alibi in being and the motif of incarnation. Lock says that just as Christ embraced the limits of time and space, so must each individual embrace his or her own "unique situatedness" and, in the words of Bakhtin in *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, "develop humility to the point of participating in person and being answerable in person" (52).

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<sup>10</sup> Charles Lock, "Bakhtin and the Tropes of Orthodoxy," *Bakhtin and Religion: A Feeling for Faith*, 97-119.

In chapters five and six I will use non-alibi in being to read Eliot – and I will use it on an intra-textual and extra-textual level. Characters and readers alike learn that they do not have an alibi in being. To pretend to have an alibi is wrong in Eliot's world view. In particular I will look at how non-alibi in being affects our understanding of the human being's position in the world and how it affects self/other relations. We will see that non-alibi in being works on intra-textual and extra-textual levels in the chapters on *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda*. Bakhtin helps us analyse the importance of recognising both one's uniqueness and one's responsibilities for both Eliot's characters and Eliot's readers. By extending the concept of non-alibi in being and answerability to a reading of *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda*, the implication for the reader is that he or she is to be changed by reading the text, and he or she cannot claim an alibi for what he or she has learnt and experienced from his or her reading. Eliot's ethics of art, her aim of extending her reader's sympathies, works when the reader recognises that he or she cannot claim an alibi for his or her reading of Eliot's novels. Thus Bakhtin helps us read Eliot on two levels.

Eliot's novels allow her greater freedom to explore the consequences of trying to claim an alibi than do Bakhtin's writings. In his writings it is the norm that the ethical person accepts both his or her uniqueness, and his or her responsibility. Bakhtin does, however, concede that there are people who choose not to live like this. It is clear that Bakhtin does not see this behaviour as normal; it is an aberration from the norm. He describes this "non-incarnated thought, non-incarnated action" as an "empty possibility" (43). Coates says that the Russian prefix of *samo* (meaning "self") occurs with astonishing frequency throughout *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*. *Samo*, she says in

“The First and the Second Adam in Bakhtin’s Early Thought,” is used in the context of the false autonomy of human beings who abrogate responsibility for their actions, and she says Bakhtin calls these “impostors” or “pretenders.”<sup>11</sup> Coates says that this language connotes the bid of Adam and Eve for the autonomy from God, as recounted in the Genesis narrative. Coates paraphrases Bakhtin: “When one chooses not to interact with the world, with others, kenotically, one denies one’s uniqueness and lives a ‘non-incarnated fortuitous life as an empty possibility’” (70).

One of the differences between Eliot’s novels and Bakhtin’s writings is that in her novels there are more characters who try and claim an alibi, than there are characters who are willing to embrace their uniqueness and their responsibilities. As part of her aesthetic aim, Eliot shows us the results of these moral choices. Whereas Bakhtin asserts that claiming an alibi is wrong, Eliot, as a novelist, is able to show us the consequences of claiming an alibi. Through her presentation of extreme egoistic behaviour Eliot is able to show the consequences of trying to claim an alibi for being: the result is moral death.

In Eliot’s novels it is the characters who do try to embrace their uniqueness and their responsibilities who are the moral touchstones of the novels. When an Eliot character recognises his or her uniqueness and the ensuing responsibility, he or she is able to transcend his or her egoism and move towards altruism. An acceptance of one’s uniqueness and one’s responsibilities leads to a right understanding of the self in relation to the other. A textual example of this will be given in this chapter, with a brief explication of *Romola* and non-alibi in being. More detailed textual examples from

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<sup>11</sup> Ruth Coates, “The First and the Second Adam in Bakhtin’s Early Thought,” *Bakhtin and Religion: A*

*Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda* will be given in chapters five and six. Transcendence of one's egoism is possible with an understanding of one's own incarnation in time and space and the understanding that the other is also incarnated in time and space. I will argue in chapters five and six that Eliot's presentation of egoists and the consequences of their behaviour in *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda* is an integral part of her aim of extending her reader's sympathies. The failures of Rosamond, Casaubon, and Grandcourt to accept their uniqueness and its responsibilities are an example for the reader of how not to behave.

I will now look at the second of Bakhtin's concepts that help us read Eliot's aesthetics of sympathy. In Bakhtin's writing, our unique position in the world results in a corresponding unique view of the world, what he calls our 'excess of seeing.' Unless we acknowledge that this unique vision also has unique responsibilities, all we will be left with is a solipsistic view of the world. However, if we use our 'excess of seeing' relationally, then we can be ethically responsible for the other.

### *Excess of seeing and incarnation*

In this section I look at how Bakhtin's understanding of the self as situated in time and space in a unique and unrepeatable manner results in what he calls an 'excess' of seeing. By this he means that our uniqueness in time and space constitutes a unique way of looking at the world. In "Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity," Bakhtin writes:

This ever-present *excess* of my seeing, knowing, and possessing in relation to any other human being is founded in the uniqueness and irreplaceability of my place in the world. For only I – the one-and-only I – occupy in a given set of

circumstances this particular place at this particular time; all other human beings are situated outside me. (23)

This excess of seeing both depends on our incarnation in time and space and is directed towards the other. Excess of seeing is always in relation to the other. If we fail to use our 'excess' relationally, all that would remain is our own limited perspective on the world. The responsible thing to do with this 'excess' is to use it in relating to the other. What we see and how we see are dependent on our uniqueness. Michael Holquist, in the Introduction to *Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays of M. M. Bakhtin*, writes:

The a priori from which the rest of Bakhtin's thought flows is the assumption that each of us occupies a situation in existence that, for the time we occupy such a space, is ours and ours alone: what I see is not the same as what anyone else sees. Perception, how I "see" the world, is always refracted, as it were, through the optic of my uniqueness. Bakhtin calls this uniqueness of vision my "excess of seeing" insofar as it is defined by the ability I have to see things others do not. (xxv)<sup>12</sup>

Our unique way of looking at the world is the visual outflowing of our unique position in the world, that we saw in the section on non-alibi in being.

Similarly, Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson, in *Creation of a Prosaics*, recognise that excess of seeing is both relational and dependent upon our uniqueness. They employ the word 'surplus' rather than 'excess,' but the meaning is the same. They write:

Here it is worth stressing that the idea of surplus is essential for Bakhtin's early understanding of the self because it is a way of locating and describing what makes each self radically singular and ir-replace-able. In using these spatial words, we imitate Bakhtin, who took the simple fact that each of us occupies a singular place at a given time as a figure for (and a consequence of) our radical

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<sup>12</sup> *Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays by M.M. Bakhtin*. The introduction is called "Introduction: The Architectonics of Answerability."

singularity in many other respects. Physical and temporal specificity is a sort of synecdoche of our larger irreplaceability. (184-85)

In essence, because of our unique position in time and space we have a unique visual perspective.

Caryl Emerson takes this discussion about unique vision one stage further in an article entitled "Russian Orthodoxy and the Early Bakhtin."<sup>13</sup> She states explicitly that excess of seeing is relational; it has implications for our relationship with the other.

Emerson writes:

Bakhtin begins his discussion of self-other relations in his early manuscripts with a simple observation: we are distinguished from one another by the quality and contours of the "surplus" that each one of us enjoys in relation to every other. I can see you, but I cannot see what is behind my own head; from your position you can see me, but only in your own way, not as anyone else sees me. It follows that every body in space "finalizes" every other body from a different perspective, and thus any image of anyone requires, as a minimum, two concrete consciousnesses at work. (116)

Emerson connects Bakhtin's excess of seeing to the Orthodox Christian theology of the icon. She argues that there is a relationship between Bakhtin's thought and Russian Orthodox thought about icons. She argues that the syntax of icons is different from the syntax of western portraiture. She refers to Leonid Ouspensky's *The Theology of the Icon*, and says: "The syntax of the icon is based rather on a dynamic multiplicity of viewpoints, with its several implied observers set inside the represented world. The many points of view coexisting within self-contained icon space constitute a paradigm

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<sup>13</sup> Caryl Emerson, "Russian Orthodoxy and the Early Bakhtin," *Religion and Literature* 22.2-3 (Summer-Autumn 1990): 109-31.

for plurality of vision.” Emerson argues that unlike a portrait, an icon invites multiplicity. As a three dimensional, physical object, it can be viewed from many different perspectives. This analysis can be extended to our understanding of the human person. As an icon can be viewed from many perspectives, so can a human person who is embodied in time and space. The incarnated human being can be looked at relationally by others.

Emerson says that in Bakhtin’s later work on Dostoevsky he discovered the potential of language to embed, communicate, and supplement multiple discrete view points even more than this visual ‘excess’ or ‘surplus.’ Emerson connects such excess of seeing back to our incarnation in time and space when she writes: “But something like an “ethics of vision,” an insistence on the irreplaceable responsibility that is generated by material embodiment in space, remains with Bakhtin throughout his life” (118). This excess of seeing entails as much responsibility and answerability as our incarnated position in time and space.

We learn more about excess of seeing in “Author and Hero.” Here we read that if two persons look at each other, one sees aspects of the other person and of the space that the other occupies that the other does not and cannot. It is important to emphasise that this dynamic is relational. In the same way that I can see things about the other that he or she cannot see, he or she can see things about me that I cannot see. Michael Holquist, in the Introduction to *Art and Answerability*, also recognises the other:

The dialogical paradox of this formulation is that *every* human being occupies such a determinate place in existence: we are all unique, but we are never alone. Bakhtin’s enterprise is founded on the situatedness of perception and thus the uniqueness of the person, but it abhors all claims to oneness. It is not only the case that from my unique situation in space and time I am able to see things you

do not: it is also – and simultaneously – the case that from the vantage of *your* uniqueness you can see things that *I* cannot. (xxvi)

We have seen that excess of seeing is related to non-alibi in being; it is the visual outflowing of it. In the same way that our unique position entails responsibilities, so does our unique vision. Our unique vision has relational responsibilities. The self can see things that the other cannot, but the other sees things that the self cannot. We will see in chapter five that after Dorothea helps Rosamond, the later reciprocates and helps Dorothea see things that from her own perspective she cannot see.

I will use this concept of excess of seeing in my reading of *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda* in chapters five and six. On an intra-textual level this helps us read *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda*. Eliot is less optimistic about this unique vision than Bakhtin. For her, it is unique, but definitely limited. Bakhtin's excess of seeing can help us understand the way that moral egoism is often expressed in visual terms. Dorothea, Casaubon, Rosamond, and Bulstrode all have unique ways of looking at the world. On an extra-textual level, the reader also has a limited perspective, but the encounter with the other that is *Middlemarch* or *Daniel Deronda* can change the way we look at the world. On the other hand, Eliot is more willing than Bakhtin to explore the consequences of what happens when we do not use this excess properly.

### *Self/other relations and incarnation*

In this section I look at how Bakhtin's understanding of self/other relations is informed by the Christian concept of incarnation. The argument in this section builds on the work of section one. In that section we saw that the motif of incarnation was central to Bakhtin's understanding of the unique position in time and space of each human being

and the consequent responsibilities of that uniqueness. We saw that the unique position of each human being and the responsibilities that that entailed were likened by Bakhtin to the two sides of Christ's nature, and were thus described as "non-fused yet undivided." This understanding of the human being has consequences for the self's interaction with the other. Our self is situated and embodied and so we have responsibilities not just abstractly, or in general, but with particular people. We interact specifically with other human beings.

Coates argues that Christ's incarnation is important for Bakhtin's understanding of self/other relations. She argues that the theological dimension of Bakhtin's work on self/other relations needs to be taken seriously. She highlights two passages in "Author and Hero" in which Bakhtin makes it explicit that Christianity provides a model for his thinking. Bakhtin argues that there is a radical distinction between the way one relates to the self and the way one relates to the other. In "Author and Hero" we read:

This radical difference is of essential significance not only for aesthetics, but also for ethics. It should suffice to recall the inequality in principle between the *I* and the *other* with respect to value in Christian ethics: one must not love oneself, one must love the other; one must not be indulgent toward oneself, one must be indulgent toward the other; and in general, we must relieve the other of any burdens and take them upon ourselves. (38)

Bakhtin refers here to a passage in Galatians where Christ commands his disciples to take up the burdens of others. In this essay, the other is described vividly in physical terms:

[I]t is only the other who can be embraced, clasped all around, it is only the other's boundaries that can all be touched and felt lovingly. The other's fragile finiteness, consummatedness, his here-and-now being – all are inwardly grasped by me and shaped, as it were, by my embrace in this act, the other's outward existence begins to live in a new manner, acquires some sort of new meaning, is born on a new plane of being. Only the other's lips can be touched with our own, only on the other can we lay our hands, rise actively above the other and

“overshadow” all of him totally, “overshadow” him in every constituent feature of his existence, “overshadow” his body and within his body – his soul. (41-2)

For Bakhtin, the other is a physical reality, which must be borne in mind when we respond ethically and aesthetically to him or her. In my readings of *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda* I will show that Eliot’s egoists often fail to respond to the other who is physically before them, and thus fail to lead a morally responsible life.

In “Author and Hero” there is a direct reference to the Christian God, and the way in which his Incarnation offers a paradigm for embodied human aesthetic and ethical acts. We read:

No one can assume a position toward the *I* and the *other* that is neutral. The abstract cognitive standpoint lacks any axiological approach, since the axiological attitude requires that one should occupy a unique place in the unitary event of being – that one should be embodied. Any valuation is an act of assuming an individual position in being; even God had to incarnate himself in order to bestow mercy, to suffer, and to *forgive* – had to descend, as it were, from the abstract point of justice. Being is, as it were, once and for all, irrevocably, between myself as the unique one and everyone else as others for me; once a position has been assumed in being, any act and any valuation can proceed only from that position. (129)

In this quotation we see that self/other relations are once again linked to the Christian God, and specifically to his incarnation. Self/other relations are dependent on our unique place in being, a uniqueness that stems from our being made in the image and likeness of God.

In this chapter I have detailed the centrality of the motif of incarnation to Bakhtin’s concepts of non-alibi in being, excess of seeing, and self/other relations. These concepts have not only moral and ethical implications, but also hermeneutical and aesthetic implications. It is possible to employ these concepts as criteria for the act of reading. We are incarnated in the text for the duration of the reading process, and we

have no alibi for what we have read. These three concepts allow for an answerable act of reading. In the chapters on *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda* I will explore how these concepts can help us read Eliot's aesthetics. I will use them to show that Eliot's sympathy has both intra-textual and extra-textual dimensions. In the next section I offer a brief textual analysis of selected incidents in *Romola*, in order to show how I will proceed with a Bakhtinian analysis of *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda*.

### *Romola and non-alibi in being*

The purpose of this section is to ease the transition from the theory of Bakhtin's concepts to the textual analysis of *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda*. In *Romola* there is a very clear example of how non-alibi in being works on an intra-textual level in Eliot's fiction, and it is worth pausing to examine this.<sup>14</sup>

In chapter 36 Romola commences her preparations for leaving Florence. She is embittered by her relationship with her husband Tito. He has sold her late father's library, thus breaking his promise not to. She feels that their relationship is "barren" and so decides to leave Florence and their marriage (chapter 36, 320). In chapter 40, "An Arresting Voice," Romola is rebuked by Savonarola and called back to Florence to take her place as a citizen of that town, and to return to her marriage. At this point in her life, Romola is attempting to excuse her decision to flee. She claims to have an alibi for her behaviour, *i.e.*, she claims that Tito's behaviour excuses her own. Also, at this point she is pretending to be a nun. We saw that Bakhtin dislikes those who pretend to have an

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<sup>14</sup> George Eliot, *Romola*, ed. Andrew Brown (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993). All subsequent references are to this edition.

alibi, who disclaim the responsibilities that their uniqueness entails. Savonarola implores Romola to accept the responsibilities that stem from her unique and incarnated position. His words to her are simple, and full of ethical significance: "You are Romola de' Bardi, the wife of Tito Melema" (chapter 40, 360). In this sentence Savonarola situates her relationally and reminds her of where and to whom she has responsibilities. He says, "You are fleeing from Florence in disguise" (chapter 40, 360). Both the disguise and the act of fleeing are wrong. He continues: "You have put on a religious garb, and you have no religious purpose. You have sought the garb as a disguise" (chapter 40, 360). The repetition shows how important this pretence is to Savonarola. He is not happy about the pretence itself, or her chosen form of pretence. He rebukes Romola:

It was declared to me who you were: it is declared to me that you are seeking to escape from the lot God has laid on you. You wish your true name and your true place in life to be hidden, that you may choose for yourself a new name and a new place, and have no rule but your own will. And I have a command to call you back. My daughter, you must return to your place. (chapter 40, 360)

The idea of returning to her true place is more than geographical; it is relational and ethical. When Savonarola calls her back to Florence, he is also calling her back to her marriage. He says that she has "debts," the debt of a Florentine woman and the debts of a wife (chapter 40, 361). These are her duties and Savonarola says that she cannot turn her back on the lot appointed to her. He says that she cannot choose her duties. Savonarola knows that she is not happy in her married life. But he says that even as a pagan she is "breaking a pledge" (chapter 40, 362). He tells her she is "committing one of the greatest wrongs a woman and a citizen can be guilty of" in attempting to flee her responsibilities (chapter 40, 362). She claims she has her reasons, and he says it is not

enough. He again draws her attention to the pledge she has given in the face of God and her fellow men. He claims that she should be faithful to the spoken word.

Romola is "shaken by the suggestion in the Frate's words of a possible affinity between her own conduct and Tito's" (chapter 40, 362). At this point Romola does not see that she has a duty as a citizen of Florence, only the duty of a daughter to her father, and that is gone now. In Eliot's moral vision, the behaviour of Romola, her attempt to claim an alibi, is also wrong. It is a move towards egoism. Savonarola rebukes Romola for her aloofness:

There is hunger and misery in our streets, yet you say, 'I care not; I have my own sorrows; I will go away, if peradventure I can ease them.' The servants of God are struggling after a law of justice, peace, and charity, that the hundred thousand citizens among whom you were born may be governed righteously; but you think no more of this than if you were a bird, that may spread its wings and fly whither it will in search of food to its liking. (chapter 40, 363)

Savonarola says that Romola is proud, and does not hold herself as one of common blood or common thoughts. He presents her with a stark ethical challenge:

"If you forsake your place, who will fill it? You ought to be in your place now, helping in the great work by which God will purify Florence, and raise it to be the guide of the nations. What! The earth is full of iniquity – full of groans – the light is still struggling with a mighty darkness, and you say, 'I cannot bear my bonds; I will burst them asunder; I will go where no man claims me'? My daughter, every bond of your life is a debt: the right lies in the payment of that debt; it can lie nowhere else. In vain will you wander over the earth; you will be wandering forever away from the right." (chapter 40, 365)

Savonarola says that Romola has no "heart for the neighbours" among whom she dwells (chapter 40, 365). He says that she cannot claim to escape from these debts by taking up a religious life, because unlike her brother Dino, she has no vocation for it: "You have no vocation such as your brother had. You are a wife. You seek to break your ties in self-will and anger, not because the higher life calls upon you to renounce them"

(chapter 40, 365). At this stage in the narrative Romola does acquiesce with Savonarola, and returns to Florence and her marriage.

As I said above, Romola is fleeing Florence because of her failing marriage. Tito, her husband, is one of Eliot's great character studies in egoism. He betrays his adoptive father Baldassarre, betrays Romola and her father when he sells their library, and he has a second wife and family. We see his character in the process of decline, as he makes moral choices that lead him further towards narcissism. Romola is shocked by the Frate's suggestion of a possible affinity between her conduct and that of Tito. She thinks that because her filial and marital duties are lessened, she can leave. Savonarola challenges her to see her wider duties, as a citizen of Florence. Savonarola wants Romola to embrace her responsibilities as a Florentine woman, and not to try and escape them. He says that it is in Florence alone that she can discharge her debts. On this occasion Romola returns to Florence.

The second occasion on which Romola escapes Florence is when she becomes disillusioned not only with her marriage, but also with Savonarola himself. She quarrels with Savonarola over the fate of her godfather, Bernado del' Nero. She flees Florence in a boat. She lands on a plague-infested island, and becomes immediately involved in helping and strengthening the islanders. When the immediate danger is past, the narrator writes:

She had felt herself without bonds, without motive; sinking in mere egoistic complaining that life could bring her no content; feeling a right to say, "I am tired of life, I want to die." That thought had sobbed within her as she fell asleep, but from the moment after her waking when the cry had drawn her, she had not even reflected, as she used to do in Florence, that she was glad to live because she could lighten sorrow – she had simply lived, with so energetic an impulse to share the life around her, to answer the call of need and do the work which cried

aloud to be done, that the reasons for living, enduring, labouring, never took the form of argument. (chapter 69, 567)

The significance of this is that Romola is able to recognise the truth of this for herself. The first time she flees she returns because Savonarola calls her back. This time her return is self-initiated. She realises that she cannot claim an alibi. She accepts her relational ties and answers their call. Romola accepts that her incarnation in time and space ensures unique responsibilities and she willingly embraces them:

And then the past arose with a fresh appeal to her. Her work in this green valley was done, and the emotions that were disengaged from the people immediately around her rushed back into the old deep channels of use and affection. That rare possibility of self-contemplation which comes in any complete severance from our wonted life made her judge herself as she had never done before: the compunction which is inseparable from a sympathetic nature keenly alive to the possible experience of others, began to stir in her with growing force. She questioned the justness of her own conclusions, of her own deeds: she had been rash, arrogant, always dissatisfied that others were not good enough, while she herself had not been true to what her soul had once recognized as the best. She began to condemn her flight: after all, it had been cowardly self-care; the grounds on which Savonarola had once taken her back were truer, deeper than the grounds she had had for her second flight. How could she feel the needs of others and not feel above all the needs of the nearest? (chapter 69, 567-68)

In this brief Bakhtinian analysis of *Romola* we see that Bakhtin's concept of non-alibi in being enables us to articulate something of Eliot's moral vision. Romola's decision to accept her uniqueness and its responsibilities is what enables her to transcend "mere egoistic complaining." Romola is able to transcend her egoistic behaviour when she accepts both her uniqueness and its responsibilities. Tito, on the other hand, slides further into egoism and moral decline because he seeks constantly to claim an alibi for his behaviour. In the following chapters I will offer a reading of *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda* that uses Bakhtin's concepts. I employ them to help me articulate the

role that incarnation, revelation, and transcendence have in Eliot's aim of extending her reader's sympathies.

## Chapter Five: A theological reading of *Middlemarch*

“If I help others to see at all it must be through that medium of art.”<sup>1</sup>

In chapter four I wrote that in order to facilitate a better understanding of the role that sympathy plays in Eliot’s aesthetics and ethics, we need to pay more attention to the role of Christian motifs in her novels. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines motif as a “constituent feature of a composition,” or as an object “forming a distinct element of a design.” In this chapter I will show that the motifs of incarnation and transcendence are constituent features of *Middlemarch*, and that they form a distinct element of its design. In addition, I proposed in chapter four that a study of Bakhtin’s concepts of non-alibi in being, excess of seeing, and self/other relations can help facilitate the role that Christian motifs play in Eliot’s aesthetics. A detailed study of Bakhtin’s aesthetics and ethics, and the connections between them, can help us to explore the intersection between Eliot’s aesthetics and ethics, and the extra-textual dimension of her aesthetics. Bakhtin’s concepts of non-alibi in being and excess of seeing can help us to articulate the extra-textual dimension of Eliot’s aesthetics, *i.e.*, her desire that her reader be changed by the act of reading her novels. In this chapter I review Eliot’s aesthetics of sympathy and the way in which she wants her aesthetics to have an effect on the reader beyond the act of reading. I discuss the centrality of the motif of incarnation in each of Bakhtin’s concepts, before applying non-alibi in being and excess of seeing to a reading of

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<sup>1</sup> In a letter to Dr. Joseph Frank Payne, 25 January 1876, Eliot wrote: “I become more and more timid – with less daring to adopt any formula which does not get itself clothed for me in some human figure and individual experience, and perhaps that is a sign that if I help others to see at all it must be through that medium of art.” *GEL* 6, 216-7.

*Middlemarch*. In particular, I look at how these concepts can help us articulate both the intra-textual and the extra-textual element of Eliot's aesthetics.

### *Eliot and the aesthetic of sympathy*

In chapter three we saw that Eliot's aesthetic aim is to extend her reader's sympathies, *i.e.*, that during and after reading Eliot's novels a change would occur in the reader. Eliot expressed this aim in literary criticism, essays, letters and her early fiction, over a period of twenty years. The presupposition entailed in this aesthetics of sympathy is that we are all egoists, with a limited perspective on the world. Eliot's moral vision is that a human being is situated somewhere on the egoist/altruist continuum, and that he or she has a corresponding limited perspective on the world. In visual terms, our egoism expresses itself in a limited perspective on the world. Our egoism, our inherent selfishness, results in an inability to see things from another's point of view. Eliot's aim of extending her reader's sympathies is directed to meet this need in her reader. As Helena Granlund writes in *The Paradox of Self-Love: Christian Elements in George Eliot's Treatment of Egoism*: "To Eliot, moral growth entails a widened vision, the ability to move outside one's own point of view and observe the world from a different perspective" (153). In the words of an early essay by Eliot, the task of the artist is to surprise the selfish into attention to that which is other than themselves.<sup>2</sup> The aim of Eliot's aesthetics, then, is to counter our inherent egoism and our limited perspective on the world. Her aesthetics is aimed at moving her reader further towards altruism, and towards the transcendence of his or her egoism.

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<sup>2</sup> "The Natural History of German Life," *Essays of George Eliot*, 270.

Eliot's aesthetic invites a response from the reader. Eliot's aesthetic aim is to produce an effect in the reader that goes beyond the encounter with the text. Once the act of reading is over, the reader will sympathise with the neighbours among whom he or she lives. In the quotation that begins this chapter Eliot talks about the possibility of helping others see things differently, and this is a constant in her aesthetics. She wants to correct our faulty vision and empower us to see things from the perspective of another. Her ethics are an ethics of incarnation, and also an ethics of transcendence. The characters and reader move toward transcendence of egoism only through an acceptance of their position as incarnated in time and space. The goal of Eliot's aesthetics in *Middlemarch* is the same goal as of the earlier fiction – namely to change the way the reader relates to those among whom he or she lives. In this chapter I draw on the work of the previous chapters to examine the aesthetics of *Middlemarch*, and the way that religious motifs operate within the structure of the novel. Eliot's aesthetic aim is an integral part of *Middlemarch*. As I mentioned earlier, although Eliot does not herself use the words 'ethics' or 'ethical' in connection with the aesthetics of sympathy, this change in the way we relate to the other is inherently ethical.

### *Middlemarch and extra-textual aesthetics*

In chapter three we saw that Eliot commented on her aesthetics in letters that she composed, but she also received letters attesting to her success in achieving these aesthetic aims. This is further evidence that Eliot wants to affect a change in individual readers, and she is pleased to hear that it is happening. After the publication of *Middlemarch*, Eliot received letters which proved that her aesthetics were having the

desired effect on her reader. Although she did not often read critical reviews of her work, she was aware of the response of individuals who wrote to her. In her journal of 1 January 1873, Eliot wrote: "I have received many deeply affecting assurances of its [*i.e.*, *Middlemarch*] influence for good on individual minds." Similarly, Karen Chase, in *Middlemarch*, quotes from a letter written by Eliot as she was beginning *Middlemarch*, in which she claims that a book's power depends on "its reception by a few appreciative natures," and the "radiation" outward from group (86). In a letter to Charles Ritter, 11 February 1873, Eliot says: "Indeed, after my husband's sympathy letters from those personally unknown to me are the only testimonies to the effect on my writing on which I thoroughly rely."<sup>3</sup> As Suzanne Graver, in *George Eliot and Community*, writes: "To judge from her readers' letters to her and contemporary reviews, she often evoked the kind of response she intended" (11).

Felicia Bonaparte, in *The Triptych and the Cross*, suggests that one failure of Eliot scholarship is that it has not probed Eliot's moral vision far enough. I agree that there is a need to fill this omission. Bonaparte says that Eliot is not simply offering her reader maxims or aphorisms, and that her moral vision is less didactic and more subtle. Bonaparte says that at one point readers of Eliot would have assumed that "she was preaching simple Christian truisms" (33). We saw in chapter three that Eliot expressed disdain for Kingsley's tendency to preach, and she wanted to avoid it in her own aesthetics. In Eliot's letters she wrote that she wanted her readers to be moved toward the ends she sought by her works as wholes, rather than as an "assemblage of extracts." She wanted to avoid "preaching" and aimed to affect her reader through the structure of

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<sup>3</sup> *GEL* 5, 373-4.

her works. She wanted to avoid her work being separable into 'direct' and 'indirect' teaching.<sup>4</sup> I intend to probe Eliot's moral vision through a Bakhtinian analysis and to assess the role that theological motifs play in Eliot's moral vision. To read Eliot in an accurate way we must navigate this tension between her desire to teach and her desire to avoid preaching or didacticism; the theological motifs of incarnation, revelation, and transcendence help us do this. Critical work has been written which says that Eliot has aims on her reader, but the religious dimension of this process has been ignored. It is for this reason that I use the concepts found in Bakhtin's early philosophical essays to read Eliot's novels.

Eliot scholars have articulated her moral vision and her desire to move her reader away from egoism toward altruism: what has not been studied is the role that theological motifs play in this aesthetics. In this section I review the work of literary critics who suggest that there is an extra-textual element to Eliot's aesthetics. We saw in chapter three that a number of contemporary Eliot scholars have argued that there is an extra-textual element to Eliot's aesthetics. Suzanne Graver, in *George Eliot and Community*, for example, argues that Eliot achieves the extension of her reader's sympathies through collaboration between the reader and the text (11). Graver says that one way in which Eliot fosters this collaboration is to create characters who experience such changes as those she would ideally have her readers undergo. However, in this chapter I will argue that the relationship between the reader and text is better understood through the concepts of answerability and responsibility, than it is through collaboration. The reader has, in Bakhtinian terms, no alibi for his or her reading of *Middlemarch*.

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<sup>4</sup> *GEL* 5, 459.

Marilyn Higuera, in "Prelude to Vocation," also discusses the extra-textual dimension of Eliot's writing, and focuses specifically on *Middlemarch*. Higuera's article is a close reading of the Prelude of *Middlemarch*. Higuera argues that it is not Dorothea who achieves reform, or even she who is the most like St Theresa. Rather, says Higuera, it is the narrator of *Middlemarch* who finds her vocation and achieves reform; the reform of her reader's sensibilities. Higuera says that the writing of a novel which, to quote from *Middlemarch*, transforms "the frozen stare with which we look at our unintroduced neighbour" qualifies as a full-fledged vocation (25).<sup>5</sup> Higuera claims that Eliot not only wants her reader to feel connected to her characters, but that she wants also her reader "to perceive sympathy as a moral act in our lives as well as our reading" (24). I concur with Higuera that Eliot does want her reader to perceive sympathy as a moral act in our lives as well as our reading. The first verb of the *Middlemarch* is "cares" (Prelude, 3) and it is Eliot's aim to help us care not only for those we meet within the confines of the text, but also for those we meet beyond the confines of the text. Similarly, in the Finale, the narrator suggests that we have cared for those whom we have encountered in the text, and we will care for those whom we shall meet once the last page is read (Finale, 818). Sympathy is thus tied to the aesthetics of *Middlemarch*. Eliot's sympathy does, as Higuera says, go "beyond the book." The extra-textual element or ethical dimension of this aesthetic is recognised by Mary Ellen Doyle in *The Sympathetic Response: George Eliot's Fictional Rhetoric*. In chapter three we saw that Doyle writes: "[Eliot] wishes to influence the intellectual and emotional

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<sup>5</sup> See *Middlemarch*, chapter 11, 93.

attitudes of real readers toward other real people in the real world outside her books” (1). This is an explicit and clear statement of Eliot’s ethical practice.

Higuera and Carol S. Gould both recognise that an important part of Eliot’s aesthetics is to help the reader transcend his or her idiosyncratic perspective. That we have a unique perspective is given; it is an inherent part of our nature. Higuera compares the careful observation of the narrator of *Middlemarch* to the “common eyes” who judge people (Prelude, 3). This phrase means both ‘common to all,’ and also common as in unsophisticated or undiscerning. Higuera expands on what Eliot is trying to achieve by this phrase. Higuera tells us that visual motifs are important in *Middlemarch*; implicit in this observation is the idea that through the act of reading *Middlemarch* our common eyes are transformed.

Similarly, Carol S. Gould, in “Plato, George Eliot, and Moral Narcissism,” argues that the literary artist, or narrative fiction, can help us transcend our idiosyncratic perspective.<sup>6</sup> Gould argues that our ability or inability to transcend our own idiosyncratic perspective increases or decreases our happiness. This ability to transcend our idiosyncratic perspective, to see the world from the perspective of another, is a necessary condition for our well-being. Gould says that the purpose of *Middlemarch* is not to point to our limited perspective on the world and leave it at that – its aim is to help us transcend it. She argues that according to Eliot, literature can be “an effective instrument for our moral improvement” (25). I agree with Gould’s arguments, but there is more to be said about how Eliot achieves this, and the role that theological motifs play

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<sup>6</sup> Carol S. Gould, “Plato, George Eliot, and Moral Narcissism,” *Philosophy and Literature* 14.1 (April 1990): 24-39.

in this process. Our idiosyncratic perspective is a symptom of our egoism, and it needs to be altered if Eliot is to extend her reader's sympathies.

### *Bakhtin and Incarnation*

In chapter four we saw how Bakhtin scholars argue that Christianity is an important part of his thinking. We saw that the incarnation of Christ was formative in Bakhtin's understanding of the human person in time and space. In Bakhtin's writings his understanding of the human person involves a number of givens: (1) the human person is incarnated in time and space; (2) each human being is uniquely situated; (3) unique responsibilities stem from this unique position; (4) the moral person does not claim an "alibi" for this uniqueness; (5) our unique position entails a unique perspective on the world; (6) each "self" can see things that the "other" cannot see; (7) a relation of reciprocity exists between the "self" and the "other." This understanding of the human person helps us read *Middlemarch*. We saw that the motif of incarnation is central to three of Bakhtin's concepts that emerge from his understanding of the human being in time and space. These three concepts are non-alibi in being, excess of seeing, and self/other relations. I argue that these three concepts can help us understand the dynamism of Eliot's intra-textual and extra-textual aesthetics. The implications and influence of these three concepts can be extended and applied to the act of reading.

We saw in chapter four that the motif of incarnation was central to each of Bakhtin's concepts. Incarnation was important for non-alibi in being in the way in which our unique position in time and space is like the uniqueness and particularity of Christ. His uniqueness and particularity guarantee our uniqueness. Moreover, Christ's unique

nature (as fully human and fully divine) entailed unique responsibilities: he came to save sinners and was crucified as the atoning sacrifice for the sins of the world. His uniqueness as God-man meant a unique work. Thus part of human beings being made in the likeness and image of God (Genesis 1:27) is that Christ guarantees our uniqueness, but this uniqueness has responsibilities, in the same way that Christ's uniqueness had responsibilities. Clearly, our uniqueness and our responsibilities are not of the same magnitude as those of Christ, but it is this relationship between uniqueness and the ensuing responsibilities that means human beings are like Christ. Bakhtin, as we saw, takes the Chalcedon doctrine of the two natures of Christ, human and divine, "without confusion, without separation," and ties our uniqueness and our responsibilities in the exact same way.

Incarnation was important for excess of seeing in that our unique position in time and space ensured a unique view of the world. Our embodied position in time and space means that we see things that other people, in their embodied position, do not see. This visual excess is a synecdoche for our larger irreplaceability. Again, the incarnation has a role in our uniqueness and particularity. However, not only does the 'I' see things that the other does not, but the other also and at the same time, sees things that the self does not. The self and the other are therefore in a relationship of reciprocity and both are in a position to offer and receive help. The motif of incarnation is important for our understanding of self/other relations, because in the same way that we are to understand that each unique person is situated in a unique time and space, in our interactions with the other, we must realise that he or she is also unique.

I want to argue that each of these three concepts not only has ethical implications, particularly with regards to how we treat those amongst whom we live, but they also have implications for the way in which we read literary texts. These concepts are at once ethical and aesthetic. Because of the way that they combine the ethical and the aesthetic, they offer a way of reading Eliot's novels which transcends any division between ethics and aesthetics that other interpretation of her novels has resulted in. I will use Bakhtin's concepts of non-alibi in being and excess of seeing to explore Eliot's portrayal of egoism in *Middlemarch*, and to explore how this relates to Eliot's aesthetic aim of extending her reader's sympathy.

In this chapter I will relate Eliot's presentation of the problem of egoism in *Middlemarch* to her aesthetic aim of extending her reader's sympathies in three ways. Her aesthetic aim is to move her reader away from egoism toward altruism. I have defined egoism not just as self-regarding action, but as the whole way in which one thinks about the world and other human beings in relation to oneself. The reader of *Middlemarch* enjoys a privileged perspective, or multiple perspectives, in relation to the characters in the text. The reader enjoys an 'excess of seeing' in relation to the characters. The extension of the reader's sympathies involves not just a recognition of this outsideness, this 'excess', but also the need to use this excess responsibly. In this way excess of seeing works on the extra-textual level of *Middlemarch*. It also works on the intra-textual level and I will discuss this below. Not only is our individual perspective widened as a result of reading *Middlemarch*, but also, and as part of the process, we learn to use our excess of seeing relationally, for the good of the other. The moral climax of *Middlemarch* is Dorothea's transcendence of her egoism, which enables

her to rescue morally Rosamond, Lydgate, and Ladislaw. Her action toward them depends entirely on her acceptance of her unique position and the responsibilities which it entails. Similarly, the reader of *Middlemarch* must embrace his or her outsidership to the characters, to the text as a whole, and to those amongst whom he or she lives. In my analysis of the ways in which Eliot relates the portrayal of egoism to her aesthetic aims, I will show the centrality of the motifs of incarnation and transcendence to this process.

In section one I will discuss Eliot's portrayal of the egoistic behaviour and thinking of Rosamond and Casaubon. I will argue that their egoism results in a lack of response to the other. This is wrong in both Eliot and Bakhtin's moral world view. Eliot nudges her reader to responding to her aesthetic by the negative example of unresponsiveness and its bad results. In section two I will discuss how Eliot encourages her reader to sympathise with dislikable egoistic characters. The reader is not asked to approve of their behaviour, but to accept these characters despite their faults. I will focus my discussion on the characters of Bulstrode and Casaubon. As a reader, we have an excess of seeing in relation to these characters. Other characters have excess of seeing in relation to these characters, but do not use it in a charitable way. As reader, we are encouraged to use our excess of seeing in a charitable way. As reader of *Middlemarch* we should not claim an alibi for what we have read. This is made all the more clear in section three. This section focuses on the scenes that form the moral climax of the novel; Dorothea's resolution following her night of anguish, and her conversation with Rosamond. Here Dorothea accepts her uniqueness and her responsibility. She transcends her egoism, accepts she has no alibi, and acts for the good of others. Through a

Bakhtinian analysis of these scenes we can see how the motifs of incarnation and transcendence are central to Eliot's aesthetic aim.

*"The candle of egoism": egoism in the behaviour and thinking of Rosamond and Casaubon*<sup>7</sup>

In this section I discuss Eliot's portrayal of the egoistic behaviour and thinking of Rosamond Vincy and Edward Casaubon. This behaviour is commended neither by the narrative comments nor by its consequences for the marriage partners of these characters. In the introduction I quoted from Bakhtin's essay "The Problem of the Text": "For the word (and, consequently, for a human being) there is nothing more terrible than a *lack of response* (127).<sup>8</sup> Marijke Rudnik-Smalbraak suggested that in the ethics and aesthetics of both Eliot and Bakhtin human beings and words require a response. In my discussion of Rosamond and Casaubon I will show the consequences of their failure to respond to Lydgate and Dorothea respectively. Rosamond and Casaubon, in the words from "Author and Hero," love themselves rather than the other; they are self-indulgent and not indulgent to their partners, and they add to, rather than relieve the burdens of their respective partners. We saw that in "Author and Hero" the other is described in vividly physical terms, and in language of love and embrace. It is a sign of their lack of relationality that both Rosamond and Lydgate fail to respond to the physical affections of Lydgate and Dorothea.

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<sup>7</sup> The phrase "candle of egoism" is adapted from the opening paragraph of chapter 27, 258.

<sup>8</sup> "The Problem of the Text," *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, 103-131.

Both Rosamond and Casaubon have a very full sense of themselves and of their uniqueness, but they do not associate it with any responsibility. We will see that they are unable to transcend their egoism and move towards altruism precisely because they fail to acknowledge that their uniqueness entails responsibility. The consequence of their failure to acknowledge both uniqueness and responsibility is that they do not have a correct understanding of their place in the world or their relation to others.

Rosamond's egoistic behaviour is shown in a number of incidents in her marriage; the loss of her baby, her writing to Sir Godwin against the expressed wishes of Lydgate, and her taking their house off the market. In chapter 58 Rosamond's baby is born prematurely. The narrator tells us: "This misfortune was attributed entirely to her having persisted in going out on horseback one day when her husband had desired her not to do so" (chapter 58, 566). The reason for Rosamond's decision to go riding is the visit of Lydgate's relative. She is impressed by his rank and wants to be in his company as much as possible, whereas her husband thinks he is a "conceited ass" (chapter 58, 568). The difference between their opinions of Captain Lydgate is just one indicator of their different characters and differing levels of egoism. At Captain Lydgate's request, Rosamond joins him in riding without informing Lydgate. When he finds out, Lydgate is furious and forbids her to ride again, but she does not give her word not to ride again. The narrator talks of her "victorious obstinacy" (chapter 58, 570). In one paragraph there are thirteen personal pronouns representing her egoistic thinking (chapter 58, 570-1). She does not take her husband's request seriously, and does as she pleases. The narrator informs us that a tree falls and the horse takes fright, leading Rosamond to loosing her baby. Lydgate is profoundly shocked at her "terrible tenacity" (chapter 58,

571). He knows that she sets aside all his thinking, and realises that she is not all receptive to him. The narrator says: "she believed in her own opinion more than she did in his" (chapter 58, 571). It is not only in the riding incident, but in "numberless trifling matters" that she sets aside his will (chapter 58, 572). Lydgate is aware of the "blank unreflecting surface" that her mind presents to his ardour for his study (chapter 58, 572). Rosamond does not act lovingly toward her husband. In "Author and Hero" Bakhtin commends bearing the burdens of the other, but Lydgate ends up carrying Rosamond as a burden. In chapter 73 we read that Lydgate is "in a bad mood for bearing her dumb mastery" (chapter 73, 730-1), and in chapter 81 the narrator says: "Lydgate had accepted his narrowed lot with sad resignation. He had chosen this fragile creature, and had taken the burthen of her life upon his arms. He must walk as he could, carrying that burthen pitifully" (chapter 81, 789). There is no reciprocal bearing of one another's burdens in this relationship; instead, Rosamond actually becomes Lydgate's burden because she will not accept any responsibility for her incarnated position in time and space.

A second incident in which Rosamond exhibits her egoistic behaviour is when Lydgate informs her they are in financial difficulties. Lydgate tells Rosamond that they are in debt, and says "we must think together about it, and you must help me" (chapter 58, 580). Her response to this is: "What can *I* do, Tertius?" She speaks in a tone of "neutral aloofness" (chapter 58, 580). She treats him like one of another species. Lydgate mentally contrasts Rosamond's behaviour to him with that of Dorothea's to Casaubon. He recalls that Dorothea cried to be taught what would best comfort Casaubon. Whereas Dorothea is fully responsive to Casaubon's needs, Rosamond is completely unresponsive to Lydgate. We saw in chapter four that for both Eliot and

Bakhtin words and persons demand a response. Therefore this failure to respond to her husband is a moral failure. In chapter 69 we read: "He went up and found her stretched on the bed pale and silent, without an answer even in her face to any word or look of his" (chapter 69, 689). This lack of response is due to Rosamond's egoism, her inability to think of the other. The narrator is clearly not in support of this behaviour. The significance of this lack of response is that it is true not only of people, but also of texts. Just as Rosamond's lack of response to Lydgate is seen to be morally wrong, so the reader's lack of response to *Middlemarch* would be equally wrong.

As readers, we are outside the marriage of Rosamond and Lydgate and have the excess of seeing of which Bakhtin speaks. Eliot further dissects their marital problems. We read: "It seemed that she had no more identified herself with him than if they had been creatures of different species and opposing interests" (chapter 58, 583). All these incidents are symptomatic of Rosamond's egoism, but its all-pervasiveness is expressed in a powerful metaphor in chapter 27:

An eminent philosopher among my friends, who can dignify even your ugly furniture by lifting it into the serene light of science, has shown me this pregnant little fact. Your pier-glass or extensive surface of polished steel made to be rubbed by a housemaid, will be minutely and multitudinously scratched in all directions; but place now against it a lighted candle as a centre of illumination, and lo! the scratches will seem to arrange themselves in a fine series of concentric circles round that little sun. It is demonstrable that the scratches are going everywhere impartially, and it is only your candle which produces the flattering illusion of a concentric arrangement, its light falling with an exclusive optical selection. These things are a parable. The scratches are events, and the candle is the egoism of any person now absent – of Miss Vincy, for example. (chapter 27, 258)

Rosamond is unable to use her excess of seeing relationally since she is only capable of interpreting what she sees in light of her own preferences and needs. She does not see things from the perspective of the other. She is aware of her uniqueness, but not of the

responsibilities that it entails. This metaphor at once illuminates Rosamond's egoistic behaviour and warns the reader that he or she needs to be responsible for his or her act of reading if he or she does not want to make this same mistake. The candle is not only the egoism of Rosamond, but potentially also that of the reader, if he or she does not learn from his or her reading of *Middlemarch*. Whereas Rosamond does not change, the reader's encounter with the text of *Middlemarch* can help the reader transcend his or her egoism, if he or she accepts his or her uniqueness and the responsibility that it entails. The reader learns to see that the act of reading is an act for which he or she can accept ethical responsibility. In accepting ethical responsibility for his or her reading of *Middlemarch* the reader can embrace his or her uniqueness and transcend his or her egoism.

Casaubon's egoism is similarly manifested in both his behaviour and his thinking. In this section I discuss Casaubon's egoism in relation to his marriage to Dorothea, and how his behaviour affects their relationship. Casaubon's egoism directly affects his marriage. His egoism is most clearly expressed in connection with his ongoing struggle with the Key to all Mythologies. This is a manuscript project that Casaubon has been working on for a number of years, and he views all things in light of their connection to this book. We see how his studies affect his relation with Dorothea; they set the pace and timing of the relationship, the content of his proposal, the destination of their honeymoon, their daily schedule when they return, and his supreme act of egoism is to entreat, or emotionally blackmail, Dorothea to continue working on his manuscript after his death. Even this, however, is not his final act of egoism; his

egoism even has a posthumous effect on Dorothea because his will entails that if she marries Will Ladislaw she will lose her fortune.

The first hint of Casaubon's egoism comes in chapter 2 when he says he is "fastidious" about readers (chapter 2, 17), but it is expressed quite clearly in his letter of proposal in chapter 5. Here Casaubon expresses his impression of Dorothea's fitness to supply the need in his life; he even says that her fitness to supply this need is what evokes his affections for her. He describes his work as "too special to be abdicated" (chapter 5, 42). He likes Dorothea's "capability of devotedness," and her ability to "supply aid in graver labours and to cast a charm over vacant hours" (chapter 5, 42-3). Casaubon thinks of his courtship to Dorothea as a "hindrance" to his "great work," and looks forward to its "termination" (chapter 7, 62). In marrying Dorothea he hopes to secure "the solace of female tendance for his declining years" (chapter 7, 62). Even at this stage of their relationship Casaubon does not think of how Dorothea thinks or feels.

In chapter 10 we are told that the Casaubons' wedding journey will be extended to Rome, so that Casaubon can "inspect some manuscripts in the Vatican" (chapter 10, 85). Casaubon wants Dorothea to have a companion on her honeymoon, so that he can study manuscripts! The narrator says that Dorothea dislikes Casaubon's "aloofness" (chapter 10, 86). This word is always significant in Eliot's ethical vocabulary, and is a sign of egoistic thinking and behaviour. In chapter 11 we read: "He took a wife, as we have seen, to adorn the remaining quadrant of his course, and be a little moon that would cause hardly a calculable perturbation" (chapter 11, 93). We have seen so far that Casaubon relates his courtship of Dorothea and choice of honeymoon destination to his

authorship of the *Key to all Mythologies*. Just how deep-seated this egoism is only becomes apparent on their honeymoon.

Chapters 19-22 record details of the Casaubons' time in Rome. Casaubon spends their honeymoon reading in the Library of the Vatican everyday, and is "usually away almost from breakfast till dinner" (chapter 21, 199). Chapter 20 tells us that Dorothea's reactions to Casaubon have undergone some change since their marriage. The narrator admits that Casaubon had not actively created any illusions about himself, but says that "whatever else remained the same, the light had changed, and you cannot find the pearly dawn at noonday" (chapter 20, 190). Dorothea's recognises a "blank absence of interest or sympathy" in Casaubon (chapter 20, 191). There is no physical affection between them, even on their honeymoon; he does not hold her hand, gives her no intimacy, and gives no sign of accepting her (chapter 20, 192). We read: "Having made his clerical toilette with due care in the morning, he was prepared only for those amenities of life which were suited to the well-adjusted stiff cravat of the period, and to a mind weighted with unpublished matter" (chapter 20, 192). We have already seen that a lack of physical affection was symptomatic of a lack of receptiveness in the Lydgates' marriage, and the same economy of imagery and motif is operative in the Casaubons' marriage. Neither Rosamond nor Casaubon are answerable to their unique relations with their spouses. They do not see that the fact of their being incarnated in a specific time and place ensures that they are answerable for this, and do not act ethically toward their spouses.

In chapter 20 Dorothea and Casaubon quarrel over his scholarly work. Dorothea attempts to apologise for her behaviour in the next chapter, and Casaubon ungraciously accepts. Dorothea remembers the day as an epoch in their relationship. We read:

To-day she had begun to see that she had been under a wild illusion in expecting a response to her feeling from Mr Casaubon, and she had felt the waking of a presentiment that there might be a sad consciousness in his life which made as great a need on his side as on her own. (chapter 21, 205)

It is this lack of response that eventually destroys their marriage. Casaubon is unable to respond to Dorothea because of his egoism. His treatment of her reveals his moral failings. In the introduction I quoted from Bakhtin's essay "The Problem of the Text": "For the word (and, consequently, for a human being) there is nothing more terrible than a *lack of response* (127). The lack of response between Dorothea and Casaubon goes beyond a lack of physical response. It constitutes Casaubon's moral failings. It is to claim an alibi for his responsibilities as a spouse.

Chapter 21 contains an important narrative comment about "moral stupidity," and includes not only the moral stupidity of Casaubon and Dorothea in their relations with one another, but also implicates the reader:

We are all of us born in moral stupidity, taking the world as an udder to feed our supreme selves: Dorothea had early begun to emerge from that stupidity, but yet it had been easier to her to imagine how she would devote herself to Mr Casaubon, and become wise and strong in his strength and wisdom, than to conceive with that distinctness which is no longer reflection but feeling – an idea wrought back to the directness of sense, like the solidity of objects – that he had an equivalent centre of self, whence the lights and shadows must always fall with a certain difference. (chapter 21, 205)

Dorothea is able to transcend her egoism because she recognises and responds to Casaubon's "equivalent centre of self." In order for Eliot to extend her reader's sympathies, it is important that we do not take the text of *Middlemarch* as an "udder." There are rhetorical clues in the text as to how we should respond to the text, and these depend on our acknowledging our uniqueness, and accepting the responsibilities that stem from it. If Eliot claims that her aim is to have an affect on her reader, her

presupposition is that in the encounter between the reader and the text some kind of meaning is transferred. There must be some meaning in the text, if the reading of the text is to change the reader; the reader alone cannot be in control of the formulation of meaning. If the reader were to be the one in control, such as radical reader response criticism would suggest, then the reader would only bring his or her own biases and perceptions to the text, and nothing in the encounter between the reader and the text would affect a change. The reader would simply find reflected his or her biases, taking the text as a mirror for what he or she already knows. This would be contrary to Eliot's aesthetic aims, as she frequently warns against seeing our own desires reflected everywhere. We cannot just project things onto the text. We have to answer for our reading of the text in order to change.

In chapter 42 Casaubon's egoism is expressed in three ways. The first is in a comment made by the narrator: "Will not a tiny speck very close to our vision blot out the glory of the world, and leave only a margin by which we see the blot? I know no speck so troublesome as self" (chapter 42, 409). This is a very clear example of how excess of seeing alone is not enough to ensure that we are acting ethically toward the other. In Eliot's novels and in her moral worldview, each human being has a unique perspective on the world. But if this unique perspective is not used relationally then it is simply another manifestation of our egoism. Eliot does not just want to point this out to us; as Carol S. Gould says, Eliot wants us to transcend this idiosyncratic perspective. The way in which this goal can be achieved is to show the reader that the uniquely incarnated human being not only has this unique vision, but that this vision entails responsibilities toward the other. We have already seen how Rosamond's egoism is

expressed visually in chapter 27; both Rosamond and Casaubon are only able to look at the world in egoistic ways; it is the characters like Dorothea who recognise that their unique vision entails responsibilities that are truly ethical.

The second way in which Casaubon's egoism is expressed in chapter 42 is through his soliloquising about Dorothea's future (chapter 42, 410-11). In Bakhtinian terms soliloquising is ethically ambivalent because the word or the utterance would not be directed toward the response of another. So again, this soliloquising is another illustration of Casaubon's desire not to interact with others.<sup>9</sup>

The third way in which his egoism is expressed is in his treatment of Dorothea. In this chapter Casaubon has Lydgate call on him, because he wants to know about his own life expectancy. Dorothea is concerned for her husband and wants to comfort him, but when she attempts to show Casaubon physical attention he does not respond to her. The narrator refers to his "unresponsive hardness" (chapter 42, 416). Casaubon does not respond to Dorothea, and we feel her horror. She tries to place her hand on his, and he simply does not allow it. Our readerly excess of seeing extends our moral vision because we see that such behaviour is wrong. We have to respond to Eliot's aesthetic aim if we do not want to mirror this unresponsiveness in our own lives.<sup>10</sup>

In chapter 48 Casaubon expresses his desire to have Dorothea work on his manuscripts after his death. His "request" is this: whether, in the event of his death, Dorothea will carry out his wishes, and apply herself to do what he should desire (chapter 48, 468). She does not think that his request is right, since she does not know to

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<sup>9</sup> A similar example is found in Milton's *Paradise Lost*; it is only fallen creatures who exhibit the tendency towards soliloquising.

<sup>10</sup> Eliot takes seriously the failure to act graciously towards the other because of one's own egoistic fears.

what it would bind her. She promises to do what affection would prompt, but this is not enough for Casaubon; he does not want her to use her own judgment, but to obey his (chapter 48, 469). She is quite sure that Casaubon is referring to his work. The narrator says that Dorothea has a clearer judgment on this work than Casaubon because he has “risked all his egoism” on it (chapter 48, 469); indeed, “his heart was bound up in his work only” (chapter 48, 471). Dorothea is saved from answering this request by Casaubon’s death. It is significant, however, that Dorothea is prepared to “answer” him, in light of his continued lack of response to her (chapter 48, 473). In section three we will see that it is Dorothea’s acknowledgement of her unique position and unique vision and the responsibilities that these entail that make her the moral touchstone of the novel, and the exemplar for the reader to follow. But this action of hers can be fuller understood in comparison with the behaviour of Rosamond and Casaubon, and as we shall see in the next section, of Bulstrode.

The narrative works to move us beyond our egoism when we see the tragic consequences of the egoism of Rosamond and Casaubon; both have failed marriages, both make their partner suffer. Casaubon does not move beyond egoism. Rosamond does temporarily, and we will look at this in section three of this chapter. Both Rosamond and Casaubon have a very full sense of themselves, of their uniqueness, but do not associate it with any responsibility. The problem with Rosamond and Casaubon is not that they are not aware of their uniqueness; they are all too aware of their uniqueness and they make sure everyone else is too. The problem is that they do not see that this entails any responsibility. They do not “participate” in life, to borrow from Bakhtin, so much as want to control it. They do not act responsibly in light of their

uniqueness. To not act responsibly for one's uniqueness is, in the moral universe of *Middlemarch*, a failure. We find them internally excusing their behaviour, either in soliloquies or free indirect discourse. We saw in chapter four that Alan Jacobs, in "Bakhtin and the Hermeneutics of Love," says that recognising that we are unique is a necessary, but not sufficient step, towards answerability. Answerability is only achieved when I recognise the "fact of uniqueness" imposes a responsibility on me that I cannot avert. Rosamond moves towards this in her response to Dorothea's visit, but it is only Dorothea who really achieves this. As we saw in chapter four, the bond or relation between uniqueness and answerability is based on the Chalcedon formulation of Christ's two natures, human and divine, existing "without confusion, without change, without division, without separation." Casaubon and Rosamond are unable to transcend their egoism, and move toward altruism precisely because they fail to acknowledge that their uniqueness entails responsibility. The consequences of their failure to acknowledge both uniqueness and responsibility is that they do not have a correct understanding of their place in the world or their relation to others.

The narrative of *Middlemarch* does not let us enjoy just one perspective on things. Already in this comparison of two egoists we have two different perspectives on the world. Already we are moving away from their solipsistic behaviour. However, even though we judge this behaviour as wrong, we cannot condemn either Rosamond or Casaubon. The second way in which Eliot extends our sympathies is to have us sympathise with unsympathetic characters.

In the way in which Casaubon's egoism affects his relationship with Dorothea, we see nothing to commend his behaviour. We see that Casaubon does not use his

excess of seeing relationally, and ends up with a solipsistic view of the world. This is precisely what Eliot's aesthetic aim is meant to counter. A further way in which Eliot extends our sympathy is to show us how other characters similarly do not use their excess of seeing in relation to Casaubon in a charitable way.

In chapter 2 Eliot shows us how two people can look at the same person, and get very different views. The epigraph of this chapter is from Cervantes's *Don Quixote*:

“Seest thou not yon cavalier who cometh toward us on a dapple-grey steed, and weareth a golden helmet?” “What I see,” answered Sancho, “is nothing but a man on a grey ass like my own, who carries something shiny on his head.” “Just so,” answered Don Quixote: “and that resplendent object is the helmet of Mambrino.” (chapter 2, 15)

This is a clear example of how two people can look at the same object and see different things. In practice it works out that different people judge Casaubon and see very different things. The immediate context of this is how Dorothea and Celia see very different things in Casaubon. Dorothea thinks Casaubon “resemble[s] the portrait of Locke,” but her sister thinks differently. We read:

When the two girls were in the drawing-room alone, Celia said –  
“How very ugly Mr Casaubon is!”  
“Celia! He is one of the most distinguished-looking men I ever saw. He is remarkably like the portrait of Locke. He has the same deep eye-sockets.”  
“Had Locke those two white moles with hairs on them?”  
“Oh, I dare say! when people of a certain sort looked at him,” said Dorothea, walking away a little.  
[. . .] “It is so painful in you, Celia, that you will look at human beings as if they were merely animals with a toilette, and never see the great soul in a man's face.”  
“Has Mr Casaubon a great soul?” Celia was not without a touch of naïve malice.  
“Yes, I believe he has,” said Dorothea, with the full voice of decision. “Everything I see in him corresponds to his pamphlet on Biblical Cosmology.” (chapter 2, 20)

But it is not only Dorothea and Celia who differ in their opinions of Casaubon. Many people have an excess of seeing in relation to Casaubon, but they do not use it in a charitable way: Mrs Cadwallader calls Casaubon the “Lowick Cicero” (chapter 6, 52),

and says he “he looks like a death’s head skinned over for the occasion” (chapter 10, 89), and Sir James thinks he is a “parchment code” (chapter 8, 68), “a dried bookworm” (chapter 2, 22), and that “He is no better than a mummy!” (chapter 6, 57). Humphrey Cadwallader is more charitable: “Casaubon is as good as most of us. He is a scholarly clergyman, and creditable to the cloth”:

He is very good to his poor relations: pensions several of the women, and is educating a young fellow at a good deal of expense. Casaubon acts up to his sense of justice. His mother’s sister made a bad match – a Pole, I think – lost herself – at any rate was disowned by her family. If it had not been for that, Casaubon would not have had so much money by half. I believe he went himself to find out his cousins, and see what he could do for them. Every man would not ring so well as that, if you tried his metal. (chapter 8, 68)

In chapter 10 the narrator steps into the discussion on Casaubon’s character. She cautions us about making a “too hasty judgment” about Casaubon:

If to Dorothea Mr Casaubon had been the mere occasion which had set alight the fine inflammable material of her youthful illusions, does it follow that he was fairly represented in the minds of those less impassioned personages who have hitherto delivered their judgments concerning him? I protest against any absolute conclusion, any prejudice derived from Mrs Cadwallader’s contempt for a neighbouring clergyman’s alleged greatness of soul, or Sir James Chettam’s poor opinion of his rival’s legs, – from Mr Brooke’s failure to elicit a companion’s ideas, or from Celia’s criticism of a middle-aged scholar’s personal appearance. (chapter 10, 82)

The narrator rebukes us for our lack of charity towards Casaubon:

Suppose we turn from outside estimates of a man, to wonder, with keener interest, what is the report of his own consciousness about his doings or capacity: with what hindrances he is carrying on his daily labours; what fading of hopes, or what deeper fixity of self-delusion the years are marking off within him; and with what spirit he wrestles against universal pressure, which will one day be too heavy for him, and bring his heart to its final pause. Doubtless his lot is important in his own eyes; and the chief reason that we think he asks too large a place in our consideration must be our want of room for him, since we refer him to the Divine regard with perfect confidence; nay, it is even held sublime for our neighbour to expect the utmost there, however little he may have got from us. Mr Casaubon, too, was the centre of his own world; if he was liable to think that others were providentially made for him, and especially to consider them in the light of their

fitness for the author of a Key to all Mythologies, this trait is not quite alien to us, and, like the other mendicant hopes of mortals, claims some of our pity. (chapter 10, 83)

Casaubon is wrong to think that the world revolves around the author of the Key to all Mythologies, and we have already seen the consequences of his being the “centre of his own world,” but the “outside estimates” of him are limited too. We see others judging Casaubon from their own point of view, but the narrator does not encourage this. We are to be more charitable. Each of the individual views expressed about Casaubon is limited; by presenting us with a number of views of Casaubon Eliot helps us see that we need to be answerable for what we see.

In the next section I will show how Bakhtin can help us read the character and actions of Bulstrode, and how his behaviour proves to be another negative example for the reader of *Middlemarch*, i.e., Bulstrode behaviour is presented as an example of how to behave.

### *“Selfish Passions”: the moral failings of Bulstrode*<sup>11</sup>

In section one we have seen the egoistic thinking and behaviour of Rosamond and Casaubon, and how it affects their relationships with Lydgate and Dorothea. Another example of a character who recognises his uniqueness but fails to appreciate that this uniqueness entails responsibility is the evangelical banker, Nicholas Bulstrode. In this analysis of Bulstrode’s behaviour, I will focus particularly on how he attempts, to borrow from the language of Bakhtin, to claim an alibi for his existence.

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<sup>11</sup> *Middlemarch*, chapter 70, 693.

Bulstrode is a moral failure. In chapter 61 we learn that in his early life Bulstrode has claimed an alibi for being, *i.e.*, he was in a unique position and was not answerable to it. He acted ignobly and immorally; he is not in “danger of legal punishment,” but he realises that he would face “scorn” from his neighbours if “certain facts of his part life” are revealed (chapter 61, 601). He is forced to confront his “blameworthy past” (601). He had been a banker’s clerk, and a member of a “Calvinistic dissenting church” (601). He was called “Brother Bulstrode,” took part in prayer meetings, and considered the ministry or the mission field as his vocation (chapter 61, 602). While at this dissenting church he is invited to the villa of the “richest man in the congregation,” Mr Dunkirk (602). He becomes “intimate” there, the wife honouring his piety, and the husband his business acumen (602). When a business partner dies, Bulstrode becomes an accountant of a pawnbroker. Bulstrode tries to justify to God his choice of business. He blames his failings on a “train of causes” (chapter 61, 603). He becomes involved in “trouble” at the villa (603). The only daughter in the family had run away years ago. The only son dies, followed shortly by the father (chapter 61, 604). A marriage is proposed between Bulstrode and the widow, but before she marries she wishes to seek out her daughter, with the aim of possibly giving her some property. After advertisements fail, the mother believes the daughter is not to be found, and so consents to marry Bulstrode. Then we read: “The daughter had been found; but only one man besides Bulstrode knew it, and he was paid for keeping silence and carrying himself away” (604).

Bulstrode has the unique knowledge and does not act responsibly. He gets away with the scam for about thirty years. We do not learn about the effect that his actions have on Mrs Dunkirk. What is of interest with Bulstrode is how he attempts to justify

his behaviour, even to God. Bulstrode has, in the words of Caleb Garth, “led a harmful life for gain, and kept others out of their rights by deceit, to get the more for [himself]” (chapter 69, 684). Bulstrode projects his own desires on to everyone, even God. We are given the “bare fact” of what Bulstrode has done in his past (chapter 61, 604). But later in the narrative we see Bulstrode again disclaim responsibility for his actions when he is watching the dying Raffles. It is significant that Raffles is the only man who knows that Bulstrode has acted dishonourably in the past, and pays a price for this knowledge. In *Romola*, Eliot shows Tito in the process of disclaiming his actions, and she employs the same technique in her presentation of Bulstrode.

Raffles appears at Bulstrode’s home on Christmas Eve, exhibiting signs of “mental restlessness” and “habitual intemperance” (chapter 68, 674). Bulstrode is able to pay him to go away on this occasion, but shortly after he returns to Stone Court and is very ill. Caleb Garth informs Bulstrode that he took Raffles there himself, and informs him that he needs a doctor. Bulstrode calls for Lydgate, who tells him that Raffles should be “well watched and attended to” (chapter 69, 687). When Bulstrode insists that he will stay and tend to Raffles, Lydgate says that he will give his directions to him alone. These include no alcohol to be given. In Bakhtinian terms this information that Lydgate gives Bulstrode puts Bulstrode in a unique position in relation to Raffles; he alone knows Lydgate’s precise instructions. He does not respond to this information in an ethically responsible way, and tries to claim an alibi for this knowledge.

In chapter 70 we see Bulstrode’s egoistic reasoning why he should not wish for the death of Raffles: “there was no sin in contemplating death as the desirable issue – if he kept his hands from hastening it – if he scrupulously did what was prescribed”

(chapter 70, 692). Bulstrode reduces his responsibilities to this man to the lowest denominator, and starts to question Lydgate's orders for treatment, and whether or not he should obey them. On Lydgate's second visit, Bulstrode insists that he alone will look after Raffles. He says the "responsibility" of looking after Raffles is not included in the Abels' service of him (chapter 70, 694). Lydgate's new instructions are a little opium, with advice about when it should cease, and still no alcohol. Bulstrode further demonstrates his egoism in his thinking about Lydgate. He has just refused Lydgate the loan of a thousand pounds, but he now begins to think that it would be useful to have Lydgate in his debt.

Bulstrode decides not to sit with Raffles for the second night. He shows Mrs Abel how to administer the opium. After some time he realises that he has not told Mrs Abel when the doses of opium must cease. He then thinks that she might have already given too much. He deludes himself that it is "excusable" he should have forgotten to give her complete instructions (chapter 70, 697). Eliot portrays Bulstrode hovering between his own room and that of Raffles, and questioning whether it is better to obey or disobey Lydgate's prescription. When Mrs Abel asks if Bulstrode has any brandy to give Raffles, twice he does not answer (chapter 70, 698). This failure to answer mirrors Bulstrode's moral failure. Bulstrode allows Mrs Abel to give Raffles brandy, and he dies during the early hours of the next morning. Bulstrode hides the brandy bottle and the opium phial. Bulstrode reasons thus: "And who could say that the death of Raffles had been hastened? Who knew what would have saved him?" (chapter 70, 700). Once again, Bulstrode alone has information about another person, and uses it to Raffles's disadvantage. In Bakhtin's meaning of the term, he is not answerable for the knowledge

that he has. Bulstrode does not kill Raffles, but he does not hinder his death. He disobeys Lydgate's order. He is the only person who Lydgate trusted with the orders. Even if he is not a murderer in deed, his is morally culpable for the death of Raffles.<sup>12</sup>

Bulstrode's failure to acknowledge his uniqueness and its responsibilities has an adverse effect on the career of Lydgate. Middlemarch gossip construes the event to be one in which Lydgate acted on behalf of Bulstrode, due to the money he had received from him. The suspicion is that Bulstrode had the motive and gave Lydgate the money to participate in some malpractice. It cannot be disproved. Lydgate does not know how his orders came to be disobeyed. Bulstrode might not have had anything to do with the disobedience. It is not possible to prove the guilt or the innocence of either man, and they are both morally tarnished. A Bakhtinian analysis of these events is that Bulstrode does not act responsibly. He is not acting according to Lydgate's instructions. He will not even admit to himself that he has done anything wrong. His behaviour disgraces Lydgate too. To borrow from Bakhtin's language in *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* we can say that this is where Bulstrode fails to "participate in Being in a once-occurrent and never repeatable manner." No one else can act in this situation, except Bulstrode; he has no alibi for his responsibility. Again, this echoes Bakhtin's statement: "That which can be done by me can never be done by anyone else. The uniqueness or singularity of present-on-hand Being is completely obligatory" (40). As I wrote in chapter four, this is more than a physical description of the human being; it is also an ethical and relational description. Bulstrode has separated his uniqueness from his responsibility. In the third

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<sup>12</sup> We read: "He had not confessed to himself yet that he done anything in the way of contrivance to this end; he had accepted what seemed to have been offered. It was impossible to prove that he had done anything which had hastened the departure of that man's soul" (chapter 71, 706).

section I will discuss the behaviour of Dorothea, and how she contrasts with Rosamond, Casaubon, and Bulstrode, and answerably accepts her uniqueness and its responsibilities.

### *The "peculiar influence" of Dorothea*<sup>13</sup>

In this section I offer a Bakhtinian reading of the scene in which Dorothea awakens from her night of emotional distress upon finding Rosamond and Will together. I consider how the concepts non-alibi in being, excess of seeing, and self/other relations help us to read this scene, and point to the extra-textual aesthetic of *Middlemarch*. It is difficult to divorce non-alibi in being and excess of seeing in the analysis of this passage. This is the moral climax of the novel.

Dorothea's long night of emotional struggle, with its inescapable "anguish" and the "unshrinking utterance of despair" occurs in chapter 80 (775). The provocation for this anguish and despair is Dorothea seeing Rosamond and Will Ladislaw in a compromising position in chapter 77. Dorothea finds them seated side by side on a sofa, with Rosamond in some emotional distress and Will holding her hands and speaking in a low voice (chapter 77, 764). Dorothea suspects an extra-marital affair. The reason for Dorothea's visit can be traced back to the conversation between herself and Lydgate in chapter 76. Lydgate takes up Dorothea's offer of going to explain his position to Rosamond. It is with this charitable inclination in mind that Dorothea sets out to see Rosamond.

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<sup>13</sup> *Middlemarch*, chapter 81, 784.

Dorothea is concerned for the moral well-being of Lydgate. He is facing public disgrace because he is implicated in a murder, and he hints at trouble in his marriage. In chapter 76 Lydgate asks Dorothea to do him a "great kindness" by going to see his wife and explain to her the situation that he himself cannot explain (chapter 76, 758). There has been a breakdown in communication between Lydgate and Rosamond and so he asks Dorothea to help. Dorothea wants to help by showing "the manifestation of respect for Lydgate and sympathy with her" (chapter 77, 763). She thinks that Rosamond will be glad of the news of Farebrother's support, and that they might be friends. She is aware that Rosamond's social position is likely to be affected by the "suspicions cast on her husband," and wants to offer friendship (chapter 77, 763). Dorothea is "moved to show her human fellowship" (chapter 76, 750) and wants to "clear" Lydgate (chapter 76, 751). According to Bakhtin's sense of perspective, she has a unique perspective on these events and relationships. Her view is highly specific and highly relational.

Dorothea's immediate reaction to finding Will and Rosamond together is to consider how it affects her alone. However, she gradually begins to consider how this event might touch on the lives of Rosamond, Will, and Lydgate. Initially Dorothea only sees how this event affects her, and is aware only of her own injured feelings, but she gradually begins to consider how this event might touch on the lives of Rosamond, Will, and Lydgate. Eventually Dorothea sleeps, and it is upon awaking that she begins to relate this event to others. She begins to think of the event, to "dwell on every detail and its possible meaning" (chapter 80, 776). She thinks about it relationally and asks: "Was she alone in that scene? Was it her event only?" (776). Dorothea accepts both her uniqueness and its ensuing responsibilities; she acknowledges her incarnated being and

acts in light of it. Thus, on an intra-textual level, non-alibi in being and the connection between uniqueness and responsibility that stems from a Chalcedon idea of incarnation shows how the motif of incarnation is present in Eliot's aesthetics in *Middlemarch*.

After this dark night of the soul, Dorothea comes to the following thinking:

And what sort of crisis might not this be in three lives whose contact with hers laid an obligation on her as if they had been suppliants bearing the sacred branch? The objects of her rescue were not to be sought out by her fancy: they were chosen for her. She yearned towards the perfect Right, that it might make a throne within her, and rule her errant will. "What should I do – how should I act now, this very day if I could clutch my own pain, and compel it to silence, and think of those three?" (chapter 80, 776-7)

Thematically this is a moment of transcendence for Dorothea, in which she moves beyond her egoism. At this moment Dorothea recognises and accepts that she alone can act in this situation. To borrow from Bakhtin's language we can say that this is where Dorothea realises that she participates in Being in a once-occurrent and never repeatable manner – no one else can act in this situation but she. She has no alibi for her responsibility to the other three characters, and her uniqueness obligates her to act. The people she is to act towards are not general or abstract, but highly specific and individual. She acknowledges and acts upon her responsibility to these three other characters. In this moment of choice the "indefiniteness" which had bothered her before is gone (chapter 3, 27), and she acts on her obligation. It is only Dorothea that knows about the crisis in the Lydgates' marriage, and only she who saw Will and Rosamond together. Dorothea needs to answer this question, and accept her answerability. The motif of incarnation is part of this dynamic and transcendence of egoism is part of this. There is an essential link between Dorothea's acceptance of her embodied position and her transcendence:

It had taken long for her to come to that question, and there was light piercing into the room. She opened her curtains, and looked out towards the bit of road that lay in view, with fields beyond, outside the entrance-gates. On the road there was a man with a bundle on his back and a woman carrying her baby; in the field she could see figures moving – perhaps the shepherd with his dog. Far off in the bending sky was the pearly light; and she felt the largeness of the world and the manifold wakings of men to labour and endurance. She was a part of that involuntary, palpitating life, and could neither look out on it from her luxurious shelter as a mere spectator, nor hide her eyes in selfish complaining. (chapter 80, 777)

The last lines of this passage show Dorothea's participation in the world. In the BBC production of *Middlemarch* Dorothea is portrayed as responding to these people. In this quotation Dorothea is situated physically and in terms of point of view. Through visual and physical images Eliot shows us how Dorothea has a unique perspective on the world. There are many references to point of view and vision in this quotation: "she opened her curtains," "looked out," "the road that lay in view," "she could see," "pearly light," "wakings," "look out," "spectator," and "hide her eyes." Previously in *Middlemarch* Dorothea has been described as "short-sighted" (chapter 3, 30); Eliot employed this description to tell us about Dorothea's moral life as well as the condition of her eyesight. If Dorothea did not learn to see things relationally, to use her excess of seeing relationally, it is clear that she would, morally speaking, remain short-sighted. It is her acceptance of the fact that her uniqueness entails responsibilities that enables her moral growth. In this scene Dorothea exhibits moral clear-sightedness. She transcends her egoism and her limited perspective on the world when she looks at things from the perspective of the other. Dorothea assumes answerability for her own uniqueness at this point. She does not evade her responsibilities to the other.

Bakhtin's concepts of non-alibi in being and excess of seeing help us articulate the significance of Dorothea's actions on behalf of Rosamond, Lydgate, and Will. We

have seen in the passage above how Dorothea uses her excess of seeing relationally, thereby transcending her egoism. She also does not try and claim an alibi. We read further about her conversation with Rosamond:

The fragile creature who was crying close to her – there might still be time to rescue her from the misery of false incompatible bonds; and this moment was unlike any other: she and Rosamond could never be together again with the same thrilling consciousness of yesterday within them both. She felt the relation between them to be peculiar enough to give her a peculiar influence [. . .]. (chapter 81, 784)

In this passage Dorothea realises that it is she alone who is able to help Rosamond, and she does not shrink from doing so. She recognises that she has a “peculiar influence,” and willingly embraces all that this entails. We are told that the “vivid sympathetic experience” she has gained through her relations with Casaubon will not let her see as she saw in the days of her ignorance (chapter 80, 776). Her marriage to Casaubon helped increase her ability to see things from the perspective of another, and here she puts this into practice. Dorothea’s “peculiar influence” enables Rosamond to respond to her, both at that moment and later. Rosamond ‘answers’ for her position in knowing how Dorothea feels about Ladislaw, and sends him a note to say that she has not ruined his reputation in the eyes of Mrs Casaubon (chapter 82, 792). As Ellen Argyros says in *“Without Any Check of Proud Reserve,”* this action does not occur in the “passion of her exchange with Dorothea, but in a more rational moment afterwards” (173). Rosamond is temporarily able to transcend her egoism, and react to Dorothea. In the same way that Dorothea is in a unique position to help Rosamond, Rosamond is in a unique position to help Dorothea because it is to Rosamond that Will has confessed his love to Dorothea.

In this chapter I have offered a Bakhtinian reading of *Middlemarch* in order to show how the motifs of incarnation, revelation, and transcendence are linked to Eliot’s

aesthetics aim of extending her reader's sympathies. I have shown how Bakhtin provides us with conceptual tools to articulate how religious motifs form a part of Eliot's ethics of art. The motif of incarnation is central to Bakhtin's concepts of non-alibi in being, excess of seeing, and self/other relations; these concepts in turn help us to articulate Eliot's study of egoism in *Middlemarch*. In this reading of *Middlemarch* I have suggested that Eliot's egoists are those who do not accept that their uniqueness entails any responsibilities. It is fair to say that Eliot's egoists have a highly developed sense of their uniqueness, but an underdeveloped sense of what this uniqueness entails. They do try and claim an alibi, they do not use their excess of seeing relationally, and fail to act lovingly toward the other. Eliot does not offer this behaviour as the exemplar to follow. Eliot approves of those who are able to transcend their egoism, those who do not try and claim an alibi, who use their excess of seeing relationally, and act lovingly toward the other. A Bakhtinian reading of *Middlemarch* suggests that the reader of the novel must similarly use their experience of reading and answer for it in the way in which they encounter the other beyond the text.

## Chapter Six: A theological reading of *Daniel Deronda*

In chapter five I explored the ways in which Eliot's study of egoism in *Middlemarch* relates to her aim of extending her reader's sympathies, and moves her reader beyond egoism toward altruism. In chapter three we saw that the purpose of Eliot's aesthetics is to help us appreciate better and tolerate the people we live amongst, and that in order to achieve this aim she needs to counter the inherent egoism of her readers and their limited perspective on the world. In chapter five we saw that the motifs of incarnation and transcendence form a constituent part of Eliot's aesthetics in *Middlemarch*, and we have also seen that Bakhtin's concepts of non-alibi in being and excess of seeing help us to recognise the role that incarnation and transcendence play in *Middlemarch*. Through positive and negative examples Eliot helps us see the importance of recognising our uniqueness and its ensuing responsibilities. In the first section of the textual analysis in chapter five I discussed the egoism of Rosamond and Casaubon, and how they were unable to relate to others because of their egoistic thinking and behaviour. We saw that they both claimed an alibi for their relational duties. I also showed how various characters did not use their excess of seeing charitably in their understanding of Casaubon. The narrative of *Middlemarch* neither approves of the behaviour of Casaubon, nor of any inclination to judge him too harshly. In the second section I examined how Bulstrode's failure to respond ethically toward Raffles is symptomatic of his attempt to claim an alibi for his existence. In the third section, a Bakhtinian analysis of the moral climax of the novel revealed how the motifs of incarnation and transcendence are present in Eliot's aesthetics. Dorothea's transcendence of her egoism

is dependent on her acknowledging that she is incarnated in time and space, and that she is unique and has ensuing responsibilities. Dorothea accepts that she has no alibi for being, and uses the excess of seeing she enjoys in relation to Rosamond, Lydgate, and Ladislaw for their advantage. For Eliot's aesthetics to have an affect on the reader beyond the act of reading, the reader of *Middlemarch* must similarly not claim an alibi for his or her reading of the text. The process of reading *Middlemarch* alters his or her perspective on the world and his or her understanding of his or her position in the world. One result of Eliot making us see things differently is the understanding that we must be responsible for what we see. This is not didacticism anew, but a relational and incarnational ethic which depends on the uniqueness of each individual.

In this chapter I offer a Bakhtinian reading of *Daniel Deronda*.<sup>1</sup> I explore how Eliot's treatment of egoism in this novel relates to her aim of extending her reader's sympathies. In the first section I will explore the egoistic behaviour and thinking of Grandcourt and Gwendolen. Grandcourt is Eliot's most extensive portrayal of an egoist, and is her most unredeemed character. In many ways his egoism is so pervasive that he is actually treated as sub-human and animalistic. His behaviour is an example of how not to behave. Grandcourt is almost non-relational; his egoism is expressed in terms of empire, tyranny, and will-to-power. This comes out most vividly in his marital relations with Gwendolen, and I explore this in detail. Gwendolen is also an egoist in her thinking and her behaviour. Her behaviour does not have narrative approval, but Gwendolen has more narrative sympathy because it is not clear what vocational choices are open to her

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<sup>1</sup> *Daniel Deronda*, ed. Graham Handley (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984). All subsequent references are to this edition. *Daniel Deronda* is Eliot's last novel, and was published in eight monthly parts between February and September 1876.

other than marriage. In the second section I discuss the difference between how Gwendolen is perceived by Grandcourt and Deronda. Both men have excess of seeing in relation to her, but they use it in very different ways. Grandcourt uses his excess of seeing to control and manipulate Gwendolen, whereas Deronda uses his excess of seeing to encourage Gwendolen towards moral growth, from egoism to altruism. Deronda is responsive to Gwendolen and teaches her to adopt a more relational, incarnational ethic. Gwendolen is able to respond to Deronda. For the reader of *Daniel Deronda*, part of learning that we have excess of seeing is learning how to use it properly. The experience of reading *Daniel Deronda* teaches us to use our unique vision in a responsible way. In the third section I look at non-alibi in being. This concept is important for Gwendolen, but it is also important for Deronda. At the beginning of the novel, Deronda has a vague desire to be of use but he feels that his lack of clear relational ties is hindering him deciding on a line of action or a vocation. He is aware of the need to do something specific, but lacks the knowledge of what that should be. In this section I trace how Deronda becomes answerable to Mordecai and to his Jewish destiny. In employing Bakhtin's concepts of non-alibi in being, excess of seeing, and self/other relations to a reading of the aesthetics of the novel, I argue that incarnation, revelation, and transcendence are constituent features of *Daniel Deronda*, and form a distinct element of its design. The ethics of Eliot's art are again best interpreted by these religious motifs.

Bakhtin's understanding of the human person helps us to read *Daniel Deronda* and understand how the motifs of incarnation, revelation, and transcendence form a part of its aesthetics. As I have already said, in Bakhtin's writings his understanding of the human person involves a number of givens: (1) the human person is incarnated in time

and space; (2) each human being is uniquely situated; (3) unique responsibilities stem from this unique position; (4) the moral person does not claim an "alibi" for this uniqueness; (5) our unique position entails a unique perspective on the world; (6) each "self" can see things that the "other" cannot see; (7) a relation of reciprocity exists between the "self" and the "other." In chapter five I suggested that a parallel can be drawn between Eliot's egoists and those who claim an alibi, and between Eliot's altruists and those who do not claim an alibi; we see this same parallel at work in *Daniel Deronda*.

As we have seen, the purpose of Eliot's aesthetic aim of extending her reader's sympathies is to move the reader beyond egoism towards altruism. This aesthetic aim is consistent throughout Eliot's literary career, but in *Daniel Deronda* it takes on a new emphasis. In *Daniel Deronda* the same aesthetic of sympathy is directed to extending Eliot's reader's sympathies toward Jewish people. Eliot wrote explicitly about her aesthetic aims for the novel. In a letter addressed to Harriet Beecher Stowe, 29 October 1876, Eliot wrote:

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 [*sic*] is observable which has become a national disgrace to us. There is nothing I should more 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 fellow-men who most differ from them in customs and beliefs.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Ellen Argyros, in "Without Any Check of Proud Reserve": *Sympathy and Its Limits in George Eliot's Novels*, argues that Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* "provided a concrete example for Eliot of how one might employ one's own most active imaginative powers to make society more tolerant towards its marginalized others" (49). In her preface to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1851), Stowe writes: "The object of these sketches is to awaken sympathy and feeling for the African race, as they exist among us [. . .]" (Argyros, 41).

Elsewhere in her writings Eliot is at pains to point out that egoism is central to her understanding of the human being. In this letter she highlights the egoism that is part of a national identity as opposed to a personal, individual identity. A number of characters in *Daniel Deronda* exhibit a lack of sympathy for Jewish people and have to move beyond this national egoism. Eliot also hopes that her readers would be changed by their experience of reading *Daniel Deronda*. Eliot's letter to Stowe hints at two aspects of Eliot's aesthetic of sympathy in *Daniel Deronda*. First, the sympathy that she, as an author, has for her characters, particularly the Jewish characters.<sup>3</sup> Second, the rousing of the imagination of her readers to a vision of the claims of others.

In chapter five we saw that Eliot was pleased that *Middlemarch* was having an effect on her readers. Eliot was also aware that *Daniel Deronda* was having an effect on her readers. Once again, this provides evidence that Eliot's aesthetic aim was consistent throughout her career, and that she knew that it was producing the effect that she desired. Eliot records her pleasure that *Daniel Deronda* is influencing both Jews and non-Jews alike. In her journal she records: "Words of gratitude have come from Jews and Jewesses, and there are certain signs that I may have contributed my mite to a good result."<sup>4</sup> Similarly, on 15 December 1876 we read:

At the beginning of this week I had deep satisfaction from reading in the Times the report of a lecture on *Daniel Deronda* [*sic*] delivered by Dr. Herman Adler to the Jewish Working Men, a lecture showing much insight and implying an expectation of serious benefit. Since then, I have had a delightful letter from the Jewish Theological Seminary at Breslau written by an American Jew named Isaacs, who excuses himself for expressing his feeling of gratitude on reading

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<sup>3</sup> Ellen Argyros discusses the sympathy that Eliot as author and/or narrator has for her characters. My aim is different; I want to look at how Eliot directs the reader toward sympathising with those we meet beyond the confines of the text.

<sup>4</sup> *The Journals of George Eliot*, 146.

Deronda [*sic*], and assures me of his belief that it has even already had an elevating effect on the minds of some among his people – predicting that effect will spread.<sup>5</sup>

And again, on 22 April 1877, we read: “I have had some delightful evidence of the effect wrought by ‘Deronda’, especially among Jews.”<sup>6</sup> These three journal extracts reflect Eliot’s personal awareness that her writings were having an effect on people. External verification comes in the form of letters Eliot received. On 25 September 1876 Eliot received a letter from Haim Gudella thanking her for representing the Jews in a favourable light, and in an attractive and scholarly manner.<sup>7</sup> On 3 November 1876 Eliot wrote to John Blackwood:

I am saved from concluding that I have exhibited my faculties in a state of decay by very delightful letters from unknown readers and reported judgments from considerable authorities. A statesman who shall be nameless has said that [...] I have kindled in him a quite new understanding of Jewish people. This is what I wanted to do – to widen the English vision a little in that direction and let in a little conscience and refinement. I expected to excite more resistance of feeling than I have seen the signs of, but I did what I chose to do – not as well as I should have liked to do it, but as well as I could.<sup>8</sup>

In these letters and journal entries we see Eliot not only expressing her aesthetic aim, but also her awareness that her novels were having the desired effect on her readers. Edmund White, in “The great issues: George Eliot, Zionism, and the novel,” notes: “The Chief Rabbi of London wrote to Eliot soon after publication and thanked her for depicting so faithfully some of the best qualities of the Jewish character.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *JGE*, 146.

<sup>6</sup> *JGE*, 147.

<sup>7</sup> *GEL* 6, 288

<sup>8</sup> *GEL* 6, 302.

<sup>9</sup> Edmund White, “The great issues: George Eliot, Zionism, and the novel” (*Times Literary Supplement*, 18 January 2002), 6.

Eliot undeniably had specific aims of extending her reader's sympathies toward Jewish people. However, the simplicity of the above comments and reflections is not mirrored in the critical reception of the novel. *Daniel Deronda* has elicited readings that propose dividing the novel into 'Jewish' and 'non-Jewish' parts. Some critics of *Daniel Deronda* seem to think the text is like a granite block, and that their role as critic is to take a chisel and sculpt it into a shape that pleases them. They would strip away its perceived flaws, leaving a perfected text for others to enjoy. This would be a dubious process at best, and a usurpation of the critic's role – even if it were possible for critics to agree on what were *Daniel Deronda*'s good bits and what were its flaws. For some critics the Jewish bits need to be stripped away, for others the Deronda/Mordecai narrative is its strength. It seems that Eliot herself anticipated such division among her readers, for she wrote to Barbara Bodichon: "I meant everything in the novel to be related to everything else."<sup>10</sup> It is not my intention to rehearse the debates of whether there are two halves to the novel because that material has been discussed elsewhere.<sup>11</sup> I do not think that the novel can be divided into two halves and argue that the aesthetic of the text calls the reader to response to the other.

Eliot's aim of rousing the imagination of men and women to a vision of the human claims of those who differ is a vital component of her ethics of art. Without

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<sup>10</sup> See *GEL* 6, 290. The letter is dated 2 October 1876.

<sup>11</sup> For further discussion of this issue see Joan Bennett, *George Eliot: Her Mind and Her Art*, David Carroll, "The Unity of *Daniel Deronda*," *Essays in Criticism* 9 (1959): 369-80, Harold Fisch, "Daniel Deronda or Gwendolen Harleth?" *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 19 (1965): 345-356, F. R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition: George Eliot, Henry James, Joseph Conrad*, (London: Chatto & Windus, 1948), Ruth Levitt, *George Eliot: The Jewish Connection* (Jerusalem: Massada, 1975), Anne Aresty Naman, *The Jew in the Victorian Novel: Some Relationships Between Prejudice and Art* (New York: AMS Press, Inc., 1980), and Alice Shalvi, ed. *Daniel Deronda: A Centenary Symposium* (Jerusalem: Jerusalem Academic Press, 1976). For postcolonial readings of *Daniel Deronda* see *The Oxford Reader's Companion to George Eliot*, 70-71.

wishing to detract from Eliot's desire to extend her reader's sympathies for Jewish people, I intend to focus on how Eliot rouses the imagination of her readers toward a vision of the human claims of the other. Eliot's aesthetic is not limited to extending her reader's sympathies towards Jews; it is to extend them to all who are different, to all who are other. I relate this aesthetic aim of extending her reader's sympathies not only towards Jews but to the people that the reader meets beyond the confines of the text. The aesthetics of the text can be understood through the framework of Bakhtin's self/other relations. *Daniel Deronda* interrogates our essential egoism. I will argue that Gwendolen's moral education begins when she learns to think of others. Gwendolen has to learn to move away from egoism. She has to learn, as Helena Granlund holds, that self-love does not lead to happiness.<sup>12</sup> The choice of self does not lead to greatest happiness for the self. In the first section of this chapter we will see that egoism is being unable to recognise the claims of the other. Grandcourt cannot recognise the claims of others, while Gwendolen learns to recognise them. In order to move the reader beyond egoism we need to recognise the claims of others. Conversely, Deronda has to learn not to sympathise with everyone, but to recognise those with whom he should sympathise.

In the last chapter we saw that a number of literary critics argue that there is an extra-textual dimension to *Middlemarch*. Similarly, Garrett F. Stewart in *Dear Reader: The Conscripted Audience in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction*, articulates the extra-textual element of Eliot's aesthetics in *Daniel Deronda*.<sup>13</sup> Stewart makes the bold claim that Eliot's aesthetics, or as he terms it in explicitly ethical terms, her 'ethic of reading,'

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<sup>12</sup> See Granlund, *The Paradox of Self-Love*, chapter one.

<sup>13</sup> Garrett F. Stewart, "Mordecai's Consumption: Afterlives of Interpretation in *Daniel Deronda*," *Dear Reader: The Conscripted Audience in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction*, 301-328.

is directed to what happens beyond the act of reading. He ties this 'ethic of reading' to the narrative of *Daniel Deronda* itself (and not only from Eliot's review essays, letters, or early fiction). He says that Eliot and the narrative of *Daniel Deronda* call us to respond. He says the one literary device Eliot employs is to directly address the reader; Garrett calls this an "enjoined response" (304). This is an interesting phrase and I think suggests something akin to Bakhtin's idea of answerability. Eliot's call on the reader is that he or she be embodied in the very narrative itself and in the narrative ethics. Stewart argues that Eliot calls us to respond to Mordecai. He says that the reader is conscripted to respond to the text.

Stewart discusses Eliot's various uses of reading within the novel, and the way in which they give us clues as to how we should read *Daniel Deronda*. In chapter 41 Deronda starts to fictionalise his own meeting with Mordecai. Stewart discusses the ways in which Deronda's reading has affected him. Stewart says that Deronda draws on his own experience of interpretation of texts to help him decide how to live. We read:

If he had read of this incident as having happened centuries ago [...] to some young man as himself, dissatisfied with his neutral life, and wanting some closer fellowship, some more special duty to give him ardour for the possible consequences of his work, it would have appeared to him quite natural that the incident should have created a deep impression on that far-off man [. . .]. (chapter 41, 473)

The aesthetics of reading that are present in *Daniel Deronda* are the intra-textual clues that show the way the text can have an extra-textual effect on the reader. Stewart summarises this: "The event of reading thus promotes as well as enacts its role as a preparation for living" (305).

*Daniel Deronda* offers not only the positive example of the effect that reading has on Deronda, however, but also the negative example of how Gwendolen's reading of the wrong types of fiction does not help her face life. Unlike Deronda, Gwendolen has read the wrong sort of books and they do not equip her for encounters with reality. In fact, she reads the types of novels that Eliot critiques in "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists." Stewart compares Gwendolen's reading with that of the Meyrick girls. Mab's response to Erckmann-Chatriens's *Histoire d'un Conscrit* is that it makes her "want to do something good, something grand. It makes me so sorry for everybody" (*Daniel Deronda*, chapter 18, 181). Stewart says that this is the effect that Eliot wants her novels to have on her reader. Stewart undoubtedly touches upon an important part of the aesthetics of *Daniel Deronda* in this contrast between good and bad literature and the effect that it has on the reader, and the way in which it prepares them for living. However, my critique of Stewart's method is similar to my critique of Higuera and Carol S. Gould in chapter five: his work does not take into account the role that the theological motifs of incarnation, revelation, and transcendence play in the process or, indeed, of any religious or Christian ideas that informed Eliot's work.

#### *The "egoistic desire" of Grandcourt and Gwendolen*<sup>14</sup>

In the first section of the textual analysis of *Middlemarch* I looked at Eliot's presentation of the egoistic behaviour and thinking of Rosamond and Casaubon. In this section I look at the egoistic behaviour and thinking of Grandcourt and Gwendolen.

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<sup>14</sup> *Daniel Deronda*, chapter 4, 36.

Eliot expresses the egoism of Grandcourt in language of empire, tyranny, and in the ways in which he thinks of others as animals that are subservient to him. His will-to-power is inscribed in his thinking about others. Grandcourt's egoism is implicit even before the dissection of his marital relations with Gwendolen. For ten years Grandcourt has had a mistress, Lydia Glasher. Lydia left her husband and son for Grandcourt, and has borne him four children. Upon her husband's death, Lydia thinks that Grandcourt will marry her; instead he pursues Gwendolen. His egoism is also exhibited in his relations with Lush, and in his treatment of his dogs. He conceives all relations in terms of power, and insists that he is the one that has mastery of the situation. He does not see that his uniqueness entails any relational responsibility to the other.

Before her marriage to Grandcourt, Gwendolen exhibits egoism in her thinking and her actions. Gwendolen is "thoughtless" to her mother, in that she does not let her mother know her whereabouts (chapter 2, 11). We read of the "sense of superior claims which made a large part of her consciousness" (chapter 2, 12). She has "implicit confidence" that her destiny would be one of "luxurious ease" (12). She thinks she is the "chief object" of her mother's anxiety (12). At the loss of their fortune, she does not feel pity for her mother, only for herself. The narrator talks of her "core of egoistic sensibility" (chapter 2, 14). She thinks she is an "exceptional" person (chapter 3, 19), with a "peculiar sensitiveness which was a mark of her general superiority" (chapter 3, 20). She thinks her four half-sisters are "superfluous" and "utterly unimportant" (chapter 3, 27). The narrator tells us: "In Gwendolen's habits of mind it had been taken for granted that she knew what was admirable and that she herself was admired" (chapter 1,

7). Gwendolen is “kindly disposed towards any one who could make life agreeable to her” (chapter 5, 38). She is said to have “common egoistic ambition” (chapter 6, 47).

Gwendolen’s egoistic behaviour is first introduced in chapter 1 when Deronda observes her gambling. Brief incidents reveal other egoistic action; kissing her own reflection in the mirror (chapter 2, 14), not getting out of bed to fetch her mother’s medication (chapter 3, 20), strangling her sister’s canary-bird (chapter 3, 20). When she sings for Klesmer, he says that the music she chooses lacks “any breadth of horizon” (chapter 5, 43). This comment about music also reflects the lack of horizon in her moral life. She has no breadth of horizon because she is an egoist. Her heart sinks at this “width of horizon” (43). *Daniel Deronda* contains an important series of images about horizons. Gwendolen needs to have her horizons widened and not to be so self-centred. In chapter 4 the narrator offers to account for some of this egoism and to develop her character. We read:

Always she was the princess in exile, who in time of famine was to have her breakfast-roll made of the finest-bolted flour from the seven thin ears of wheat, and in a general decampment was to have her silver fork kept out of the baggage. (chapter 4, 35)<sup>15</sup>

The narrator asks: “How was this to be accounted for?” and gives a three-fold answer. The first reason is her “beauty,” “graceful movements,” “clear unhesitating tones,” and her “potent charm” (chapter 4, 35). The second is the fact that she was an eldest daughter of a timid mother, who is apologetic for inflicting a step-father on her. But the narrator says that she has seen those who are not beautiful or unusual accorded the same “assiduous, apologetic attention” (chapter 4, 36). The narrator puts it down to a “strong

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<sup>15</sup> This passage contains a number of biblical allusions, including the story of Joseph’s exile in Egypt, and to the famine.

determination to have what was pleasant, with a total fearlessness in making themselves disagreeable or dangerous when they did not get it" (chapter 4, 36). She concludes: "Hence I am forced to doubt whether even without her potent charm and peculiar filial position Gwendolen might still not have played the queen in exile, if only she had kept her inborn energy of egoistic desire, and her power of inspiring fear as to what she might say or do" (chapter 4, 36).

Gwendolen's supreme egoistic action is her decision to marry Grandcourt. It is not a decision that Gwendolen makes easily, but she gambles on what she knows of Grandcourt's past life and his present behaviour. In chapter fourteen, Gwendolen is horrified to find out that Grandcourt has a mistress and four children (chapter 14, 136), and so leaves for Leubronn. However, her family is then ruined financially. She consults Klesmer about the possibility of becoming a singer or actress, but he says that she does not have the talent or discipline for this. Faced with the only other option of becoming a governess, Gwendolen decides to marry Grandcourt. It is a complex decision, partly motivated by the desire to help her family financially, partly by her confidence that she can manipulate Grandcourt after marriage. In her decision to marry Grandcourt, knowing what she does about his relationship with Lydia Glasher, Gwendolen unwittingly puts herself in the hands of a sadist. Gwendolen does not act in a responsible way to the revelation about Grandcourt's past that comes in the person and message of Lydia Glasher, and this is her mistake. In the attempts to excuse her behaviour, she pretends to have an alibi for what she knows.

Gwendolen naively believes that as Grandcourt's wife she will be able to manage or manipulate him into doing good for Lydia Glasher and her children. She

reasons thus: "she had drawn on all the knowledge she had for grounds to justify her marriage. And what she most dwelt on was the determination, that when she was Grandcourt's wife, she would urge him to the most liberal conduct towards Mrs Glasher's children" (chapter 28, 288). Before Gwendolen flees to Leubronn, her uncle Gasgoine says that it is her "responsibility" to marry Grandcourt (chapter 13, 127). After warning her against caprice, coquetry, and folly, he says that he hopes Gwendolen will find in marriage a "new fountain of duty and affection" (chapter 13, 127). He says "you will have probably an increasing power, both of rank and wealth, which may be used for the benefit of others" (chapter 13, 127-8). There is a tragic irony in these words.<sup>16</sup>

Gwendolen's belief before her marriage is that she will be able to influence Grandcourt; she does not consider what her own marital duties will be: "It was characteristic that, with all her debating, she was never troubled by the question whether the indefensibility of her marriage did not include the fact that she had accepted Grandcourt solely as the man whom it was convenient for her to marry, not in the least as one to whom she would be binding herself in duty" (chapter 29, 307). Gwendolen does not think of her relational duties as she enters marriage, but only of what is convenient for her. Thus she exhibits her egoism in her decision to marry Grandcourt, and in her thinking about what their marriage will be like.

Gwendolen realises the consequences of her actions on her wedding night, when she receives Grandcourt's diamonds and a letter from Lydia. The letter reads:

"These diamonds, which were once given with ardent love to Lydia Glasher, she passes on to you. You have broken your word to her, that you might possess what was hers. Perhaps you think of being happy, as she once was, and of having

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<sup>16</sup> In chapter 44 Gasgoine talks about a wife's "great influence with her husband," and Gwendolen feels these words to be a "bitter comedy" (512).

beautiful children such as hers, who will thrust hers aside. God is too just for that. The man you have married has a withered heart. His best young love was mine; you could not take that from me when you took the rest. It is dead; but I am the grave in which your chance of happiness is buried as well as mine. You had your warning. You have chosen to injure me and my children. He had meant to marry me. He would have married me at last, if you had not broken your word. You will have your punishment. I desire it with all my soul.

“Will you give him this letter to set him against me and ruin us more – me and my children? Shall you like to stand before your husband with these diamonds on you, and these words of mine in his thoughts and yours? Will he think you have any right to complain when he has made you miserable? You took him with your eyes open. The willing wrong you have done me will be your curse.” (chapter 31, 330)

Lydia's complaint that Gwendolen has broken her word is taken seriously in Eliot's moral world view. As I mentioned earlier, Gwendolen should have been responsible to the advice and knowledge that she received from Lydia. Lydia believes that only Gwendolen stands between her and Grandcourt. Morally speaking, Gwendolen's decision to marry Grandcourt does inflict an injury on Lydia and her children. Her failure to respond to the claims of Lydia Glasher is a result of her egoism and of her circumstances. In Bakhtin's terms, Gwendolen claims an alibi for the knowledge that she has about Lydia and Grandcourt, but the narrative makes it clear that there can be no alibi for this sort of information. The outcome of Gwendolen's marriage to Grandcourt serves as a warning to the reader of what can happen when one attempts to avoid the responsibilities that come from one's unique position in time and space. Lydia's letter is prophetic in that Gwendolen's relationship with Grandcourt is a curse and a punishment. Gwendolen's hope for moral growth is dependent on the self-dissatisfaction that she feels as a result of her actions. It is only as she turns away from pleasing her self that her moral growth can begin. The narrative makes it clear that very early in her relationship with Grandcourt does she begin to rue her actions.

One of the first descriptions of the marital relations of Gwendolen and Grandcourt is found in chapter 35. Their marriage is described as Grandcourt's "empire of fear" (chapter 35, 395). We read:

Already, in seven short weeks, which seemed half her life, her husband had gained a mastery which she could no more resist than she could have resisted the benumbing effect from the touch of a torpedo. Gwendolen's will had seemed imperious in its small girlish sway; but it was the will of a creature with a large discourse of imaginative fears: a shadow would have been enough to relax its hold. And she had found a will like that of a crab or a boa-constrictor which goes on pinching or crushing without alarm at thunder. Not that Grandcourt was without calculation of the intangible effects which were the chief means of mastery; indeed he had a surprising acuteness in detecting that situation of feeling in Gwendolen which made her proud and rebellious spirit dumb and helpless before him. (chapter 35, 394-5)

Their relationship is described in terms of power relations, but Grandcourt clearly has the "mastery." Gwendolen is powerless to resist his will, and his egoism and will-to-power are more potent than hers. Eliot employs contrasting descriptions of their wills, Gwendolen's being described as "small" and "girlish" and Grandcourt's like a boa-constrictor.

Chapter 48 similarly records how Grandcourt's egoism is worked out in his relationship with Gwendolen. This chapter details a number of incidents in which Grandcourt is seen exerting his power and influence over Gwendolen, including his response to her relationship with Deronda, his implication that Deronda has an indecent relationship with Mirah, his scheme to let her know his provisions for Lydia Glasher and her children in the event of his death, and his command that she join him for sailing in the Mediterranean. We read:

No movement of Gwendolen in relation to Deronda escaped him. He would have denied that he was jealous; because jealousy would have implied some doubt of his own power to hinder what he had determined against. That his wife should have more inclination to another man's society than to his own would not pain

him: what he required was that she should be as fully aware as she would have been of a locked hand-cuff, that her inclination was helpless to decide anything in contradiction with his resolve. However much of vacillating whim there might have been in his entrance on matrimony, there was no vacillating in his interpretation of the bond. He had not repented of his marriage; it had really brought more of aim into his life, new objects to exert his will upon; and he had not repented of his choice. (chapter 48, 543)

Grandcourt sees that marriage is an opportunity for increasing the number of people he can exert his will upon. Although he makes no attempt to physically restrain Gwendolen, he imprisons her will in his. Eliot's portrayal of the psychological abuse imposed on Gwendolen is a chilling representation of the possible misappropriation of personal ties. Only her husband is capable of inflicting such psychological abuse on Gwendolen, and in this Grandcourt is clearly abusing their relationship. Grandcourt has supreme confidence that he will get his own way in his relationship with Gwendolen.

In this chapter Grandcourt tries to imply that Deronda's relations with Mirah are indecent and improper. Gwendolen is distraught, and ends up going to see Mirah to ask her if she knows any ill of Deronda. When Grandcourt finds out that she has been to see Mirah he forbids for her ever to do so again, saying that she is compromising her position as his wife. We read of the effect that his speech has on her:

Every slow sentence of that speech had a terrific mastery in it for Gwendolen's nature. If the low tones had come from a physician telling her that her symptoms were those of a fatal disease, and prognosticating its course, she could not have been more helpless against the argument that lay in it. But she was permitted to move now, and her husband never again made any reference to what had occurred this morning. He knew the force of his own words. If this white-handed man with the perpendicular profile had been sent to govern a difficult colony, he might have won reputation among his contemporaries. He had certainly ability, would have understood that it was safer to exterminate than to cajole superseded proprietors, and would not have flinched from making things safe in that way. (chapter 48, 552)

Implicit in this narrative comment is the fact that Grandcourt conceives of his relation to Gwendolen as being like the relation between a governor of a colony and people within that colony who need to be brought to order. He knows that making false accusations about the character of Deronda is exactly what will distress Gwendolen the most. In addition, he wants Gwendolen to know that he knew she knew about Lydia Glasher before their marriage, and commands her to join him yachting. In chapter 54 the narrative records what happens when the Grandcourts go yachting. Once again Grandcourt expresses his egoism in his behaviour toward his wife: “[H]e wanted to feel more securely that she was his to do as he liked with, and to make her feel it also” (chapter 54, 622). He is described as “leading his wife captive” and enjoying his “despotism” (chapter 54, 626).

The marriage of Gwendolen and Grandcourt is ended upon his death. Gwendolen feels tremendous guilt and remorse upon his death, and questions whether her murderous thoughts were instrumental in his death. The narrative of *Daniel Deronda* leaves it open to interpretation whether or not Gwendolen is complicit in Grandcourt’s death. In his will, he leaves the bulk of his estate to Lydia Glasher and her family.

In this section I have analysed how the egoism of Grandcourt and Gwendolen manifests itself in their thinking and their behaviour. In Bakhtinian terms, both of them try to claim an alibi for their marital relations. In the next section I will look at how Gwendolen’s guilt and remorse over her actions, together with her relationship with Deronda, allow her to transcend her egoism, and move toward altruism.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> “But her remorse was the precious sign of a recoverable nature; it was the culmination of that self-disapproval which had been the awakening of a new life within her” (chapter 56, 649).

*"His opinion . . . may be our virtue in the making"*<sup>18</sup>

In this section I compare the way in which Grandcourt and Deronda use their respective excess of seeing in relation to Gwendolen. According to Bakhtin, excess of seeing is the visual, perspectival working out of a person's uniqueness in time and space, *i.e.*, each human being has a unique way of looking at the world that is dependent on his or her incarnated position in time and space. Excess of seeing is a relational phenomenon and is part of the way in which a human being works out his or her non-alibi in being. We need, as human beings, to learn to use the excess of seeing that we have in relation to the other, for his or her advantage. Only by accepting that our non-alibi in being and excess of seeing ensue responsibilities can we be answerable for our uniqueness. Grandcourt uses his excess of seeing in relation to Gwendolen for his own advantage. In the last section we saw how his egoism manifested itself in his tyrannical and despotic behaviour toward her. In this section I will compare his treatment of Gwendolen with the way in which Deronda uses his excess of seeing in relation to her for her advantage and for her moral growth.

I wrote in chapters four and five that the novel form gives Eliot scope to explore the consequences of trying to claim an alibi and of not using our excess of seeing in a way that is helpful toward the other. In Bakhtin's writings we saw how he holds that the moral person does not try and claim an alibi and uses his or her excess for the advantage of the other. He does allow for the person who does try and claim an alibi, but this behaviour is seen as deviating from the norm. For Bakhtin excess of seeing is good, but in our reading of *Daniel Deronda* we need to question power relations and the gaze.

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<sup>18</sup> *Daniel Deronda*, chapter 64, 709.

How do we use this excess? In Eliot's moral universe to recognise that we have excess of seeing is not enough; we have to learn to use it relationally.

As part of Eliot's ethics of art she exposes the consequences of non-incarnated action and the damage that it does to the self and the other. In this way Eliot's novels extend Bakhtin's writing, and extend the sympathies of her reader. In *Daniel Deronda* we see that we can use the excess of seeing we enjoy for the good or the ill of the other. Through the contrasting behaviour of Grandcourt and Deronda Eliot encourages us to use our excess of seeing for the advantage of the other. In this section I will show how Deronda does use his excess of seeing to Gwendolen's advantage, and how he helps her see things differently, how he helps her to see things relationally. The motif of incarnation is pertinent to this discussion: the excess of seeing that Grandcourt and Deronda have in relation to Gwendolen is because of their incarnated position outside her. They see her in a unique way that corresponds to their unique position.

Deronda's physical outsidership and his excess of seeing in relation to Gwendolen are apparent in the opening lines of the novel:

Was she beautiful or not beautiful? and what was the secret of form or expression which gave the dynamic quality to her glance? Was the good or the evil genius dominant in those beams? Probably the evil; else why was the effect that of unrest rather than that of undisturbed charm? Why was the wish to look again felt as coercion and not as a longing in which the whole being consents? (chapter 1, 3)

This opening paragraph is very important. The phrases "beauty," "secret of form," "good," and "evil" suggest both aesthetics and ethics, and the connection between them. The word "coercion" introduces the theme of power that we have seen already in the relationship between Grandcourt and Gwendolen. It is important to note that the dominance and the coercion refer to Gwendolen and not Deronda. He is not the one

manipulating power; rather, it is she. In section one we saw that before her marriage to Grandcourt, Gwendolen attempted to exert her power over everyone. We saw in the last section that she tried to be a princess and a queen. She tries, unsuccessfully, to be the one in control of the relationship with the sadistic Grandcourt.

As chapter 1 continues Gwendolen begins to feel uneasy with Deronda's gaze. Gwendolen thinks that his gaze is unflattering and condescending.<sup>19</sup> Deronda is measuring her in terms of moral behaviour. He dislikes gambling. She is aware of the spatial difference between them. He is "outside" her (chapter 1, 6). It is this outsidership that allows him to help her. His "measuring" gaze makes her wince; this anticipates the way she will physically and morally wince in Grandcourt's presence (chapter 1, 6). At this point in her story, Gwendolen dislikes Deronda looking at her, and his moral judgment on her, but as the novel develops, and she suffers not only personal remorse for her own actions, but psychological abuse from Grandcourt, she appreciates more the way in which Deronda is able to help her.

A textual example of the way in which Grandcourt uses his excess of seeing to manipulate Gwendolen can be found in chapter 28. We read:

It was characteristic that he got none of his satisfaction from the belief that Gwendolen was in love with him; and that love had overcome the jealous resentment which had made her run away from him. On the contrary, he believed that this girl was rather exceptional in the fact that, in spite of his assiduous attention to her, she was not in love with him; and it seemed to him very likely that if it had not been for the sudden poverty which had come over her family, she would not have accepted him. From the very first there had been an exasperating fascination in the tricksiness with which she had – not met his advances, but – wheeled away from them. She had been brought to accept him in spite of everything – brought to kneel down like a horse under training for the arena, though she might have an objection to it all the while. On the whole, Grandcourt got more pleasure out of this notion than he could have done out of

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<sup>19</sup> Some feminist critics would agree.

winning a girl of whom he was sure that she had a strong inclination for him personally. And yet this pleasure in mastering reluctance flourished along with the habitual persuasion that no woman whom he favoured could be quite indifferent to his personal influence; and it seemed to him not unlikely that by-and-by Gwendolen might be more enamoured of him than he of her. In any case she would have to submit; and he enjoyed thinking of her as his future wife, whose pride and spirit were suited to command every one but himself. He had no taste for a woman who was all tenderness to him, full of petitioning solicitude and willing obedience. He meant to be master of a woman who would have liked to master him, and who perhaps would have been capable of mastering another man. (chapter 28, 293-4)

In Grandcourt's thinking about Gwendolen there is no question of love, no respect, no tenderness, no affection. There is a lack of physical affection and responsiveness between them. Grandcourt's excess of seeing is encoded with power, the desire to make Gwendolen submit to him, and the urge to master her. In Grandcourt's excess of seeing there is no pretence of helping Gwendolen. Whereas in Bakhtin's writings excess of seeing is a grace-bestowing act, Grandcourt uses his excess of seeing to make Gwendolen dumb before him.<sup>20</sup> He certainly does not love her as he loves himself, nor is he indulgent toward her ("Author and Hero," 38). He treats her like a horse that is to be tamed. It is during the course of her marriage with Grandcourt that Gwendolen begins to appreciate the detachment that Deronda brings.

During the course of *Daniel Deronda*, Gwendolen and Deronda have a series of one on one conversations that help her transcend her egoism. His graciousness is instrumental in moving her on from selfishness. Following his observation of her gambling in chapter one, we find that he redeems the necklace that she pawns after hearing of her family's financial loss (chapter 2). She is horrified by his actions, and does not look forward to their meeting again. In chapter 29 Gwendolen notices that

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<sup>20</sup> Feminist critics have also criticised Bakhtin's writing for not attending to the issue of power.

Deronda's eyes are "fixed on her with a look so gravely penetrating that it had a keener edge for her than his ironical smile at her losses" (chapter 29, 303). She is beginning to respond to his "critical glance" (chapter 29, 304). Gwendolen begins to look for opportunities of private discussions with him, and wants to know how and what he thinks about things. This need for an other is a good sign, as she is moving away from smug self-satisfaction. Her ability to express the need for another person's opinion is a sign of moral growth.

In *Daniel Deronda* there are a number of occasions in which the narrative pauses and has us consider the way in which Deronda views Gwendolen. The first is in chapter 36, when he hears of Grandcourt's relationship with Lydia Glasher. At first he thinks that Gwendolen could know nothing of this situation, and then he considers that possibly she did know. This is his reflection on her situation:

Since the early days when he tried to construct the hidden story of his own birth, his mind had perhaps never been so active in weaving probabilities about any private affair as it had now begun to be about Gwendolen's marriage. This unavowed relation of Grandcourt's, – could she have gained some knowledge of it, which caused her to shrink from the match – a shrinking finally overcome by the urgency of poverty? He could recall almost every word she had said to him, and in certain of these words he seemed to discern that she was conscious of having done some wrong – inflicted some injury. His own acute experience made him alive to the form of injury which might affect the unavowed children and their mother. Was Mrs Grandcourt, under all her determined show of satisfaction, gnawed by a double, a treble-headed grief – self-reproach, disappointment, jealousy? He dwelt especially on all the slight signs of self-reproach: he was inclined to judge her tenderly, to excuse, to pity. He thought he had found a key now by which to interpret her more clearly: what magnifying of her misery might not a young creature get into who had wedded her fresh hopes to old secrets! [. . .] Gwendolen knowing of that woman and her children, marrying Grandcourt, and showing herself contented, would have been among the most repulsive of beings to him; but Gwendolen tasting the bitterness of remorse for having contributed to their injury was brought very near to his fellow-feeling. If it were so, she had got to a common plane of understanding with him on some difficulties of life which a woman is rarely able to judge of with any justice or generosity; for, according to precedent, Gwendolen's view of

her position might easily have been no other than that her husband's marriage with her was his entrance on the path of virtue, while Mrs Glasher represented his forsaken sin. (chapter 36, 404-5)

Grandcourt is only capable of imagining that Gwendolen is jealous, he does not consider that she might be reproaching herself. The signs of self-reproach that Deronda perceives are an essential step in Gwendolen's moral growth. Self-satisfaction would indicate undisturbed egoism, and so this unease is a sign that she is capable of transcending her egoism. Whereas Grandcourt uses the knowledge that he has about Gwendolen's meeting with Lydia Glasher to squash her spirit, Deronda's impulse is to excuse or pity her. He does not use the knowledge that he has of her to her disadvantage. He is aware that her trust in him means responsibility for him.

Deronda realises that his act of redeeming Gwendolen's pawned necklace means that he has assumed a responsibility toward her. In chapter 48 we read:

She was something more than a problem: she was a lovely woman, for the turn of whose mind and fate he had a care which, however futile it might be, kept soliciting him as a responsibility, perhaps all the more that, when he dared to think of his own future, he saw it lying far away from this splendid sad-hearted creature, who, because he had once been impelled to arrest her attention momentarily, as he might have seized her arm with warning to hinder her from stepping where there was danger, had turned to him with a beseeching persistent need. (chapter 48, 545-6)

Initially Gwendolen is only able to conceive of Deronda as he relates to herself, and not as a separate person. She is conscious of her intense need of him, and yet she needs to grow further than that and recognise him as a separate person. Gwendolen does not see Deronda's other life: "the phrase 'reading Hebrew' had fled unimpressively across her sense of hearing, as a stray stork might have made its peculiar flight across her landscape without rousing any surprised reflection on its natural history" (chapter 48,

553).<sup>21</sup> In the passage quoted above, we see that Deronda once again uses his excess of seeing for her advantage. In the quotation above there is the hint of Deronda's uncertainty about his future. When he does become aware of his Jewish identity, he is aware that his relationship with Gwendolen will be significantly changed. He is afraid to tell her of this change.

The theological motif of revelation is crucial to our understanding of how Gwendolen learns to perceive of Deronda as a person who has a separate existence. The moral climax of the novel occurs when Deronda reveals to Gwendolen his Jewish identity, and she recognises fully the implications of this for their relationship. When she returns to England, after Grandcourt's drowning, she wishes to see Deronda:

Gwendolen [. . .] lived through and through again the terrible history of her temptations, from their first form of illusory self-pleasing when she struggled away from the hold of conscience, to their latest form of an urgent hatred dragging her towards its satisfaction, while she prayed and cried for the help of that conscience which she had once forsaken. She was now dwelling on every word of Deronda's that pointed to her past deliverance from the worst evil in herself and the worst infliction of it on others, and on every word that carried a force to resist self-despair. (chapter 69, 740)

Gwendolen no longer resents Deronda's moral gaze upon her; indeed, she recognises how essential it is to her well-being. She is fully aware of his importance to her moral growth. However, a further stage is necessary: she needs to recognise him as a separate other with his own separate life. In chapter 69 we read:

[S]he was also upborne by the prospect of soon seeing him again: she did not imagine him otherwise than always within her reach, her supreme need of him blinding her to the separateness of his life, the whole scene of which she filled

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<sup>21</sup> See also chapter 44: "She was thinking of Deronda much more than he was thinking of her – often wondering what were his ideas "about things," and how his life was occupied. [. . .] it was as far from Gwendolen's conception that Deronda's life could be determined by the historical destiny of the Jews, as that he could rise into the air on a brazen horse, and so vanish from her horizon in the form of a twinkling star" (508).

with his relation to her – no unique preoccupation of Gwendolen's, for we are all apt to fall into this passionate egoism of imagination, not only towards our fellow-men, but towards God. And the future which she turned her face to with a willing step was one where she would be continually assimilating herself to some type that he would hold before her. Had he not first risen on her vision as a corrective presence which she had recognized in the beginning with resentment, and at last with entire love and trust? She could not spontaneously think of an end to that reliance, which had become to her imagination like the firmness of the earth, the only condition of her walking. (chapter 69, 740)

At this moment Gwendolen is still blind to Deronda's separate life. She cannot imagine him in any other terms than those that relate to her. Even the experiences of her marriage have not led her to think this way. Deronda's presence in her life is described as her "spiritual breath" (chapter 65, 716). A further jolt needs to come; and it is a revelation from beyond herself.

In chapter 69 Deronda tells Gwendolen that he is a Jew, and that he will probably leave England for a number of years. This revelation of Deronda's separate identity paves the way for Gwendolen's transcendence of her egoism. Gwendolen transcends her egoism when she recognises and accepts the claim of Deronda's Jewishness on his life, and realises that he will not always be there as her mentor. She is shocked out of her egoism. The narrator tells us that her "memory had been stunned" – that due to the shock of Grandcourt's death she had ceased to think that the "little Jewess and her brother" could make a difference to her destiny (chapter 65, 718). The transcendence of her egoism results in a change in the way she perceives the world and her place in the world. It involves recognising the Jewish claims on Deronda. It is a move away from moral stupidity. She no longer thinks that the world revolves around her.

When Gwendolen hears Deronda's news she is stunned:

There was a long silence between them. The world seemed getting larger round poor Gwendolen, and she more solitary and helpless in the midst. The thought that he might come back after going to the East, sank before the bewildering vision of these wide-stretching purposes in which she felt herself reduced to a mere speck. There comes a terrible moment to many souls when the great movements of the world, the larger destinies of mankind, which have lain aloof in newspapers and other neglected reading, enter like an earthquake into their own lives [ . . . ]. Then it is as if the Invisible Power that has been the object of lip-worship and lip-resignation became visible, according to the imagery of the Hebrew poet, making the flames his chariot and riding on the wings of the wind, till the mountains smoke and the plains shudder under the rolling, fiery visitation. Often the good cause seems to lie prostrate under the thunder of unrelenting force, the martyrs live reviled, they die, and no angel is seen holding forth the crown and the palm branch. Then it is that the submission of the soul to the Highest is tested, and even in the eyes of frivolity life looks out from the scene of human struggle with the awful face of duty, and a religion shows itself which is something else than a private consolation.

That was the sort of crisis which was at this moment beginning in Gwendolen's small life: she was for the first time feeling the pressure of a vast mysterious moment, for the first time being dislodged from her supremacy in her own world, and getting a sense that her horizon was but a dipping onward of an existence with which her own was revolving. All the troubles of her wifeness and widowhood had still left her with the implicit impression which had accompanied her since childhood, that whatever surrounded her was somehow specially for her, and it was because of this that no personal jealousy had been roused in her in relation to Deronda: she could not spontaneously think of him as rightfully belonging to others more than to her. But here had come a shock which went deeper than personal jealousy – something spiritual and vaguely tremendous that thrust her away, and yet quelled all anger into self-humiliation (chapter 69, 747-8).

Here the motif of revelation is extremely important. Gwendolen is jolted out of her moral stupidity by a revelation from someone outside her self. Only at this point is Gwendolen learning to have the right perspective on the world. We are told that not even the terror of marriage to Grandcourt shook her out of egoism. The language in this passage is powerful because of the grandeur of the imagery. It is as though Gwendolen is undergoing a cosmic shift in her understanding of her own position in the world, and in the way in which she relates to others. Previously Deronda has advised her to "try to

care about something in this vast world besides the gratification of small selfish desires” (chapter 36, 416); in this scene the vast world seems to be crowding in on Gwendolen, squeezing out her small selfish desires. She is forced to look at things from Deronda’s perspective, and she wants to understand his position. Her moral growth culminates in her letter to him on his wedding day, and her resolution that she will be better because she has known him. The climax of Gwendolen’s redemption is the moment when she is shocked out of her self-obsession by the revelation of Deronda’s other life. The language of astronomy is used throughout *Daniel Deronda* to express the state of Gwendolen’s thinking about the world and her position in it.<sup>22</sup> It is therefore significant that her understanding of the world is changed by this revelation from Deronda. In her relationship with Deronda, Gwendolen learns to see people in their wider relations, and not to relate everything to herself. Deronda’s excess of seeing leads her to moral growth. The theological motifs of incarnation, revelation, and transcendence have been important in understanding how this process works. In the next section I will focus on how Deronda similarly learns of his need for the other. His lack of a sense of vocation is only countered when he discovers his Jewish identity, and the responsibilities that this position holds for him.

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<sup>22</sup> For example, in chapter 6 we read: “What she unwillingly recognized and would have been glad for others to be unaware of, was that liability of hers to fits of spiritual dread, though this fountain of awe within her had not found its way into connection with the religion taught her or with any human relations. [. . .] Solitude in any wide scene impressed her with an undefined feeling of immeasurable existence aloof from her, in the midst of which she was helplessly incapable of asserting herself. The little astronomy taught her at school used sometimes to set her imagination at work in a way that made her tremble; but always when some one joined her she recovered her indifference to the vastness in which she had seemed an exile [. . .]. With human ears and eyes about her, she had always hitherto recovered her confidence, and felt the possibility of winning empire” (chapter 6, 56-7).

*Deronda's "duteous bond"*<sup>23</sup>

*Daniel Deronda* is a quite different novel from its immediate predecessor, and has suffered from comparisons. With the exception of *Daniel Deronda*, all of Eliot's novels show their protagonists in conflict with a society. For example, in *Middlemarch* Dorothea feels "hemmed in by a social life which seemed nothing but a labyrinth of petty courses, a walled-in maze of small paths that led no whither" (chapter 3, 28), and Lydgate feels "the hampering threadlike pressure of small social conditions, and their frustrating complexity" (chapter 18, 176). In chapter five we saw that Bakhtin's concepts of non-alibi in being and answerability provided us with an ethic that helps us understand how people can cope and be responsible within this closed community, *i.e.*, that it is an acknowledgement of one's unique, incarnated position in time and space that enables one to lead an ethical life. We saw that this enabled Eliot's characters to transcend their egoism and help them better relate to the other. However, in *Daniel Deronda*, the problems of Deronda and Gwendolen are not due to the sense of being stifled or held back by the society in which they live.

The problems of Deronda and Gwendolen stem, in part, from their rootlessness. A lack of a sense of belonging hinders their moral growth. In the circumstances we find the characters at the beginning of the novel, it is not possible for them to know what are their full responsibilities. Although they are unique in time and space, they do not know of the responsibilities this position entails. In chapter 3 we are told that one of the possible reasons for Gwendolen's egoism is her lack of rootedness. The knowledge of his responsibilities is also hidden from Deronda. Joan Bennett, in *George Eliot: Her*

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<sup>23</sup> *Daniel Deronda*, chapter 63, 692.

*Mind and Her Art*, articulates the difference between *Daniel Deronda* and Eliot's earlier fiction: "In this book the absence of an enveloping society for either Gwendolen or Daniel is a part of the author's central conception. Both characters are incomplete because they have been deprived of such a soil in which to grow" (83). Bennett says that in Eliot's earlier novels the "central drama" sprang from the tension between the individual and the community, but in *Daniel Deronda* Eliot attempted to embody it by a reverse process, *i.e.*, to articulate the tensions that occur when one is unsure of one's place in society. I think that Bennett's assessment of *Daniel Deronda* is correct. In *George Eliot and the Landscape of Time: Narrative Form and Protestant Apocalyptic History*, Mary Wilson Carpenter discusses Eliot's use of the motif of exile. She argues that the motif is used in relation to both Jewish and non-Jewish characters. Carpenter summarises Jean Sudrann's argument in "*Daniel Deronda* and the Landscape of Exile," and writes that both Gwendolen and Deronda are exiles who are deprived of "a spiritual inheritance that would give shape and moral significance to their own lives" (139).<sup>24</sup> This unincarnated aspect of their lives is expressed in the language and images of rootlessness and exile. But despite the differences between *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda* in the conception and portrayal of the individual and his or her relation to society, Bakhtin's concepts of non-alibi in being, excess of seeing, and self/other relations can help us articulate how this difference relates to Eliot's aesthetic aim of extending her reader's sympathies. Bakhtin's concepts of answerability and non-alibi in being help us understand not only how characters like Dorothea need to be answerable

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<sup>24</sup> See Mary Wilson Carpenter, *George Eliot and the Landscape of Time: Narrative Form and Protestant Apocalyptic History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), and Jean Sudrann, "*Daniel Deronda* and the Landscape of Exile," *English Literary History* 37.3 (September 1970): 433-55.

for their uniqueness, but also how Gwendolen and Deronda can find a way out of their moral apathy. The characters in *Daniel Deronda* are more 'unincarnated' than their counterparts in *Middlemarch*. Nonetheless, it is the recognition and acceptance of their uniqueness and its ensuing responsibility that gives them the opportunity for moral growth.

Gwendolen and Deronda are at opposite ends of Eliot's moral spectrum of egoism and altruism, but the solution to both their problems is to accept their uniqueness and the responsibilities that it entails. For Deronda that is to accept and embrace fully his Jewish inheritance and, as we saw in the last section, Gwendolen moves from egoism to learn better ways of relating to and recognising the claims of the other.

In *Daniel Deronda* the hero needs to figure out his vocation and responsibilities. In this section I will examine in detail the interpersonal relations between Deronda and Mordecai. I will trace how, in the friendship with Mordecai, we see Deronda move from a longing to do something useful, to willingly embracing his Jewish inheritance and future. Both Deronda and Mordecai are aware of their need of the other. Through an analysis of their relationship we can see how religious motifs form part of Eliot's ethics and aesthetics.

When we are first introduced to Deronda he does not know who is his mother, but he suspects that his father is Sir Hugo Mallinger. Deronda has been given the "education of an English gentleman," first at Eton and then at Cambridge (chapter 16, 157). A number of careers are open to him, including law, writing, and politics (chapter 16, 161). Deronda does not need to get an "immediate income," or to "fit himself in haste for a profession" (chapter 16, 164); he exists in a "state of social neutrality"

(chapter 16, 165). We read: "Other men, he inwardly said, had a more definite place and duties" (165). He leaves Cambridge with no clear direction, except he desires to go overseas and "understand other points of view" (chapter 16, 168). In short, his future vocation is unclear to him. Deronda is not an egoist, but he is extremely passive. In Bakhtin's terms Deronda is not trying to claim an alibi, but he does not know what to do.

In deference to Sir Hugo Deronda begins to study law, but this decision merely deepens "the roots of indecision" (chapter 17, 169). The narrator informs us that Deronda is in a "sort of contemplative mood" – "questioning whether it were worth while to take part in the battle of the world" (169). The narrator says this is often done on the back of the capital that others have earned, and expresses her disapproval of this indecision. It is not morally good. In Bakhtin's terms, everything in Deronda's history prepares him for the meeting with Mordecai, and Mordecai's call on his life. Deronda is willing to embrace his uniqueness and its ensuing responsibility.

Deronda's lack of a sense of vocation is expressed in chapter 32. I list a number of Eliot's descriptions, and then offer a commentary:

His early-wakened sensibility and reflectiveness had developed into a many-sided sympathy, which threatened to hinder any persistent course of action [...]. (335)

His imagination had so wrought itself to the habit of seeing things as they probably appeared to others, that a strong partisanship, unless it were against an immediate oppression, had become an insincerity for him. His plenteous, flexible sympathy had ended by falling into one current with that reflective analysis which tends to neutralize sympathy. (335-6)

A too reflective and diffusive sympathy was in danger of paralysing in him that indignation against wrong and that selectness of fellowship which are the conditions of moral force; and in the last few years of confirmed manhood he had become so keenly aware of this that what he most longed for was either

some external event, or some inward light, that would urge him into a definite line of action, and compress his wandering energy. (336).

Deronda is not trying to avoid his responsibilities, he just does not know what they are. Sympathy is an important word in Eliot's moral vocabulary, and is central to her ethics of art. However, she implies that it needs to be directed. It is not good enough to be sympathetic by nature; one has to act upon it. Sympathy for Deronda, as for the reader, needs to be an act rather than an emotion. It is not enough to be "reflective," one also has to be active. The problem for Deronda is that he just does not know what he should do:

But how and whence was the needed event to come? – the influence that would justify partiality, and make him what he longed to be yet was unable to make himself – an organic part of social life, instead of roaming in it like a yearning disembodied spirit, stirred with a vague social passion, but without fixed local habitation to render fellowship real? To make a little difference for the better was what he was not contented to live without; but how make it? (chapter 32, 336-7)

Deronda has "no special demands on him," and "no fixed relationship except one of a doubtful kind" (chapter 32, 337). Deronda is not a pretender in Bakhtin's terms; he does not want to lead an unincarnated life. He wants to be answerable, but does not know how. In chapter 33 we read: "Was it not his secret complaint against the way in which others had ordered his own life, that he had not open daylight on all its relations, so that he had not, like other men, the full guidance of primary duties?" (chapter 33, 354). It is his relationship with Mordecai and Mirah that eventually clarify this for him.

From Deronda's perspective the event which precipitates his meeting with Mordecai is his rescuing Mirah from drowning in chapter 17. Deronda takes on this "responsibility" of finding Mirah's mother and brother, not knowing what will be the result (chapter 17, 178). His attempts to find Mirah's relatives lead him to Mordecai.

Deronda meets Mordecai when he calls in to a secondhand bookstore to make a purchase (chapter 33). From Mordecai's perspective, however, he interprets Deronda in light of his five-year search for someone to take on his ideas. Upon meeting Deronda he inquires if he is a Jew. When Deronda gives a negative, Mordecai immediately loses interest in him (chapter 33, 357-8). Deronda and Mordecai meet again when Deronda joins the Cohens for the Sabbath meal, and realises that Mordecai is a house-guest of theirs. On this occasion he asks Deronda if he knows Hebrew (chapter 34, 369). Deronda thinks that he is "remarkable man" and is intrigued by him (chapter 34, 370), but on this occasion they do not get to know one another better. We learn about Mordecai's expectations of their relationship in chapter 38.

Mordecai needs Deronda because he is dying, and he wants to pass his work on to others. Mordecai is conscious of "ebbing physical life" and "widening spiritual loneliness" (chapter 38, 439-40). He is searching for a man who will accept the "spiritual product" of Mordecai's life as a mission (chapter 38, 440). He is looking for an "intellectually cultured" Jew, who is materially well-off (440). He is looking for a "Being answering to his need" (chapter 38, 441), a "deliverer" (chapter 38, 443).

In chapter 40, Deronda sets out once again to talk to Mordecai. Deronda hopes that "their conversation should not again end speedily with that drop of Mordecai's interest which was like the removal of a drawbridge, and threatened to shut out any easy communication" (chapter 40, 458). Deronda wants there to be a communication between them. While he rows along, he looks at things from Mordecai's point of view: "he experienced, as was wont with him, a quick change of mental light, shifting his point of view to that of the person whom he had been thinking of hitherto chiefly as serviceable

to his own purposes” (458). Deronda is aware that Mordecai has some kind of “expectation” of him, but does not know what it could be; he wonders if there is a “peculiar tie” between them (chapter 40, 459).

At this point in the narrative, Deronda is considering only what he can do to help Mordecai, without conceiving that Mordecai will be able to help him. We read: “It accorded with his habitual disposition that he should meet rather than resist any claim on him in the shape of another’s need” (chapter 40, 461). Deronda wonders what the nature of the “strong relation” between them is, since Mordecai feels it so strongly (chapter 40, 462). He does not really have “belief in the validity of Mordecai’s impressions concerning him,” but he does have “a profound sensibility to a cry from the depths of another soul; and accompanying that, the summons to be receptive instead of superciliously prejudging” (chapter 40, 463). Mordecai tells Deronda of the great studies he has made, which he has written in Hebrew. He is conscious that he does not have the energy left to re-write them in English. Deronda offers to publish it, but Mordecai wants more from him. He has such hope in Deronda, but Deronda has to remind him that he is not a Jew. Deronda finds himself in the double bind of not wanting to disappoint Mordecai, nor wanting to feed any illusions that he might later have to shatter. Deronda is forced to confess that he does not know his parentage – he is conscious of the danger of refusing “some task that belonged to him, some act of due fellowship” (chapter 40, 467). He longs to be answerable and responsible to something, but he does not know what is the call on his life. Deronda confesses:

“What my birth was does not lie in my will,” he answered. “My sense of claims on me cannot be independent of my knowledge there. And I cannot promise you that I will try to hasten a disclosure. Feelings which have struck root through half my life may still hinder me from doing what I have never yet been able to do.

Everything must be waited for. I must know more of the truth about my own life, and I must know more of what it would become if it were made a part of yours.” (chapter 40, 468)

Deronda reflects on their meeting in the following chapter. We have already seen how Garrett Stewart interprets Deronda’s reaction to this event, and the way in which his reading has prepared Deronda to think imaginatively into the experience of others. Since the age of thirteen Deronda has been “used to think of some revelation that might influence his view of the particular duties belonging to him” (chapter 40, 476). Deronda begins to reflect on the influence that Mordecai might have on him; and not just on what he can do for Mordecai:

[I]t was conceivable that as Mordecai needed and believed that he had found an active replenishment of himself, so Deronda might receive from Mordecai’s mind the complete ideal shape of that personal duty and citizenship which lay in his own thought like sculptured fragments certifying some beauty yearned after but not traceable by divination. (chapter 40, 476)

We have already seen that Deronda is longing to know precisely what he should do, and he begins to think that his friendship with Mordecai might provide him with some guidance. Deronda, as I have already said, is not looking for an alibi, or an excuse not to act; but he is unaware of what is demanded of him. He wonders whether Mordecai will have some “determining effect” on him (chapter 41, 477). Deronda summarises their relationship:

What I can be to him, or he to me, may not at all depend on his persuasion about the way we came together. To me the way seems made up of plainly discernible links. If I had not found Mirah, it is probable that I should not have begun to be specially interested in the Jews, and certainly I should not have gone on that loitering search after an Ezra Cohen which made me pause at Ram’s book-shop [. . .]. Mordecai, on his side, had his visions of a disciple, and he saw me by their light; I corresponded well enough with the image his longing had created. He took me for one of his race. Suppose that his impression – the elderly Jew at Frankfort seemed to have something like it – suppose, in spite of all presumptions to the contrary, that his impression should somehow be proved

true, and that I should come actually to share any of the ideas he is devoted to? (chapter 40, 478)

Deronda's growing affection for Mirah is one reason why he does not mind if it is revealed to him that he is a Jew.

In chapter 43 Deronda realises that Mordecai is Mirah's brother, and that their mother is dead. He decides to get separate accommodation for Mordecai, away from the Cohens, so that Mirah can tend him. Deronda is also yearning "after the obligation of avowed filial and social ties" (chapter 43, 506). He communicates this news of Mirah to Mordecai in chapter 46, and they meet for the first time in chapter 47. In chapter 49 Deronda learns that Sir Hugo is not his father, and in 50 he reads the letter from his mother. The quality of his relationship with Mirah and Mordecai create in him the willingness to embrace a Jewish identity; this willingness is confirmed when the revelation that he is a Jew comes from his mother.

Deronda's mother wishes to see him because she is ill and dying, and feels the need to confess to him. In their first meeting, in chapter 51, she reveals to Deronda that he is a Jew, and confesses that she hid this knowledge from him. He is angry that she hid this knowledge from him because it has such an effect on him. The reason that he has not known precisely what he ought to do stems from the fact that she hid the knowledge of identity from him. He has not been able to embrace the responsibilities that flow from his uniqueness because he did not know his position was. His mother had chosen not to reveal his identity before, but now she is ill she wishes to make amends. In Eliot's moral universe, Leonora Charisi is morally culpable in hiding the knowledge of his birth from Deronda. She has caused Deronda great anguish by claiming an alibi for her maternal relations to him, and attempting to claim an alibi on his behalf for his Jewish identity.

Deronda declares his intention to embrace his Jewish identity: "I consider it my duty – it is the impulse of my feeling – to identify myself, as far as possible, with my hereditary people, and if I can see any work to be done for them that I can give my soul and hand to, I shall choose to do it" (chapter 53, 616).

Following this revelation of Deronda's Jewish identity we read: "He beheld the world changed for him by the certitude of ties that altered the poise of hopes and fears, and gave him a new sense of fellowship" (chapter 55, 636). We have seen how the motif of revelation played a part in Gwendolen's moral growth, when she learned of Deronda's separate existence from her. In Deronda's case too, the motif of revelation is vital to his learning of his true identity, and his ability to embrace it. In chapter 60 he visits his grandfather's friend, Kalonymos, in order to pick up his grandfather's papers.

He informs Kalonymos:

"I shall call myself a Jew," said Deronda, deliberately, becomingly slightly paler under the piercing eyes of his questioner. "But I will not say that I shall profess to believe exactly as my fathers have believed. Our fathers themselves changed the horizon of their belief and learned of other races. But I think I can maintain my grandfather's notion of separateness with communication. I hold that my first duty is to my own people, and if there is anything to be done towards restoring or perfecting their common life, I shall make that my vocation." (chapter 60, 673)

For the first time in his life Deronda has a clear idea of what his vocation should be, and he willingly embraces it. He is answerable, in Bakhtin's terms, to his relationship to his grandfather and to his people. We read:

It happened to Deronda at that moment, as it has often happened to others, that the need for speech made an epoch in resolve. His respect for the questioner would not let him decline to answer, and by the necessity to answer he found out the truth for himself. (chapter 60, 673-4)

In his conversation with Kalonymos Deronda discovers his vocation. It is significant that Deronda has to “answer” for his identity, and he does so willingly. This conversation, and his willingness to answer his grandfather’s friend, is a synecdoche for his larger willingness to be ethically responsible for his unique position in time and space.

In chapter 63 Deronda informs Mordecai and Mirah that he is a Jew. The narrator tells us:

He had set out for Genoa in total uncertainty how far the actual bent of his wishes and affections would be encouraged – how far the claims revealed to him might draw him into new paths, far away from the tracks his thoughts had lately been pursuing with a consent of desire which uncertainty made dangerous. He came back with something like a discovered charter warranting the inherited right that his ambition had begun to yearn for: he came back with what was better than freedom – with a duteous bond which his experience had been preparing him to accept gladly [. . .]. (chapter 63, 692)

It is his relationship with both Mirah and Mordecai that makes him glad to be a Jew. He is glad that he has a “duteous bond” with both of them. The revelation that he is a Jew allows him to marry Mirah, thus fulfilling his emotional need for the other. Similarly, the revelation that he is a Jew enables him to take on a role in society. We read:

It was as if he had found an added soul in finding his ancestry – his judgment no longer wandering in the mazes of impartial sympathy, but choosing, with that noble partiality which is man’s best strength, the closer fellowship that makes sympathy practical – exchanging that bird’s-eye reasonableness which soars to avoid preference and loses all sense of quality, for the generous reasonableness of drawing shoulder to shoulder with men of like inheritance. (chapter 63, 693)

Earlier we saw that Deronda’s sympathy needed to be given direction, and the discovery of his Jewish identity enables him to find that necessary direction. Gone is the maze-like wandering; Deronda now has a specific duty. Deronda acknowledges to Mordecai that their relation has been instrumental in making him glad that he is a Jew:

“It is quite true that you and Mirah have been my teachers,” said Deronda. “If this revelation had been made to me before I knew you both, I think my mind

would have rebelled against it. Perhaps I should have felt then – ‘If I could have chosen, I would not have been a Jew.’ What I feel now is – that my whole being is a consent to the fact. But it has been the gradual accord between your mind and mine which has brought about that full consent.” (chapter 63, 697)

It is Deronda’s relationship with Mordecai and Mirah, his willingness to treat them ethically, and to embrace the fact that he is answerable to this relationship, that makes Deronda the moral lodestar of this novel.

### *Conclusion*

In this novel we see clearly that the self has a need of the other. Both Gwendolen and Deronda express their need of the other. Gwendolen needs the other to shake her out of her egoism, and Deronda needs the other to know what his vocation is. In Gwendolen’s relationship with Deronda, his outsideness in relation to her allows him to see things that she cannot see for herself. Because of his incarnation in time and space he enjoys an excess of seeing in relation to her that he employs for her benefit. Deronda similarly needs Mordecai and Mirah in order to work out what his vocation and duties will be. The religious motifs of incarnation, revelation, and transcendence are a key part of Eliot’s ethics of art in *Daniel Deronda*, and we have seen that Bakhtin’s concepts of non-alibi in being, excess of seeing, and self/other relations help us express them.

## Conclusion

Pauline Nestor writes in *George Eliot*:

[Eliot's] fiction and thought were shaped by her conviction that the most important sign of spiritual life was the ability 'to be able always to reconsider one's conclusions and go well over the process by which they are arrived at' (V, 58).<sup>1</sup>

In this conclusion, I will briefly 'go over' the process of my research on the ethics of Eliot's art. In so doing, I am conscious – along with the narrator of *Middlemarch* – that "every limit is a beginning as well as an ending" (Finale, 818). In this conclusion, I write not only to sum up what I have argued in this thesis but also to suggest new directions which this kind of work might take in the future. Like Eliot, Bakhtin expressed ambivalence about the possibility of saying the last word. I hope not to have said the last word on Eliot's ethics of art but to have contributed to the dialogue about Eliot's ethics, and to the dialogue about the study of literature and theology.

Briefly stated, I have discussed Eliot's ethics of art, *i.e.*, her desire to extend her reader's sympathies. The presupposition underlying Eliot's aesthetic aim in this respect is that each human being is an egoist who has a flawed perception of his or her relation to the world and to the other. Bakhtin and Eliot share an understanding of the human being as incarnated in time and space, and both are interested in the intersection between ethics and aesthetics. However, due to the different genres in which they chose to write, this understanding of the human being works itself out somewhat differently. Eliot, who did not adhere to

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<sup>1</sup> Pauline Nestor, *George Eliot*, 9.

any formal Christian belief actually presents her characters as flawed, fallen, and sinful in their failure or inability to respond to the other. It is this tendency not to respond ethically to the other that her ethics of art aims to address and to counter. Bakhtin, on the other hand, concentrates philosophically on those who are willing to embrace both their uniqueness and their responsibilities. His understanding of the ethically responsible person, who does not separate his or her uniqueness from his or her responsibilities, is based on his understanding of the Chalcedon doctrine of Christ's human and divine natures existing in one person. And, as we have seen Bakhtin's understanding of the human being is the model to which Eliot's ethics of art points us. Eliot's ethics of art is not prescriptive, and does not tell the reader what to do on every occasion. However, in her presentation of mixed, erring human creatures Eliot holds up as a model Dorothea and Deronda, who accept their uniqueness and their responsibility. Eliot's ethics of art have an effect on the reader when the reader is prepared to accept his or her answerability for his or her reading of *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda*.

In light of all this, I propose that there are three ways in which future research of kind might proceed. The first way of proceeding would be to offer a Bakhtinian analysis of Eliot's other novels. So far, I have limited my exploration of Eliot's ethics of art to her last two novels. This has been largely due to the confines of space but this does not mean that a Bakhtinian analysis is relevant only to *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda*. I have shown that Eliot's aesthetics is consistent throughout her literary career and that all her novels are concerned with questions of egoism, sympathy, moral responsibility, and how to lead a good life. The model of analysis that I have used in this thesis could be employed

profitably in a reading of Eliot's other novels. In chapter four I showed briefly how the Bakhtinian concept of non-alibi in being could be applied to *Romola*, and the same model could be applied to *Adam Bede*, *The Mill on the Floss*, and *Felix Holt*.

The second way of proceeding would be to offer a Bakhtinian analysis of literary works by other authors, including the novels of Henry James or Richardson's *Clarissa*.

The third way would be to extend this kind of research elsewhere in the area of literature and theology. In this thesis I have brought into dialogue literary theory, literary criticism, and theology in order to read Eliot's ethics of art. As a graduate student I have been based in a theology department whilst working on literary texts and literary theory, although with a view to engaging in a theologically responsible manner with Eliot's novels. I have attempted to be responsible to this intellectual engagement with these two disciplines, and can only suggest that there are many further ways in which this could be done in future work. In earlier chapters of this thesis I discussed the nature of the interdisciplinary relationship between literature and theology, what David Jasper and Terry Wright refer to as a creative tension. Literature and theology are two separate academic disciplines with their own tensions, problems, and area of concern. But both disciplines have something to learn and something to impart when they are brought into dialogue. By engaging with theological discourse, I have suggested that a literary theorist can gain a clearer sense of the theological concerns of literary artists, and the subtlety and complexity with which these concerns are treated in literary texts. This is no slight thing given the many ways in which literature and literary theory engage with Christian thinking. I have also

suggested that theologians can learn ways of interpreting literary texts that allow these texts to retain their distinctiveness. It would be possible for theologians to use insights gained from literary theory to engage with biblical studies and biblical theology.

Eugene Ionesco's play *Non* (1934) contains the following lines: "If God exists, why write literature? / And if he doesn't, why write literature?" These lines pose a question that offers a challenge to any one working in the intersection of literature and theology. The lines could possibly suggest that if God exists then there is no need for the comforts that fiction offers, or just no need for fiction at all. Alternatively, they could suggest that if God does not exist then there is no point in anything at all, and therefore no point in creating literary texts. In other words, these lines could imply that one could write literature in praise of God's existence. Whichever way in which they are interpreted, this quotation is important to both disciplines because it suggests that the questions of God's existence and the question of why we write literature are somehow connected. It does not provide us with the answer of how these two issues are related, but it gives us something about which both literary critics and theologians can think and write.

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