

INTRODUCTION.i. Critical Considerations

In spite of the perceptive and still valid appreciation of George Eliot's work by Henry James<sup>1</sup> the esteem in which she was held by nineteenth century readers and critics did not translate well into the twentieth century. In his guide to George Eliot criticism W.J. Harvey notes that the general acclaim which marks criticism of George Eliot's work until about 1885, when Cross's biography of her appears,<sup>2</sup> contrasts strangely with the subsequent decline of her reputation which continues until the 1940's.<sup>3</sup> A reading of contemporary reviews and letters, the Cross biography, or the correspondence of George Eliot with her publisher William Blackwood<sup>4</sup> reveals that the Victorians generally responded to an image of the author and qualities in her works which find no response in twentieth century readers. The rustic novels were very popular, not least because of what was felt to be their warmly intimate tone, their homely naturalism and humour, and their pithy but reassuring sayings which sum up a sense of life that is at once a judgement and an acceptance. In later novels contemporary readers responded to the majestic sibylline moralist towering above characters and readers alike and dictating morals with the weight of freely conceded authority.

Readers and critics of the 1930's especially could not respond to the early manner, nor would they concede authority to the Olympian moralist. The sibylline image was felt to produce an art devoid of any real creativity and dictated by abstract and unreal moral concerns.<sup>5</sup> The warmer manner of the rustic novels with their intimacy, pastoral charm, 'lambent humour' and sententiousness was also felt to be 'not quite the key to our age'.<sup>6</sup>

F.R. Leavis is generally credited with reestablishing George Eliot's reputation in 1948 with The Great Tradition,<sup>7</sup> but on not quite the same basis that had sustained it in the nineteenth century. Leavis is not interested in her as a dispenser of wisdom, or in the earlier pastoral manner that had endeared her to Victorian readers. He positively objects to passages or characters in which personal identifications become too obtrusive or indulgent. Instead, he prefers to regard her primarily as a novelist. What Leavis appreciates as the great and fundamental qualities in her art are qualities of intelligence rather than of 'wisdom', of a finely regulated sympathetic awareness rather than of 'vision'. Accordingly, in analysis of her work he stresses her acute psychological insight and a closely related capacity for moral valuation. If Leavis may be said to have created a new conception of George Eliot, a new idea of what her importance consists in,

it is one of maturely critical humanity.

Since Leavis, it is roughly this conception which has persisted and influenced the considerable amount of critical work which has followed. As this chapter is not intended primarily as a comprehensive guide to criticism, I will not present this work in detail but merely try to give an idea of its directions, limitations and possibilities. For my purpose it is sufficient to point out that the bulk of criticism since Leavis has generally tended to accept, though with reservations, that George Eliot is a great novelist and has been concerned to demonstrate the degree of greatness by 'a thorough - some would say excessive - elucidation of her themes and their forms'.<sup>8</sup> By this time George Eliot's themes are obvious and Barbara Hardy<sup>9</sup> and W.J. Harvey<sup>10</sup> have amply demonstrated that her novels reveal a fine sense of artistic form, her extensive reliance on nineteenth century fictional conventions notwithstanding. For Harvey

This vindication of George Eliot's literary conventions and fictional strategies is the most important single advance toward a proper critical understanding and appreciation of her art.<sup>11</sup>

However, most thematic and formal criticism less sophisticated than the two works just mentioned tends to ground analysis in a number of dubious conceptual bases, revealing one or a number of dichotomies in design and conception. The head may be said to be imperfectly reconciled with the heart, or it may be assumed that they are unconsciously antagonistic principles. For example, even in Basil Willey's

perceptive and balanced study of the ideological background to George Eliot's fiction we find this backhanded tribute to her intellectual prowess:

She was the first English writer to bring an intellect of that calibre to the service of fiction, and the wonder perhaps is that this preponderant cerebration did not devour her creative instinct more completely than it did. <sup>12</sup>

In another sort of dichotomy, George Eliot may be regarded as the novelist philosopher, 'whose works are seen as disguised tracts, the narrative gilding the didactic pill and the characters incarnating idealised moral states or conflicts', or again as the emotionally unbalanced woman, whose 'novels, for better or worse, are simply dramatisations of her personal conflicts and dilemmas that she intrudes overtly or obliquely into her fiction'.<sup>13</sup>

Another common means of accounting for the limitations of some of George Eliot's work is to assume that it is consciously fabricated or contrived rather than unconsciously inspired and spontaneous. As Jerome Beaty has pointed out, this type of explanation is based on an uncritical reflection of fashionable but unsound nineteenth century notions about art: 'Writers humanly anxious to be thought inhumanly great magnify the unconscious element in their work'.<sup>14</sup> And critics in their turn 'sometimes identify what they approve of in a work as the

product of the unconscious, what they disapprove of as the product of the conscious mind'.<sup>15</sup> Beaty's study of George Eliot's method of creating Middlemarch quite discredits this practice by showing that inspiration was closely associated with meticulous planning.

Beaty's study has also shown that because John Cross, George Eliot's nineteenth century biographer, shared with her the view 'that she created in an almost Platonic frenzy, that her best welled up from what we would call the unconscious', his selection of biographical material in her letters and journals has been influenced accordingly.<sup>16</sup> And he observes that since this prejudice is built into the Cross biography, which has remained until very lately the chief compact source of details about George Eliot's life and opinions, critics have tended to reflect it.<sup>17</sup>

However, in recent years critics have had access to Gordon S. Haight's biography,<sup>18</sup> and have therefore been freed from the need to resort to the Cross biography and the dangers of indirectly reflecting his nineteenth century understanding of George Eliot. The new biography supplements the monumental edition of the George Eliot letters by Haight<sup>19</sup> and other recent scholarship such as an edition of George Eliot's essays by Pinney,<sup>20</sup> and additional biographic works such as K.A. MacKenzie's Edith Simcox and George Eliot.<sup>21</sup> By gradually divesting itself of dated and fixed attitudes the biographical

study of George Eliot has created a freer atmosphere for the formulation of critical perspectives, thus going some way towards redressing the state of affairs that Harvey pointed to in 1964: 'In many ways criticism has outrun scholarship!'<sup>22</sup>

In the last decade some critics with a scholarly and critical interest in the history of ideas have carried further the basic insight that Willey's 1949 study reveals: that George Eliot's main themes are not to be seen in isolation but as coextensive with an ideological climate which had already done much to formulate the basic questions which she was trying very consciously to explore in her art. U.C. Knoepfelmacher gives a comprehensive account of the ideological background and goes on to examine the novels as conscious artistic embodiments of very particular philosophies, most notably that of Feuerbach.<sup>23</sup> Bernard J. Paris presents a more balanced view of the novels as experiments in life which test notions that are not so much the result of particular ideological influences as part of George Eliot's experience of the age she lived in.<sup>24</sup> George Levine surveys Eliot's novels, letters and Westminster Review articles to determine her ideological position in the nineteenth century debate between humanist philosophies of responsibility and the deterministic grammars of science and positivism.<sup>25</sup>

W.J. Harvey has offered some moderating advice on the limits of this blend of criticism and history of ideas when he attacks Knoepfelmacher's overly ingenious attempts to identify debts to particular scientists and philosophers in George

Eliot's novels. He concludes that

George Eliot's art reveals a particular intellectual coloration which is part of her general sensibility. This is the result of the blending together of a number of primary colours (i.e. her intellectual sources), the particular chemistry of the blending being determined by her own mind and temperament. By analysis we can be reasonably sure that this or that primary colour must have been an ingredient in the process, but in what proportions and what relations to other ingredients we cannot pretend to say with any accuracy.<sup>26</sup>

While he supports and makes use of the added comprehensiveness of approach which takes into account the intellectual milieu, he opposes 'any attempt to decompose her [George Eliot's] mind into an intellectual spectrum with individual colours labelled Comte, Feuerbach, Spencer, Lewes, Darwin, Huxley, etc.'<sup>27</sup>

Nevertheless, despite the caution with which we must regard explorations of George Eliot's ideological background, they are valuable to the extent that they take her intellectual dimension into account. Thanks to them and to a biographical scholarship which is extensive enough to be relatively free of over-selectivity, we are now in a position to make a truer assessment than ever before of George Eliot's mind and are supplied with a broader basis for discussing her art. In the last five years or so the possibilities offered by this state of affairs have seemed to coincide with what Barbara Hardy has suggested is 'a prime characteristic of this moment in the criticism of fiction [which is] a free, searching and fundamental process of evaluation'.<sup>28</sup> Certainly this temper predominates in the essays she has edited. The wide variety of critical approaches and explorations reveals

and is made possible by an extensive acquaintance with scholarship on the period. The general vision of the essays, while ultimately a judging vision, does not function according to the reductive process encouraged by long established verdicts but suggests further exploration. In 'Daniel Deronda: George Eliot and Political Change' Graham Martin looks at the artistic failure of this novel as a reflection of the basic conceptual weakness of idealism in nineteenth century humanism, a weakness which Marx had recognized in Feuerbach.<sup>29</sup> In 'The Pastoral of Intellect' John Bayley offers a critique of George Eliot's use of the pastoral form to embody predominantly philosophical ideas and, in doing so, he links it with nineteenth century idealism, the search for a philosophy of history and Pre-Raphaelite genre painting.<sup>30</sup> W.J. Harvey's essay, 'Idea and Image in the Novels of George Eliot', examines in a truly 'Spenserian' or freely experimental manner the operation in George Eliot's work of a generally current nineteenth century view that the evolution of the personality could be regarded as passing through stages like the evolution of a species.<sup>31</sup>

Like Bayley, Raymond Williams in The English Novel From Dickens to Lawrence<sup>32</sup> explores the use of the pastoral form when he looks at the rustic novels as very conscious attempts to extend 'the knowable community' of the English novel and finds their pastoralism inconsistent with a true knowledge of the actual dynamics of the working class. To some extent the works of Williams and Bayley might be seen as

elaborate recapitulations of Harvey's 1964 emphasis on artistic form. But they are part of a radically different critical focus on the nineteenth century in which theme and form are not treated in isolation or related only to the greater isolation of the splendidly abstract category of 'art', but as coextensive with a variety of ways of knowing and expression which make up the general temper of the age of which they are all products.

It appears to me that further criticism must move towards and demand this broader and more fluid conception of theme and form. The need for a defence of George Eliot as an artist is no longer pressing, nor is the need to show, as Leavis has, that in certain works she shows evidence of psychological penetration and a capacity for moral valuation which we would find very useful in our own lives. And if Leavis' justification of George Eliot is no longer necessary, Willey's approach to her in terms of an intellectual/emotional dichotomy seems less adequate than ever in an age of existentialist philosophies, Gestalt psychology and a new mysticism. Surely now that scholarship is making the relations between George Eliot and her age ever clearer the need is to understand her not in terms of reductive, essentialist categories but historically, as a part of the total process of the century she lived in. As with all history we must recognize that there can be no final understanding and that criticism of any

earlier writer functions as an ongoing dialectic between the uncertain experience of the present and the no less uncertain experience of the past.

I see my own study of George Eliot as answering needs of this kind, and so I am to work from current perspectives and offer fresh insights and evaluations without recapitulating too much of what has already been done. While my study will be primarily of the novels in themselves, I hope to bear in mind throughout that they are products of an age, and are very consciously attempts to create new forms out of old forms, in an ongoing struggle to reconcile a total complex of world views. For me, as for George Eliot herself, the experimental process is the important factor. She once replied to a plea by an admirer<sup>33</sup> for some work of certainty to reconcile him to a personal loss, that for her there were no à priori certainties:

Your letter will have associated you with questions which are the most frequently in my thoughts - questions which are my chief prompters to write anything at all. But my writing is simply a set of experiments in life - an endeavour to see what our thought and emotion may be capable of - what stores of motive actual or hinted as possible, give promise of a better after which we may strive - what gains from past revelation and discipline we must strive to keep hold of as something more sure than shifting theory. 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. <sup>34</sup>

For George Eliot the uncertainty of the world, the failure of systems to contain it, leads one into life by forcing one to

develop an essential human capacity for experiment, for the testing of oneself in contact with otherness. Certainly George Eliot is here displaying in her own way a prime characteristic of her age, an age in which artists, scientists, poets, philosophers, novelists and political economists showed an acute awareness of the methods by which each would attempt to answer the basic questions: Who are we? Where did we come from? Where are we going?

In focussing, then, on the inherent uncertainty and the concern for experimentation of George Eliot's novels I am being true to her own weltanschauung and that of her age, which in destroying the certainties of revealed religion and creating the Industrial Revolution made change and uncertainty the defining contours of the world.

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ii. 'An art which does mend nature'<sup>35</sup>

That George Eliot had a very strong sense of her art as an expression of the uncertain tenor of her age is evident from this passage in Middlemarch, in which she compares herself with Fielding, a characteristic voice of the preceding century:

A great historian, as he insisted on calling himself, who had the happiness to be dead a hundred and twenty years ago, and so to take his place among the colossi whose huge legs our living pettiness is

observed to walk under, glories in his copious remarks and digressions as the least imitable part of his work, and especially in those initial chapters to the successive books of his history, where he seems to bring his armchair to the proscenium and chat with us in all the lusty ease of his fine English. But Fielding lived when the days were longer (for time like money is measured by our needs) and Summer afternoons were spacious, and the clock ticked slowly in the Winter evenings. We belated historians must not linger after his example; and if we did so, it is possible that our chat would be thin and eager, as if delivered from a camp-stool in a parrot-house.<sup>36</sup>

In spite of her obvious admiration for Fielding as an 'historian', George Eliot is aware that his grand style of presentation, his copious digressions and easy generalizations on the nature of human existence, are no longer quite relevant. The confidence with which Fielding conducts his 'quick and sagacious penetration into the true essence of all the objects of our contemplation'<sup>37</sup> is for George Eliot an indication that he had the 'happiness to be dead a hundred and twenty years ago'. Fielding's time is not her time, and in the intervening one hundred and twenty years the forms of the world have changed drastically and are no longer so easily, so certainly, identifiable. The perspective glass of 'historical' observation must adapt to new rhythms. The comparison was not lost on Henry James, who in his own paraphrase of the passage quoted above identifies the characteristic difference in approach as follows: 'Fielding was didactic - the author of Middlemarch is truly philosophic'.<sup>37</sup> It would appear that for James as for George Eliot to be 'truly

philosophic' is not to treat nature by way of digressions presupposing the prior certainty of didacticism. 'Nature' for them is not so readily and conveniently available, and requires more earnestness and respect to be understood. Both James and George Eliot register the feeling characteristic of the nineteenth century as a whole that, like God, nature has ceased to exist at all as a comforting certainty framing human existence. Rather, humanity itself advances to the fore and takes full responsibility for explaining its origins and determining its own nature, its place in a world which it helps to fashion:

Heaven help us! said the old religion; the new one from its very lack of that faith will teach us all the more to help one another.<sup>39</sup>

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In what follows I should like to give a very brief account of the intellectual development of George Eliot, or Marian Evans as she was then known, in the years before she began writing fiction. This is not to assume, as the studies of Knoepfelmacher and Levine seem to, that her intellectual development was complete before she began to write fiction. Nor do I assume, as Willey does, that in speaking of intellect one must necessarily neglect emotion. It is not within the scope of this chapter to describe in detail and for their own sakes the ramifications of the many ideologies Marian Evans

comes into contact with. As I have indicated, this has been done elsewhere. Moreover, the purpose of my short account is to emphasize the way in which Marian Evans develops within her milieu, how she reacts to it to arrive at her own distinctive feeling of what is important in life and art at the time she begins writing fiction.

The degree to which George Eliot's concerns are those of her age has been noted by Basil Willey:

Probably no English writer of the time, and certainly no novelist, more fully epitomizes the century; her development is a paradigm, her intellectual biography a graph of its most decided trend. Starting from evangelical Christianity, the curve passes through doubt to a reinterpreted Christ and a religion of humanity: beginning with God it ends in Duty.<sup>40</sup>

Marian Evans developed doubts about her Evangelicalism early. Haight notes that when only thirteen she read a novel by Bulwer Lytton in which a virtuous atheist figures prominently.<sup>41</sup> She later recalled being 'considerably shaken by the impression that religion was not a requisite to moral excellence'.<sup>42</sup> This impression was reinforced when on visiting some Methodist miners she was 'shocked at the apparent union of religious feeling with a low sense of morality'.<sup>43</sup> Thus when as a young woman she read Charles Christian Hennell's An Inquiry Concerning the Origin of Christianity,<sup>44</sup> there was already one strong inducement for her to accept its conclusion: that the gospels are not to be regarded as divine revelation and that the miracles ascribed to Jesus are perfectly explicable in

terms of ordinary events. A second inducement was the strong ideological impression which science made on all serious thought in the nineteenth century. Philosophy tended to see all reality as subject to the same order of law that science appeared to reveal in matter. Thus for Hennell

Supernatural and miraculous events are out of the order of nature, but the operation of natural law is uniform and invariable, therefore miracles do not happen and never have happened.<sup>45</sup>

This most fundamental of all the beliefs of her positivistic century - that the spiritual, mental and moral spheres are to be regarded as co-extensive with the physical world whose laws science was rapidly uncovering - was first revealed to Marian Evans in systematic form in Charles Bray's The Philosophy of Necessity.<sup>46</sup> That the positivistic world view was to remain as an important and basic strand in George Eliot's thinking can be seen in this excerpt from a letter written to Bray in 1857, many years after the initial contact, when Bray's attempts to discover 'the natural laws of mind'<sup>47</sup> through the pseudoscience of phrenology provoked her disagreement:

...in the fundamental doctrine of your book - that mind presents itself under the same condition of invariableness of antecedent and consequence as all other phenomena (the only difference being that the true antecedent and consequent are proportionately difficult to discover as the phenomena are more complex) I think you know I agree.<sup>48</sup>

Shortly after her 'conversion' by Hennell and Bray who, as Haight notes, merely gave ideological validity to

her own most deeply seated doubts, Marian Evans embarked on the translation of another work of biblical scholarship striking at the roots of revealed religion, Leben Jesu by David Friedrich Strauss.<sup>49</sup> Though Strauss offers a more sophisticated and profound interpretation of the gospels than Hennell - as, if not dictated truth, myths enshrining man's most noble spiritual yearnings - Marian Evans became 'Strauss sick' in the work of translation, 'it made her ill dissecting the beautiful story of the crucifixion'.<sup>50</sup> Strauss's attempt to emphasize the dignity of human religious belief in spite of its mythical basis ends with a morbid note of regret:

The boundless store of truth and life which for eighteen centuries has been the aliment of humanity, seems irretrievably dissipated; the most sublime levelled with the dust, God divested of his grace, man of his dignity, and the tie between heaven and earth broken.<sup>51</sup>

In the next ten years of her life, for part of which she was editor of the Westminster Review, Marian Evans moved within an intellectual climate seemingly dominated by the positivism of Auguste Comte, the originator of the belief in 'natural sequences' which she had met with in Hennell, Bray and Strauss. Her future de facto husband, G.H. Lewes, was one of Comte's foremost champions in England, and Comte's authority was invoked or his basic beliefs paraphrased to lend credence to all forms of heterodoxy and progressive inquiry of which the Westminster Review was the chief organ in England. Under Marian Evans' editorship the Westminster

Review published articles on reform, politics (all from a radical point of view), history, religion, philosophy, science and literature. The contributors represent England's most progressive and creative thinkers, those most sensitive to continental social and philosophical ideas, and include John Stuart Mill, Herbert Spencer, W.R. Gregg, J.A. Froude, G.H. Lewes and herself.

It would be a mistake, however, to imagine that Marian Evans passively reflected the intellectual climate of her age, as Willey seems to suggest when he speaks of her biography as 'a graph of its most decided trend'.<sup>52</sup> The picture we get from the Haight biography and her own reviews and letters is of a mind moving freely and critically among the personalities, ideologies, faiths and systems of her time. Her Westminster Review articles perhaps best reveal the critical temper of her mind, how in comprehending the truth of a particular position she related it to other developments in the thought of the age and finally judged its overall validity with a characteristic boldness of personal commitment. In her critique of the Evangelical teaching of Dr. Cumming she develops her initial doubts of Evangelicalism into the quite original and devastatingly supported judgement that dogmatic other worldliness not only fails to encourage true morality but actively retards it.<sup>53</sup> Similarly, in 'Worldliness and Other Worldliness: The Poet Young' she destroys the notion

that poetical rhetoric is sublime in direct proportion that it escapes from the real.<sup>54</sup> When she reviews Mackay's The Progress of the Intellect, which traces the origin of all divinities to nature cults, she criticizes the shortcomings of Comte's insistence that inquiry must not be theological or metaphysical if it is to have any value, by pointing out that each age has its own most appropriate form of belief to enshrine its best tendencies.<sup>55</sup>

In letters written well after her Westminster Review period we find numerous instances of her disclaiming any basic influence by scientists and positivistic theorists. Thus of Darwin's The Origin of Species and Spencer's pioneering essay on evolutionary theory, 'The Development Hypothesis', she writes:

...to me, the development theory and all other explanations of processes by which things came to be, produce a feeble impression compared with the mystery that lies under the processes.<sup>56</sup>

And though she read Mill's Logic and Political Economy with much benefit, she had 'no consciousness of their ever having made any marked epoch in [her] life'.<sup>57</sup> If she granted the basic premise of positivism that 'all events whatever, the events of our own personal life included, are always subject to natural relations of sequence and similitude',<sup>58</sup> she was far from granting Comte's deliverance that these relations lie 'in all essential respects...beyond the reach of our

interference'.<sup>59</sup> To Mill, whose thinking had been deeply influenced by Comte, she wrote:

Every fresh morning is an opportunity one can look forward to for exerting one's will. I shall not be satisfied with your philosophy till you have conciliated necessitarianism...with the practice of willing strongly, of willing to will strongly and so on, that being what you certainly can do and have done about a great many things in life.<sup>60</sup>

It was characteristic of her that she did not argue from dogma or from ideology but from experience, and it was truth to experience which must be the test of the truth of anything else:

I have faith in the working out of higher possibilities than the Catholic or any other church has presented and those who have strength to wait and endure are bound to accept no formula which their whole souls - their intellect as well as their emotions - do not embrace with entire reverence. The highest 'calling and election' is to do without opium and live through all our pain with conscious, clear-eyed endurance.<sup>61</sup>

We can be justly sceptical, therefore, of one main bias in the criticism of George Eliot by the ideological historians that 'the positivist cosmology led Eliot to see life as essentially tragic'<sup>62</sup> (my italics). If these later letters quite unequivocally disclaim the influence of the positivistic 'systems', there is also biographical evidence apart from the articles she wrote for the Westminster Review to suggest that during this period she was not over-impressed with the systemic approach to life.

One can infer that from her personal experience with Spencer, for one, she must have begun entertaining grave

doubts as to the power of a monumental positivistic awareness of the great chains of cause and effect actually to inspire a man with the moral qualities that in Comte's view should inevitably follow. Haight tells of how Spencer carried on a peculiar relationship with Marian Evans and managed to call forth her affection without responding in kind.<sup>63</sup> How far he was guilty of trifling with her is uncertain, but there is a definite suggestion that his self-esteem made him incapable of the sort of generosity and sympathy which she expected of a relationship. Haight notes how he justified the inadequacies he displayed in failing to respond to Marian Evan's passion by appeals to the absolute importance of 'physical beauty' and by spuriously arguing "'a necessary relationship" between ugly features and inferiority of intellect and character'.<sup>64</sup> But Marian Evans, it appears, was well aware of the human smallness behind the weighty theoretical exterior:

She saw his absurdities clearly enough now and studied in him a human trait of which she was to be one of the greatest delineators - egoism. She had long since accepted the philosophy of necessity, that everything acts in accordance with its own nature; she did not expect more than was in him.<sup>65</sup>

Spencer's inadequacies and his high flown rhetoric about personal beauty could hardly have failed to put her in mind of the kind of cant she would later expose in Dr. Cumming and the poet Young, and her early misgivings about the ability of dogma to inspire a real sense of responsibility.

In mentioning this incident I do not wish to imply that there is a significant causal relationship between its particular occurrence and any finally worked out attitude which will appear as a 'theme' in George Eliot's novels. I merely wish to illustrate what I believe was a tendency in Marian Evans' development during the period of her editorship. Like The Road to Xanadu,<sup>66</sup> which details the multitude of images leading to 'Kubla Khan', the Haight biography gives such a massive impression of life and significant interactions and influences that to single out a few as being of special causal significance invites the charge of sacrificing truth to simplicity.

Nevertheless, the influence of Feuerbach's thought on Marian Evans can hardly be underrated. In his Wesen des Christentums which she began translating in 1853,<sup>67</sup> she found a profound and sensitive awareness of the real personal and interpersonal basis of spirituality notably lacking in both positivism and Evangelicalism. With Feuerbach's general contention that 'God' is merely an abstraction of qualities ('predicates') that are essentially human, Marian Evans was already roughly acquainted through the 'higher criticism' of Strauss. Feuerbach, however, gives a far more penetrating and compelling argument: that in doing away with religion man is not the loser but the gainer. For this he advances basically two reasons. First, a superior method of

reasoning is employed to serve the needs of the spiritual life, one which does not 'generate the object from the thought but the thought from the object'.<sup>68</sup> And second, because theological and metaphysical confusions are done away with, the true human and social role of spiritual love emerges more clearly. It is love rather than belief which is the essence both of Christianity and of man:

Out of the heart, out of the inward impulse to do good, to live and die for man, out of the divine instinct of benevolence which desires to make all happy and exclude none, not even the most abandoned and abject, out of the moral duty of benevolence in the highest sense, as having become an inward necessity, i.e. a movement of the heart - out of the human nature therefore as it has revealed itself through the heart, has sprung what is best, what is true in Christianity.<sup>69</sup>

Moreover, love does not require ideal and sublime conditions for its existence, as Spencer had argued, but by its very essence must recognize and accept limitations because it is the nature of existence to be finite and limited. This gives rise to another interesting idea: that because existence is essentially limited, one's initial consciousness of the world must almost inevitably be egoistic by reason of one's inexperience of 'otherness' and limitation:

Consciousness of the world is consciousness of my limitations...the first stone against which the pride of egoism stumbles is the thou and alter ego... Only through his fellow does man become clear to himself and self-conscious; but only when I am clear to myself does the world become clear to me.<sup>70</sup>

The conclusion Feuerbach arrives at is that the love which results from the interaction with otherness and which forces

recognition of oneself is the basic reality and the only true way of becoming for mankind:

Love is God himself, and apart from it there is no God...not a visionary imaginative love - no! A real love, a love which has flesh and blood, which vibrates as a mighty force through all being.<sup>71</sup>

How much more profound and philosophical is this view of the destiny of man, which recognizes the fundamental importance of human will and the consequent uncertainty of the process of becoming, than the casuistry with which Spencer 'discovers' the 'laws' of human evolution in 'The Development Hypothesis'.

One does not need Marian Evans' assurance that 'with the ideas of Feuerbach' she 'everywhere' agrees<sup>72</sup> to recognize his influence on the whole character of her thought and her art. However it is still important to appreciate that she was not dogmatically impressed by Feuerbach, but responded to ideas in him which were statements of her own developing awareness that a truly heuristic critique of humanity and morals cannot involve what is not man, whether it be remote positivistic sequences or the God of Evangelicalism. In this connection it is interesting to reflect that in their acute awareness of the essentially creative process of becoming oneself both Feuerbach and George Eliot remain very modern figures, anticipating the deepest insights of an existentialist such as Martin Buber<sup>73</sup> or the psychologist, Erich Fromm.<sup>74</sup> George Eliot's and Feuerbach's individual and phenomenological

explorations of the spiritual significance of interpersonal love and the personal expression of spiritual love ensure the continuing relevance of their work, while Comtist dogma gathers dust in libraries. It is in the light of this profoundly creative, undogmatic and empirical awareness of life as mysterious process rather than mechanical object that I would now like to discuss George Eliot's so-called 'moral' view of life and art.<sup>75</sup>

It is significant that what must be the fullest and most cogent statements by George Eliot on the purpose of art should appear in several articles she wrote for the Westminster Review in July and October of 1856. It is in September of this year that her journal records the beginning of 'The Sacred Fortunes of The Reverend Amos Barton'.<sup>76</sup> In what Lewes regarded as her most brilliant article, her review of Riehl's The Natural History of German Life,<sup>77</sup> Marian Evans argues originally and incisively for the absolute necessity for realism in art. She begins by praising Riehl's accurate, sympathetic and unsentimental view of the German peasantry and passes to a reflection on the totally inadequate picture of the rural and working classes that one finds in English art and thought:

Probably, if we could ascertain the images called up by the terms 'the people,' 'the masses,' 'the proletariat,' 'the peasantry,' by many who theorize on those bodies with eloquence, or who legislate for them without eloquence, we should find that they indicate almost as small an amount of concrete knowledge - that they are as far from completely representing the complex facts summed up in the collective term, as the

railway images of our non-locomotive gentleman. How little the real characteristics of the working-classes are known to those who are outside them, how little their natural history has been studied, is sufficiently disclosed by our Art as well as by our political and social theories. Where, in our picture exhibitions, shall we find a group of true peasantry? What English artist even attempts to rival in truthfulness such studies of popular life as the pictures of Teniers or the ragged boys of Murillo? Even one of the greatest painters of the pre-eminently realistic school, while, in his picture of 'The Hireling Shepherd,' he gave us a landscape of marvellous truthfulness, placed a pair of peasants in the foreground who were not much more real than the idyllic swains and damsels of our chimney ornaments. Only a total absence of acquaintance and sympathy with our peasantry, could give a moment's popularity to such a picture as 'Cross Purposes,' where we have a peasant girl who looks as if she knew L.E.L.'s poems by heart, and English rustics, whose costume seems to indicate that they are meant for ploughmen, with exotic features that remind us of a handsome primo tenore.<sup>78</sup>

She goes on to observe that even those painters who try to avoid this vulgar caricature and 'aim at giving the rustic type of features...treat their subject under the influence of traditions and prepossessions rather than of direct observation'.<sup>79</sup> Somehow what is always manages to present itself in the guise of what it is not:

The notion that peasants are joyous, that the typical moment to represent a man in a smock-frock is when he is cracking a joke and showing a row of sound teeth, that cottage matrons are usually buxom, and village children necessarily rosy and merry, are prejudices difficult to dislodge from the artistic mind, which looks for its subjects into literature instead of life. The painter is still under the influence of idyllic literature, which has always expressed the imagination of the cultivated and town-bred, rather than the truth of rustic life. Idyllic ploughmen are jocund when they drive their team afield; idyllic shepherds make bashful love under hawthorn bushes; idyllic villagers dance in the

chequered shade and refresh themselves, not immoderately, with spicy nut-brown ale. But no one who has seen much of actual ploughmen thinks them jocund; no one who is well acquainted with the English peasantry can pronounce them merry.<sup>80</sup>

She then gives a description of the English peasantry which probably came as a physical shock to contemporary sensibilities, shaped as they were by the fallacy of the merry peasant:

The slow gaze, in which no sense of beauty beams, no humour twinkles, - the slow utterance, and the heavy slouching walk, remind one rather of that melancholy animal the camel, than of the sturdy countryman, with striped stockings, red waistcoat, and hat aside, who represents the traditional English peasant. Observe a company of haymakers. When you see them at a distance, tossing up the forkfuls of hay in the golden light, while the wagon creeps slowly with its increasing burthen over the meadow, and the bright green space which tells of work done gets larger and larger, you pronounce the scene 'smiling,' and you think these companions in labour must be as bright and cheerful as the picture to which they give animation. Approach nearer, and you will certainly find that haymaking time is a time for joking, especially if there are women among the labourers; but the coarse laugh that bursts out every now and then, and expresses the triumphant taunt, is as far as possible from your conception of idyllic merriment. That delicious effervescence of the mind which we call fun, has no equivalent for the northern peasant, except tipsy revelry; the only realm of fancy and imagination for the English clown exists at the bottom of the third quart pot.<sup>81</sup>

Just as Marian Evans had earlier recognized the morally and empirically unsound tendencies of positivism and Evangelicalism towards a dogmatic idealism, she now recognizes the fundamental unreality of this facile idealizing of rustic life which is encouraged by the pastoral mode:

The selfish instincts are not subdued by the sight of buttercups, nor is integrity in the least established by that classic rural occupation, sheep-washing. To make men moral, something more is requisite than to turn them out to grass.<sup>82</sup>

Marian Evans' indignation at this 'artistic' falsification of an area of life is an expression of her moral and social intelligence. The morality is not - as many critics would lead us to believe by making too facile a distinction between 'moralism' and 'realism' - reducible to discussion in terms of an instinctive 'bias' of her nature, which may or may not be guided by her intelligence. Therefore I think it is ultimately fatuous to suggest, as Knoepflmacher and Paris both do, that George Eliot's art and her realism are instruments of her 'religion of humanity'. Her morality is in the fullest sense an intelligent activity and should be discussed in terms which recognize this. It is her moral intelligence which sees art as a human and social activity, modified by and acting upon social realities. Thus falsification in all art and particularly in art which professes to deal with the people is morally pernicious:

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>83</sup>

That this presupposes an extremely sophisticated view of the role of art in society, rather than the inevitable workings of a moral ideology which subordinates art to the 'interests' of morality is evident in the supreme value Marian Evans places on realism, as distinct from unrealism in a moral cause:

This perversion is not the less fatal because the misrepresentation which gives rise to it has what the artist considers a moral end. The thing for mankind to know is, not what are the motives and influences which the moralist thinks ought to act on the labourer or the artisan, but what are the motives and influences which do act on him. We want to be taught to feel, not for the heroic artisan or the sentimental peasant, but for the peasant in all his coarse apathy, and the artisan in all his suspicious selfishness.<sup>84</sup>

The tendency of moralism away from reality is also recognized as a characteristic feature of the socially, politically and economically based ideologies which profess to work for the amelioration of the human condition:

If we need a true conception of the popular character to guide our sympathies rightly, we need it equally to check our theories, and direct us in their application. The tendency created by the splendid conquests of modern generalization, to believe that all social questions are merged in economical science, and that the relations of men to their neighbours may be settled by algebraic equations, - the dream that the uncultured classes are prepared for a condition which appeals principally to their moral sensibilities, - the aristocratic dilettantism which attempts to restore the 'good old times' by a sort of idyllic masquerading, and to grow feudal fidelity and veneration as we grow prize turnips, by an artificial system of culture, - none of these

diverging mistakes can co-exist with a real knowledge of the People, with a thorough study of their habits, their ideas, their motives.<sup>85</sup>

Accordingly, she notes how Communism fails to revolutionize the German peasants because the ideal and abstract language in which its narrow economic ideology is couched proves to be completely out of touch with their language and expectations.<sup>86</sup> Consequently the value of organic continuity and tradition is emphasized as a means of maintaining the communication between men vital to any society.<sup>87</sup> Whether her obvious approval of Riehl's 'social-political conservatism' suggests that Marian Evans may in this case have adopted what looks like an ideological standpoint, I shall discuss later when treating the novels. What is important to recognize now is that she is searching for the means to give a real picture of her own society.

I have already noted her rejection of the vast bulk of poetry, novels and genre painting because of their cloying pastoralism. In 'Silly Novels by Lady Novelists' she dismisses the rhetoric which mistakes 'vagueness for depth, bombast for eloquence and affectation for originality',<sup>88</sup> and which clogs most of the fiction of her own day. But the possibilities for creating more adequate forms are there: 'the materials of fiction' are like crystalline masses, which may 'take any form, and yet be beautiful; we have only to pour in the right elements - genuine observation, humour and passion'.<sup>89</sup>

In her article on Riehl, Marian Evans gives us an idea of the sort of art which by combining observation, humour and passion in the right proportions really extends readers' sympathies to the working or peasant classes:

When Scott takes us into Luckie Mucklebackit's cottage, or tells the story of 'The Two Drovers,' - when Wordsworth sings to us the reverie of 'Poor Susan,' - when Kingsley shows us Alton Locke gazing yearningly over the gate which leads from the highway into the first wood he ever saw, - when Hornung paints a group of chimney-sweepers, - more is done towards linking the higher classes with the lower, towards obliterating the vulgarity of exclusiveness, than by hundreds of sermons and philosophical dissertations.<sup>90</sup>

However her choice of examples - Scott, Kingsley, Wordsworth and Joseph Hornung, the Swiss painter of genre pieces illustrating social and historical subjects - is less than impressive for twentieth century readers who have had the experience of a more thoroughgoing realism. But this only makes it clear that far from being surrounded by 'determining' influences, Marian Evans is almost completely alone in what she is attempting. The authors mentioned could have a restricting influence on her but certainly none of them could serve as effective models for her attempt to create a social or psychological realism. It is significant that when later in the article she praises Dickens for his 'power of rendering the external traits of our town population', she remarks on his failure to 'give us their psychological character...with the same truth as their idiom and manners'.<sup>91</sup> Indeed, she sees that but for his humour and power to capture the surfaces

of life, which acts as a corrective to his 'frequently false psychology', his

...preternaturally virtuous poor children and artisans...would be as noxious as Eugene Sue's idealized proletaires in encouraging the miserable fallacy that high morality and refined sentiment can grow out of harsh social relations, ignorance and want.<sup>92</sup>

For Marian Evans, social realism in a novel obviously requires a quite sophisticated conception of character and intelligent human interaction to be effective. So when in the article on lady novelists she mentions Mrs. Gaskell as an example of what women are capable of<sup>93</sup> but does not further allude to her as a model of social realism, I am inclined to think that it is because she finds Mrs. Gaskell's books psychologically uninteresting. Similarly, though she recognizes the talent of Harriet Beecher Stowe, whose novels did so much towards extending the sympathy of English readers to Negro slaves, she also notices psychological naivety in 'the absence of any proportionate exhibition of the Negro character in its less amiable phases'.<sup>94</sup>

Jane Austen was the only novelist in English fiction up to that time with the intelligence and the sophisticated sense of character and human interaction that George Eliot was to display. Marian Evans' journal shows that she re-read most of Jane Austen's novels between February and June 1857,<sup>95</sup> and so she must have been well impressed by the awareness of ambiguities and subtleties that Jane Austen possessed and her

own well-meaning contemporaries lacked. Certainly Lewes was. In a Westminster Review article written in 1852 he called her

The greatest artist that has ever written, using the term to signify the most perfect mastery of means over end... To read some of her books is like an actual experience of life: you know the people as if you had lived with them, and you feel something of personal affection for them.<sup>96</sup>

One wonders, then, why Marian Evans does not take more obvious notice of Jane Austen throughout the articles in which she develops and refines her conception of realism. Perhaps it is because, like Fielding, Jane Austen appears to be so much an eighteenth century figure, and she must have seemed particularly so in Marian Evans' time, 'when the soul of man was waking to pulses which had for centuries been beating in him unheard'.<sup>97</sup> For Marian Evans, deeply conscious as she was of participating in the search for purpose characteristic of her age, there may even have been something disquieting about Jane Austen's reserved ambiguity of tone. Certainly Jane Austen gives the impression of a sphinx-like neutrality at times. But perhaps the most obvious characteristic of Jane Austen's work which would keep her from consideration in Marian Evans' articles on realism is her deliberate focussing upon quite small areas of society. If one was concerned to take the lower classes into one's consideration of life then Jane Austen's admittedly ambiguous taunt - 'Let other pens dwell on guilt and misery, I quit such odious subjects as soon as I can',<sup>98</sup> - contains a damning measure of truth.

We may conclude by granting that when Marian Evans begins her own experiments in fiction, she has accepted the idea that the only meaningful sphere of inquiry is the human and social rather than the metaphysical. Yet she is very conscious of the inadequacy of English thought and art in realizing this insight: everything remains to be done. While Feuerbach supplies philosophy with a critique of the actual psychological and personal bases of love and morality, fiction, and English fiction in particular, is sadly lacking in this order of seriousness and penetration. Consequently it is inadequate as a reflection of existing realities and as a way of answering present needs. While Riehl can supply the Germans with a clear sighted view of the way their society works, English social studies are mechanistic, and English novels are clogged with triviality, idealized conventions or simplistic psychology. Marian Evans, therefore, sees her task broadly as exploring at a personal and interpersonal level 'what our thought and emotion may be capable of',<sup>99</sup> as well as mitigating 'the vulgarity of exclusiveness',<sup>100</sup> by extending the social range of fiction.

This thesis attempts to examine George Eliot's novels as acts of creative thought or 'experiments in life',<sup>101</sup> in which she tries to work out what she sees as the chief problems of her age. Ultimately this will involve an assessment of the quality of her thought as revealed in her art. The criteria of validity are obscure but must finally relate back to the question of the enduring meaning of her work, to

whether or not it is 'quite the key to our age'. In my criticism of the novels I will treat them as acts of language, attempts to realize her profound sense of life through plot, character and the tools of fiction. As I do not hold the view that her sense of life is fully formed before she begins writing fiction, I tend to see each novel as unique rather than as a variation on a common theme. This is not to say that I will make no attempt to recognize obvious similarities, but the comparisons I make will demonstrate the movement and development of her mind and art. In any essential movement basic differences of conception and design must be as much a significant characteristic of form as are constant motifs. Consequently I do not propose to follow a uniform approach in the case of each novel, but to allow the novels to be interesting in different ways.

1. James wrote in all ten essays on George Eliot and her work, the most important (for our purposes) being as follows:
  - 'Felix Holt, The Radical', The Nation, III, 16 Aug. 1866, 127-8.
  - 'The Novels of George Eliot', Atlantic Monthly, XVIII, 1866, 479-92.
  - 'Middlemarch', Galaxy, XV, 1873, 424-8.
  - 'Daniel Deronda: A Conversation', Atlantic Monthly, XXXVIII, 1876, 684-94.
  - 'The Life of George Eliot', Atlantic Monthly, LV, 1885, 668-78.

An extensive analysis of the influence on later criticism of James' perspective on George Eliot appears in W.J. Harvey's The Art of George Eliot, Chatto and Windus, London, 1963, Chapters 1-4, passim.

2. J.W. Cross (ed.), George Eliot's Life: As Related in Her Letters and Journals, 1885 and new edition, A.M.S. Press, N.Y., 1965.
3. W.J. Harvey, 'George Eliot' in L. Stevenson (ed.), Victorian Fiction: A Guide to Research, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1964, p. 294.
4. See G.S. Haight, George Eliot: A Biography, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1968, passim.
5. Lord David Cecil, Early Victorian Novelists: Essays in Revaluation, 1934, Collins (Fontana), London, 1964, pp. 215-51, passim.
6. G.M. Young, 'The Mercian Sibyl' in W.D. Handcock (ed.), Victorian Essays, Oxford University Press, London, 1962, p. 131.
7. Chatto and Windus, London.
8. Barbara Hardy (ed.), Critical Essays on George Eliot, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1970, p. viii.
9. Barbara Hardy, The Novels of George Eliot: A Study in Form, University of London Press, London, 1959.
10. See especially his The Art of George Eliot, Chatto and Windus, London, 1963.
11. In Victorian Fiction: A Guide to Research, p. 312.

12. Nineteenth Century Studies: Coleridge to Matthew Arnold, Penguin Press, 1949, p. 215.
13. Harvey, in Victorian Fiction: A Guide to Research, pp. 295-6.
14. Middlemarch From Notebook to Novel: A Study of George Eliot's Creative Method, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 1960, p. 105.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid., Ch. 4, passim.
17. Ibid., pp. 107-8.
18. See footnote 4.
19. The George Eliot Letters in 7 Volumes, Oxford University Press, London, and Yale University Press, Newhaven, 1956. All subsequent references to the Letters will be to this edition, hereafter abbreviated as G.E.L.
20. T. Pinney (ed.), The Essays of George Eliot, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1963.
21. Edith Simcox and George Eliot, Oxford University Press, London, 1961.
22. In Victorian Fiction: A Guide to Research, p. 322.
23. Religious Humanism and The Victorian Novel: George Eliot, Walter Pater and Samuel Butler, Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J., 1965, and 'Religious Humanism and The Victorian Novel: A Postscript', in S.K. Kumar (ed.), British Victorian Literature: Recent Revaluations, New York University Press, N.Y. and University of London Press, London, 1969, pp. 202-14.
24. Experiments in Life: George Eliot's Quest for Values, Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 1965.
25. 'George Eliot's Religion of Humanity' in English Literary History, XXIX, 1962, 418-43.
26. 'Idea and Image in the Novels of George Eliot', in Critical Essays on George Eliot, pp. 159-60.
27. Ibid., p. 160.
28. Ibid., p. vii.

29. Ibid., pp. 133-51.
30. Ibid., pp. 199-215.
31. Ibid., pp. 157-99.
32. Chatto and Windus, London, 1970.
33. G.E.L., VI, 216.
34. Ibid., 216-7.
35. George Eliot to J. Morley, May 14th 1867 (L.W.Smith Collection, Morristown, N.J.), quoted by Haight, op. cit., p. 396.
36. Middlemarch, 2 Volumes, Dent (Everyman), London, 1965, Vol. I, 122.
37. Tom Jones, Dent (Everyman), London, 1962, p. 393.
38. Henry James, 'George Eliot's Middlemarch' in Nineteenth Century Fiction, VIII, 1953, 170.
39. G.E.L., II, 82.
40. Op. cit., p. 215.
41. Op. cit., p. 39.
42. G.E.L., I, 45.
43. Haight, op. cit., p. 39.
44. [N.P.] London, 1838.
45. Willey, op. cit., p. 224.
46. Longman and Company, London, 1841.
47. Phases of Opinion and Experience During a Long Life: An Autobiography, 1885, p. 23, quoted by Haight, op. cit., p. 37.
48. G.E.L., V, 403.
49. Her translation was published as The Life of Jesus, critically examined by David Friedrich Strauss, translated from the fourth German edition in 3 Volumes, Chapman Bros., London, 1846.

50. G.E.L., I, 206.
51. Marian Evans (trans.), op. cit., III, 396.
52. See footnote 40.
53. 'Evangelical Teaching: Dr. Cumming' Westminster Review, LXIV, 1955, in Essays, ed. cit., pp. 335-85.
54. Westminster Review, LXVII, 1857, in Essays, ed. cit., pp. 335-85.
55. Westminster Review, LIV, 1851, in Essays, ed. cit., pp. 27-46.
56. G.E.L., III, 227.
57. G.E.L., VI, 163.
58. Auguste Comte, A General View of Positivism, translated by J.H. Bridges, Academic Reprints, Stanford, 1953, pp. 28-9.
59. Ibid., p. 29.
60. G.E.L., VI, 66.
61. G.E.L., III, 366.
62. Paris, in English Literary History, XXIX, 1962, 418.
63. Op. cit., pp. 112-7.
64. Ibid., p. 115.
65. Ibid., p. 117.
66. J.L. Lowes, The Road to Xanadu, Constable and Company, London, 1927.
67. Her translation was published in 1854 as The Essence of Christianity.
68. Marian Evans (trans.), The Essence of Christianity, new edition, Harper and Row, New York, Evanston and London, 1957, p. 34.
69. Ibid., p. 60.
70. Ibid., p. 82.
71. Ibid., p. 47.
72. G.E.L., II, 153.

73. 'Between Man and Man', 'I and Thou', selected excerpts in The Writings of Martin Buber, W. Herberg (ed.), Meridian Books, New York, 1965.
74. The Art of Loving, Unwin Books, London, 1971.
75. The notion that George Eliot held a dual attitude towards art and life, expressing itself in 'moralistic' or 'realistic' terms, seems to be common among virtually all critics of her, but more particularly those who have analysed her as an ideological barometer: e.g. Paris, Experiments in Life, ed. cit., p. 115.
76. Haight, op. cit., p. 210.
77. Westminster Review, LXVI, 1856, in Essays, ed. cit., pp. 266-99.
78. Ibid., p. 268.
79. Ibid., pp. 268-9.
80. Ibid., p. 269.
81. Ibid.
82. Ibid., p. 270.
83. Ibid.
84. Ibid.
85. Ibid., p. 272.
86. Ibid., pp. 284-5.
87. Ibid., p. 287.
88. Ibid., p. 316.
89. Ibid., p. 324.
90. Ibid., p. 270.
91. Ibid., p. 271.
92. Ibid., pp. 271-2.
93. Ibid., p. 322.

94. 'Three Novels', Westminster Review, LXVI, 1856, in Essays, ed. cit., p. 327.
95. Haight, op. cit., p. 225.
96. Quoted by Haight, op. cit., p. 134.
97. Daniel Deronda, 2 Volumes, Dent (Everyman), London, 1964, Vol. I, 89.
98. 'Mansfield Park' in The Works of Jane Austen, Allan Wingate, London, 1962, p. 552.
99. G.E.L., VI, 216.
100. Essays, ed. cit., p. 270.
101. G.E.L., loc. cit.

CHAPTER 1 : SCENES OF CLERICAL LIFE

In her Westminster Review article 'Silly Novels by Lady Novelists' Marian Evans had attacked two species of fiction professing to deal with the church. One was an 'oracular' sort of novel usually prompted by a sublime feeling of allegiance to the High Church.<sup>1</sup> The other was 'the white neckcloth species', or the Evangelical counterpart of High Church fiction, which was no less snobbish and cant ridden, 'intended as a sort of medicinal sweetmeat for Low Church young ladies'.<sup>2</sup>

In Scenes of Clerical Life Marian Evans, now George Eliot, attempts to show 'the real drama of Evangelicalism' which 'lies among the middle and lower classes'.<sup>3</sup> Thus the tales are designed to illustrate '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'.<sup>4</sup>

Each of the tales is unique in attempting to reach this broadly-stated critical and philosophical goal by various fictional means corresponding to differing human perspectives. The psychology operates on a different level in each case revealing different structures of intelligence and feeling. It is as if the author was aware of several ways in which it would be possible to touch life. One could sensitively

register its outline as in the figure of Amos Barton. One could attempt to delve beneath a surface appearance by an imaginative reconstruction of past history as she does with Mr. Gilfil. One could be intensely aware of relationship as process, or of the creative possibilities of a relationship for revealing a fuller sense of life, as George Eliot appears to be with Janet and Tryan in 'Janet's Repentance'. I shall now briefly examine each of the tales with an eye to their individual uniqueness of perspective and form as well as their overall similarity of theme. I should then like to consider the overall impression of their realism.

'The Sad Fortunes of The Reverend Amos Barton', the first of the tales, deals with a prosaic and emotionally inarticulate Evangelical parson whose rigid adherence to Evangelical dogma deadens his emotional sensibilities and creates a barrier between himself, his family and his parish. In this atmosphere, real sympathy is not given a chance to grow. Amos seems to take the absolute unquestioning love and devotion of his wife for granted. George Eliot succeeds very well in conveying the harsh, limited existence of Amos and his family, and there is a real depth of psychological penetration in the sense we get of Amos' alienation from his true emotional being:

For though Amos thought himself strong, he did not feel himself strong. Nature had given him the opinion but not the sensation.<sup>5</sup>

Amos' picture of himself standing single-handed in the stronghold of Satan, which is Shepperton, is pathetically unreal. The workers of Shepperton have enough real misery of their own to occupy them and are not conscious of any spiritual or material sustenance from Amos.

The love of Amos' wife, Milly, for her obviously limited husband is very moving and deeply true. However, George Eliot is guilty of the same psychological simplism that she recognized in so much contemporary fiction in that she sees Milly as uniformly good and self-sacrificing. When the egoistic Countess Czerlaski comes to stay with them and so adds to the financial burden of the Barton household, Milly is too self-sacrificing to be angry. She remains meek in spite of the fact that not only herself but her husband and children will be the poorer for the Countess' stay. It is Nanny the servant who, sympathizing with Milly's illness, must finally drive out the Countess. Nanny is also aware of how Amos' reputation suffers by having the Countess in the house. The implication is that this working class woman is closest to Amos and his family when they need her, not when she hears Amos preach. Similarly, when Amos is bereaved, the population of Shepperton takes a more sympathetic, understanding attitude towards him. However, even though Milly's death is partly the result of a questionable if self-sacrificing tolerance, the pathos of Amos' bereavement is real, as is his growth through suffering into a more sympathetic relationship

with his parishoners.

In this tale, then, George Eliot succeeds fairly well in realizing her design of showing a Feuerbachian growth into awareness through suffering in an Evangelical parson ministering to the middle and lower classes of English provincial town life. At one level the success is due to the combination of a fairly sombre physical realism with an awareness of the subtleties of class interdependence. The tale also succeeds at the individual level due to an acute psychological penetration which, though directed at Amos mainly from the outside, manages to strike a crucial balance between objectivity and sympathy.

'Mr. Gilfil's Love Story' is less successful. Though like 'Amos Barton' it is liberally supplied with childhood memories and realistic detail its plot is melodramatic and quite unreal. In trying to get inside Mr. Gilfil by understanding him in terms of his history, George Eliot loses the sense of vital connection between Gilfil as old man and Gilfil as young lover, and becomes entangled in incidental romance. Certainly we could be expected to feel for the aged and crabbed Mr. Gilfil and to legitimately imagine that his life once contained fuller possibilities and youthful loves and hopes which were perhaps crushed. But the fictional method of realizing this is through a romantic fable marked by the

simplistic psychology George Eliot deplored in other lady novelists. That Caterina, the girl whom Gilfil loves, should be possessed body and soul by Captain Wybrow is hardly believable. When Wybrow conveniently dies of a heart attack just as she is about to plunge a knife into him, we are reminded of conventional romances in which this sort of improbable event abounds. The whole emphasis on the tragedy arising out of Caterina's passion reflects the common romantic notion that young girls of particularly fine sensibility must, in Rosamond Vincy's words, 'love at once and without change'.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, it is perhaps unreal to assume that Maynard Gilfil's very nobility prevents him from loving again after his 'first and only love'.<sup>7</sup>

In the finest of the three tales, 'Janet's Repentance', George Eliot shows a subtle and generally unflinching awareness of the psychological being of the characters she deals with and places them within a starkly realized background of English provincial town life. The tale shows a fuller awareness of the multidimensionality of life than either of the preceding ones. The outside observer feels with her main characters rather than for them. There is empathy rather than sympathy as in 'Amos Barton' or sentimentality as in 'Mr. Gilfil's Love Story'.

Janet Dempster is driven to alcoholism and despair by the brutality of her husband, an unloving, overbearing

drunkard. He seems to enjoy destroying his wife's peace and humiliating her in front of his mother, to whom he always acts with respect. He is feared and hated alike by the townspeople because his practice of law may give him the chance to turn it against any one of them. As in 'Amos Barton' a sense of interlocking social worlds emerges, if fitfully, by allusion in the conversation of various characters, and plays a central role in the plot. When Tryan the Evangelical curate comes to Milby to serve the artisan class, it is largely the prejudice of a professional class and their hangers-on which opposes him. Dempster himself plays a prominent part in this activity and manages to instigate an attempt to drive Tryan out by force. When Janet at first sympathizes with Tryan and then seeks his guidance, she offends against the 'vulgarity of exclusiveness' which her own class holds as a value. Dempster's brutal opposition is thereby given a social context. Tryan himself is quite real and his sympathy is not marred by psychological naivety in its portrayal. We are gradually informed of his prior acquaintance with suffering and his own tendency towards certain weaknesses by his own confession. We are not expected to regard him as an incarnation of goodness but as a human being who, by living through misery engendered by pride, has developed a sympathetic sense of the misery of other people.

After Dempster's death Tryan himself falls ill and has to depend on Janet instead of having her depend on him. The love that develops between them is altogether real and plainly shows a deep understanding of what love is. It is not the mad passion crippling one for life that we see in Maynard Gilfil; rather, it grows out of a very real relationship of mutual sympathy and dependence.

However though a fundamental balance has been struck between observation and empathy and the social intelligence is in evidence, there are flaws. If the goodness of Tryan and Janet is understood, it is not so certain that Dempster's evil is. Apart from pointing out that he reflects the vulgarities of his class, George Eliot makes no real attempt to explain him at the personal level, to show why he has become so abandoned. This suggests that, contrary to her professed intentions, the author shrinks from exploring the full implications of the personal misery and social unsalubriousness which she does present to some degree in this and in the other tales. The tales must ultimately be judged in terms of a vision which they helped pioneer, a realist vision sensitive to nuance and uncompromising in portraying the harsher aspects of life.

In spite of their realism and emotional intelligence the tales as a group reveal an uncertainty or naivety

in narrative technique. To understand why, we must go further than merely assuming that as apprentice works they must inevitably be flawed, and look at them in the context of the public to whom George Eliot addresses her fiction. The reading public was unprepared for the sort of realism Marian Evans argues for in the pages of the Westminster Review. Blackwood, her publisher, was unsympathetic with the harshness and bleakness of the tales and of Part One of 'Janet's Repentance' he wrote:

It is exceedingly clever and some of the bits and descriptions of character are first rate, but I should have liked a pleasanter picture. Surely the colours are rather harsh for a sketch of English country town life only twenty five years ago... Still it is true to nature. The case is but too common... I feel certain that I am right in advising you to soften your picture as much as you can.<sup>8</sup>

But George Eliot feels she has softened her picture enough already:

The real town was more vicious than my Milby; the real Dempster was far more disgusting than mine; the real Janet alas! had a far sadder end than mine, who will melt away from the reader's sight in purity, happiness and beauty.<sup>9</sup>

If George Eliot thought of herself as a realist, why was the real town more vicious than the one she has portrayed, why was the real Dempster more disgusting than hers, and why did the real Janet come to a sad end while, as she half-bitterly remarks, hers 'will melt away from the reader's sight in purity, happiness and beauty'?

Clearly we must reject any suggestion that, like many of her contemporaries, George Eliot was innocently unaware of the evil and sordidness around her. We can only conclude that whereas she is both aware of the vicious aspects of life and determined to portray them, she lacks the full means to do so. It is not only a question of intention but of sensibility. She cannot write in a vacuum but must address her fiction to a sympathetic public which, it is hoped, will desire to see more of her work. Though her realism is a departure from accepted practice it must retain a relation to that practice. She may chastise the reader when she argues for a more realistic and hence more serious view of common life. On the other hand she may also be cloyingly familiar:

Reader! did you ever taste such a cup of tea as Miss Gibbs is this moment handling to Mr. Pilgrim?...<sup>10</sup>  
No - most likely you are a miserable town-bred reader.

If the intimacy of this sort of tone takes the edge off the harshness that the tales reveals, it succeeds in endearing the author to her public. The tone is so intimate that the public imagined the author to be one of themselves rather than the disturbing Miss Evans of the Westminster Review. It is no accident that the majority of readers of Scenes of Clerical Life pronounced confidently that its anonymous author was a clergyman. Jane Carlyle guessed that

the author was

...a man of middle age, with a wife from whom he has got those beautiful feminine touches in his book, a good many children, and a dog that he has as much fondness for as I have for my little Nero! for the rest, not just a clergyman, but brother or first cousin to a clergyman! 11

In spite of their analytical vigour and honesty 'Amos Barton' and 'Janet's Repentance' appear in some aspects to be naive and sentimental. But whereas the sentimentality of 'Mr. Gilfil's Love Story' reveals itself in the very conception of plot and character, the occasional naivety of the other two stories is one of tone - possibly indicating that at this early stage George Eliot is unsure of her public.

However in their variety of technique and perspective the tales lay the groundwork for the more daring and more fully realized explorations of realistic idiom to be found in the novels.

1. Essays, ed. cit., pp. 310-2.
2. Ibid., p. 317.
3. Ibid., p. 318.
4. G.E.L., II, 274.
5. The Scenes of Clerical Life in The Works of George Eliot,  
Blackwood, London, no date given, I, 34.
6. Middlemarch, Dent, (Everyman), London, I, 262.
7. Epilogue to 'Mr. Gilfil's Love Story' in Works, ed. cit.  
I, 38.
8. G.E.L., II, 344-5.
9. Ibid., 347-9.
10. 'Amos Barton', Works, ed. cit., I, 10.
11. G.E.L., II, 425-6.

\* \* \* \*

CHAPTER 2 : ADAM BEDE.

Professor Haight has noted that Adam Bede was conceived as another clerical scene, but that Blackwood's lack of enthusiasm for the realism of 'Janet's Repentance' made George Eliot resolve to close the series.<sup>1</sup> In referring to Adam Bede she reassures Blackwood as follows:

I have a subject in mind which will not come under the limitations of the title 'Clerical Life', and I am inclined to take a large canvas for it and write a novel... It will be a country<sub>2</sub> story - full of the breath of cows and the scent of hay.

One wonders if George Eliot means to further soften her picture. Certainly the total impression of Adam Bede is distinctly less harsh than that of 'Janet's Repentance'.

Whether or not this is so, George Eliot informs us that the genesis of the novel differs from that of Scenes of Clerical Life because less of the significant material is actually remembered.<sup>3</sup> In this case, remembered experience seems to be important for the imaginative possibilities it suggests, rather than on its own account. The novel was prompted by

...an anecdote told my by my Methodist aunt Samuel...an anecdote from her own experience...it occurred to her to tell me how she had visited a condemned criminal - a very ignorant girl, who had murdered her child and refused to confess; how she had stayed with her praying through the night, and how the poor creature at last broke out into tears and confessed her crime. My aunt afterwards went with her in the cart to the place of execution.<sup>4</sup>

George Eliot recalled how she began

...blending this and some other recollections of my aunt in one story with some points in my father's early life and character... The character of Dinah grew out of my recollections of my aunt but Dinah is not at all like my aunt, who was a very small black-eyed woman, and (as I was told, for I never heard her preach) very vehement in her style of preaching... The character of Adam and one or two incidents connected with him were suggested by my father's early life; but Adam is not my father any more than Dinah is my aunt. Indeed there is not a single portrait in Adam Bede; only the suggestions of experience wrought up into new combinations.<sup>5</sup>

We can see that George Eliot is not concerned here with a strictly documentary realism but is more aware of previous experience as the raw material for a new articulation. It would also appear that there is an element of experimentation in so far as she claims that the novel develops spontaneously from a very bare plan:

When I began to write it, the only elements I had determined on, besides the character of Dinah, were the character of Adam, his relation to Arthur Donnithorne, and their mutual relations to Hetty - i.e. the girl who commits child murder - the scene in the prison being of course the climax towards which I worked. Everything else grew out of the characters and their mutual relations.<sup>6</sup>

If this passage comes very close to suggesting what critics generally have assumed, that Adam Bede was inspired by imagination working through memory,<sup>7</sup> Professor Haight shows just how little of the novel was drawn from actual memory and how much of the main action and the background was the result of careful research. Not only was George Eliot's 'acquaintance

with Methodists...limited to one or two visits of her aunt' but many of Dinah's defining characteristics such as her method of divining God's will by opening the bible at hazard and reading the first tract the eye falls upon, her belief in present miracles, her visits to prisons and madhouses, and her preaching in the calm still evening with the setting sun behind her, were drawn directly from Southey's Life of Wesley.<sup>8</sup> George Eliot's journal also suggests that many of the naturalistic touches in the background of the novel were drawn from scrupulous research into sources from the period in which Adam Bede is set.<sup>9</sup>

I do not think, then, that it is valid to treat the novel as an act of imagination working through memory, thereby producing a work of unconsciously inspired naturalism marred at times by conscious moralizing. Rather I think we must look at it in the light of George Eliot's own professed intentions to develop an idiom of moral, psychological and social realism. Her hints that the novel is partly the result of natural spontaneity are not critically helpful except in so far as they suggest that there may be a greater degree of subjective involvement in this book than in The Clerical Scenes, so that her creations will be less determined by correspondences to actual events and more by what she wishes to do with them. Thus we could expect that in this work we will have a truer

indication of the depth of the novelist's understanding of her critical and philosophical insight that true morality is to be conceived of in limited circumstances which will be themselves fairly representative of existing social conditions.

The plot of Adam Bede would seem to recapitulate and extend the insight that lies behind the plots of 'Amos Barton' and 'Janet's Repentance'. In all three cases we see a growth through suffering to larger awareness and sympathy. In the present novel Adam, a simple but noble-minded carpenter, falls in love with Hetty Sorrel whose vanity leads her to seek further afield than a humble carpenter. She cherishes hopes that Arthur Donnithorne, the young squire, is in love with her and dreams that Arthur will marry her and raise her from the drudgery of her present low social position as milkmaid on her aunt Poyser's farm. Arthur, a basically good natured but careless young egoist, finds he is attracted to Hetty and against his better judgement does not seek help from his friend Irwine the minister but puts himself in the way of temptation and seduces Hetty. Adam sees them embracing and fights with Arthur who makes a partial confession of his guilt. But Hetty becomes pregnant and in several months when she can no longer hide the fact, runs away to find Arthur who has gone off to join his regiment. She fails to find him and wanders deliriously through the countryside, has her baby and leaves it to die. Hetty is thrown into prison and is finally led to

repent by Dinah Shaw, her Methodist cousin whose saintliness had earlier been contrasted with Hetty's worldliness, while Adam is advised by Irwine the minister to suppress his hatred of Arthur and subdue his anger. Hetty is transported while Arthur remorsefully leaves the district to serve in the army. After several years of suffering Adam finds that he is drawn to Dinah who has been a great solace to him, while Dinah, by admitting she is drawn to Adam, sees the folly of her adoption of the role of Methodist ascetic and servant of God only. For both of them sorrow has changed the face of love as of awareness and still remains as a primary fact of consciousness:

It would be a poor result of all our anguish and our wrestling if we won nothing but our own selves at the end of it - if we could return to the same blind loves, the same self-confident blame, the same light thoughts of human suffering, the same frivolous gossip over blighted human lives, the same feeble sense of that unknown towards which we have sent forth irrepressible cries in our loneliness. Let us rather be thankful that our sorrow lives in us as an indestructible force, only changing its form, as forces do, and passing from pain into sympathy - the one poor word that includes all our best insight and our best love.<sup>10</sup>

The novel was quite unique in its time in that the main characters, Adam and Dinah, were drawn from the lower classes. There is also a very strong suggestion that Arthur's position as the young squire, which in most fiction would be enough for him to be seen in the heroic role, actually puts him on a lower moral plane than Adam, the workman. Thus the novel appears to be a very conscious attempt to extend the readers'

conception of morality by showing that it is not inconsistent with a low social position. However the fictional method of Adam Bede is vastly different from that employed in 'Amos Barton' and 'Janet's Repentance'. To begin with we may note that the structure of the narrative is far more complicated and seems to play a very significant role in forming the nature of our response to certain characters and situations.

As the novel begins innocently and straightforwardly enough by taking us into the carpenter's shop where Adam and his brother Seth are at work with their fellows, Adam's marked characteristics, his essential nobility and his impatience with what he considers to be coarse and unbecoming behaviour strikes us almost immediately. We see from his behaviour and conversation that he is sharply distinguished from the other workmen by his good sense and the pride he takes in his work. But we also see the truth in Wiry Ben's reproach that he is too short with others and 'fond enough o' preaching',<sup>11</sup> himself. However the first chapter passes into the second by way of a mediating literary device: the use of the elderly articulate stranger on a horse as an observer of the scene about to be depicted. As Adam walks home, at the end of Chapter 1, he passes by the stranger on the horse who, struck by this specimen of rustic nobility, turns around to take a second look. Adam, we are told, is 'unconscious of the admiration he was exciting'.<sup>12</sup>

In Chapter 2 the stranger encounters Mr. Casson,

the innkeeper, and through their conversation we learn that there is to be a Methodist woman preaching on the green. The stranger thinks he knows what to expect from Methodists and has no intention of staying to hear. We suspect that his opinion of them echoes that of Mr. Casson:

'...I've heard as there's no holding these Methodisses when the maggit's once got i' their head: many of 'em goes stark starin' mad wi' their religion'.<sup>13</sup>

However the self-assured condescension of the traveller stops short at Dinah as he sees her, and is moved by her on her own terms:

The simple things she said seemed like novelties as a melody strikes us with a new feeling when we hear it sung by the pure voice of a boyish chorister; the quiet depth of conviction with which she spoke seemed in itself an evidence for the truth of her message.<sup>14</sup>

Thus the stranger is compelled to say and listen in spite of himself:

The stranger who had been interested in the course of her sermon, as if it had been the development of a drama - for there is this fascination in all sincere and unpremeditated eloquence, which opens to one the inward drama of the speaker's emotions - now turned his horse aside and pursued his way...<sup>15</sup>

It is significant that while the stranger and the author do not see anything remarkable in the rustics gathered to hear the sermon they do see something remarkable in Adam and Dinah. The rustics are generally treated condescendingly or quite objectively. Thus there is humour in the absurdities of Mr. Casson, and we are led to sympathize, though condescendingly, with Chad's Bess who in the simplicity of her

rustic heart has been moved to tears by Dinah's sermon. But if the rustics are 'softened' by such touches they are not idealized and we occasionally meet a passage almost scientifically objective in its statement:

But do not imagine them gathered in a knot. Villagers never swarm: a whisper is unknown among them, and they seem almost as incapable of an undertone as a corn or a stag. Your true rustic turns his back on his interlocutors, throwing his questions over his shoulder, as if he meant to run away from the answer...<sup>16</sup>

However, Adam and Dinah are not seen in this way. Nor are they condescended to. Adam is seen by the stranger while walking over the hill singing a hymn. Dinah's sermon strikes the stranger 'as if it had been the development of a drama'. While the rustics are presented as a class, what we are meant to respond to in Adam and Dinah are not primarily social characteristics but personal or moral characteristics. We do not see them as representatives of a social class, as the other rustics all too obviously are, but as representatives of a different order of being which marks them out from the rustics. They are presented poetically and dramatically and so give promise of much greater fictional possibilities and overall human significance than do the rustics who lack a poetic and dramatic fictional dimension.

Thus by use of tone, dramatic and poetic suggestion and the articulate educated stranger on horseback, whose reactions the reader is encouraged to identify with, George Eliot makes a clear distinction in sensibility if not directly

in class between Adam and Dinah and their rustic compeers. We suspect that the sensibility of which Adam and Dinah are representative is not a rustic sensibility but that of a mind which imagines a noble rustic existence on the one hand and sees all too clearly an actual crabbed rustic existence on the other. Certainly no such elaborate measures were taken to ensure that we see Amos Barton, Mr. Tryan or Janet Dempster in any dimension other than that which defines their social environment.

As we read on we find that this naivety of sensibility which, through narrative techniques suggests a sharp distinction in heart and mind between the two main characters and people who we would think were their social and intellectual equals, is recapitulated on the levels of description, character and plot. The naivety of sensibility becomes to some degree a naivety of social and psychological awareness. However this does not become really obvious until quite late in the novel when Hetty is tried for murder. It is a tribute to the author's genius that it does not become glaringly apparent earlier.

I should now like to look more closely at the background which gives atmosphere to the novel, the sense of its being full of 'the breath of cows and scent of hay'.<sup>17</sup>

The description of the Poyser farm was probably one of the most appealing features of the book for Victorian

readers. Certainly it would have been a quite novel experience after a uniform diet of the genteel romances and melodramas that George Eliot attacks as the primary material for Lady Novelists. Jane Carlyle's reaction to this book as a whole suggests distinct relief:

O yes! It was as good as going into the country for one's health, the reading of that book was! - Like a visit to Scotland minus the fatigue of the long journey, and the grief of seeing friends grown old, and places that knew me, knowing me no more! I could fancy in reading it, to be seeing and hearing once again a crystal-clear, musical Scotch stream, such as I long to lie down beside and - cry at (!) for gladness and sadness...<sup>18</sup>

Obviously Adam Bede was felt not only to be real but entirely natural as well. The natural, wholesome element of the book is nowhere more evident than in George Eliot's treatment of the Poyzers. The farm is a centre of bustling activity directed by Mrs. Poyser whose sharp tongue ensures that no work is left undone, no dust left to be cleared up and no trouble spared in making her cheese and cream the finest in the county. The Poyzers give too much evidence of life and their dialogue is too idiosyncratic and easily flowing for them to be considered in the same breath with the caricatures that contemporary pastoral literature tended to produce. However they do show strong evidence of genre in their make-up, or perhaps more evidently in the way they relate to the plot. They do not develop as individual characters or depart from the expectations that a first description of them gives us. They are

perhaps too obviously characteristic of how farm life should be lived rather than of how it is lived. The plot moves around them and involves them to some extent but does not affect them as individuals or affect the way that they are characteristic of the ideal farm life.<sup>19</sup> The threat by the old squire to take over their property which has been in Poyser hands for generations gives promise of something more than a genre treatment. We are momentarily reminded of the cruel injustice that tenant farmers were commonly exposed to in the early part of the nineteenth century before a developing social consciousness made a show of curbing the power of the landholders in the nominal interests of social justice. But if we expect an exploration of this theme we are disappointed when the whole issue is simplistically resolved by one of Mrs. Poyser's characteristic outbursts of speaking her mind. Certainly it is clear where George Eliot's sympathies lie, and that the old squire is in the wrong, but to show the squire being driven off by Mrs. Poyser's sharp tongue gives a false impression of the helplessness of tenant farmers and the difficulty of bringing about a social change which might alleviate their condition. A Victorian reader who chuckled over the humour of this scene may well have been lulled into a complacent faith in English pluck rather than alerted to the complexity of the social issues involved. The Marian Evans of the Westminster Review was clearly aware that to generate

sympathy by any means other than an exacting and socially intelligent realism, was quite useless in terms of inspiring appropriate reform.

Adam Bede tends to develop very much at a slow leisurely pace passing from one locale or one situation to another. For instance the whole of the third book is devoted to the birthday feast held to celebrate the young squire's coming of age. Like the Poyser farm this situation provides the author with an opportunity to develop a broad sense of the general rustic medium in which the main characters move. And like the Poyser farm it is a phenomenon which creates its own distinctive feeling of life and functions very patently as a background against which the main drama is played out. Hetty does see Arthur at the dance and becomes more emotionally involved with him, but the birthday feast gives the overall impression of remaining self-sufficient and outside of the plot.

The method of portraying characters in Adam Bede is not, when compared even with 'Amos Barton' and Janet's Repentance', a subtle one. The character of most of the main figures - Adam, Dinah, Irwine and Hetty - is stated quite fully to begin with before the plot fairly gets under way. Only with Arthur do we get a sense of a character actually developing and being shaped by the plot.

The impression we have of Adam remains relatively stable even though he is the main figure in the novel. However

if this suggests a certain clumsiness of conception, Adam is nevertheless quite an impressive fictional creation. If he sometimes gives a sense of being poetically imagined, there is no inessential romanticism and artifice in the treatment of his relationship with his family:

Family likeness has often a deep sadness in it. Nature, that great tragic dramatist, knits us together by bone and muscle, and divides us by the subtler web of our brains; blends yearning and repulsion; and ties us by our heart-strings to the beings that jar us at every movement. We hear a voice with the very cadence of our own uttering the thoughts we despise; we see eyes - ah! so like our mother's - averted from us in cold alienation...<sup>20</sup>

There is very real poignancy in Adam's despair at his father's drunkenness and the general decay of his pride in himself and his work:

'So it will go on, worsening and worsening', thought Adam; 'there's no slipping up-hill again, and no standing still when once you've begun to slip down.'<sup>21</sup>

There is also a very impressive attempt to imagine him in terms of a peasant psychology:

Adam was not a man to be gratuitously superstitious but he had the blood of the peasant in him as well as of the artisan, and a peasant can no more help believing in the traditional superstition than a horse can help trembling when he sees a camel. Besides, he had that mental combination which is at once humble in the region of mystery and keen in the region of knowledge.<sup>22</sup>

However, Adam is anything but insignificant and his limitations are not those of an insignificant person like Amos Barton. This constitutes a serious flaw because in Adam Bede George

Eliot is perhaps more conscious than ever of the importance of depicting the insignificant:

I turn without shrinking, from cloudborne angels, from prophets, sibyls, and heroic warriors, to an old woman bending over her flower-pot, or eating her solitary dinner, while the noonday light, softened perhaps by a screen of leaves, falls on her mob-cap, and just touches the rim of her spinning-wheel, and her stone jug, and all those cheap common things which are the precious necessaries of life to her...<sup>23</sup>

Adam recalls the peasant grandeur of Wordsworth's Michael rather than the human limitations of Amos Barton. His intelligence sets him apart from his community and it is significant that he is able to speak more or less normally as well as in the dialect of his parents. When Dinah Shaw likens Adam to 'the patriach Joseph, for his great skill and knowledge and the kindness he shows to his brother and his parents',<sup>24</sup> George Eliot makes no attempt to qualify the judgement. Adam's grand Wordsworthian quality which suggests an original sort of virtue and wisdom only to be found in nature, sometimes emerges in his dialogue. When meditating on his love for Hetty and Seth's love for Dinah he says 'It's a mystery we can give no account of; but no more we can of the sprouting o' the seed for that matter'.<sup>25</sup> We may well wonder if the artist who imagines this profound penetration by a simple workman into the processes of nature, is the same person who acidly observes that 'integrity [is not] in the least established by that classic rural occupation sheep-washing'.<sup>26</sup>

Indeed George Eliot herself appears to be uneasily conscious that the rustic simplicity she invests Adam with is a thin disguise for characteristics that are anything but rustic, as she defines them in her article on Riehl:

Adam, you perceive, was by no means a marvellous man, nor properly speaking a genius, yet I will not pretend that his was an ordinary character among workmen; and it would not be at all a safe conclusion that the next best man you may happen to see with a basket of tools over his shoulder and a paper cap on his head, has the strong conscience and the strong sense, the blended susceptibility and self command of our friend Adam. He was not an average man. Yet such men as he are reared here and there in every generation of our present artisans - with an inheritance of affections nurtured by a simple family life of common need and common industry, and an inheritance of faculties trained in skilful and courageous labour.<sup>27</sup>

Here George Eliot first gives the appearance of defending Adam from the charge that he is not a 'marvellous' man. But the defence is entirely gratuitous because it has been made abundantly clear already that the sort of polite or learned accomplishments which Adam lacks are not in themselves 'marvellous'. Certainly it is possible that there may be people like Adam in every generation but George Eliot admits that they must be few. We cannot say that Adam is an unreal being, because as George Eliot tells us in the letter quoted earlier Adam's character is suggested by her father Robert Evans. But we can ask the question - why does George Eliot choose to present a heroic personality in Adam and yet take virtually every opportunity to stress his humble station in life, his narrow intellectual accomplishments while defending him from hypothetical charges of vulgarity? It is possible

that this defence which seems gratuitous to us now was prompted entirely by the almost overwhelming tendency of contemporary novelists to equate moral worth with an unreal degree of accomplishment. But still we may feel that George Eliot has overstated her case, and in overstating it perhaps conceals a tendency in herself to identify moral being with a too unqualified heroism.

If Adam is not typical of workmen of his class, neither is Dinah typical of Methodist preachers. We have already seen how much trouble George Eliot takes to ensure that the reader will react favourably to her sermon rather than dismiss it as cant. In another passage which closely resembles her apology for Adam, George Eliot makes a more direct apology for Dinah's and Seth's Methodism. After acknowledging that

It is all too possible that to some of my readers Methodism may mean nothing more than... sponging preachers and hypocritical jargon... <sup>28</sup>

she admits that she 'cannot pretend that Seth and Dinah were anything else but Methodists',<sup>28</sup> and that their beliefs are highly questionable. She then rightly points out that

Faith, hope and charity have not always been found in a direct ratio with a sensibility to the three concords; and it's possible, thank Heaven! to have very erroneous theories and very sublime feelings.<sup>30</sup>

But she then gives an example of sublime feeling coexisting with a very limited awareness:

The raw bacon which clumsy Molly spares from her own scanty store, that she may carry it to her

neighbour's child to 'stop the fits' may be a piteously inefficacious remedy; but the generous stirring of neighbourly kindness that prompted the deed has a beneficent radiation that is not lost. <sup>31</sup>

From this George Eliot concludes that we could not in all conscience 'think Dinah and Seth beneath our sympathy',<sup>32</sup> even though we may be accustomed to 'weep over the loftier sorrows of heroines in satin boots and crinoline, and of heroes riding fiery horses'.<sup>33</sup> As in the case of Adam, the apology is misleading, for even though it may be quite valid to sympathize with people like 'clumsy Molly' and perhaps Seth, whose humanity expresses itself in false beliefs, it is quite another thing to accept the sublime Dinah - who is not at all like 'clumsy Molly'.

Throughout the novel Dinah is treated extremely sympathetically by the author. Even though she is criticized by the robustly healthy Mrs. Poyser for her Methodist excesses there is never the slightest suggestion that Dinah's character is not uniformly pure and unmixed with those basic limitations which George Eliot normally sees as essential to an understanding of human life. Not only is Dinah basically pure and deserving of our sympathy in spite of her Methodism, but the feelings and intelligence that we do discern in her Methodist idiom of speech bear a remarkable resemblance to George Eliot's own most deeply held convictions. When Dinah claims to be possessed by the Lord it sounds eminently humane and reasonable:

I seem to have no room in my soul for wants and fears of my own, it has pleased God to fill my head so full with the wants and sufferings of his poor people.<sup>34</sup>

In her advice to Seth - 'We mustn't be in a hurry to fix and choose our own lot; we must wait to be guided'<sup>35</sup> - we seem to hear George Eliot's own voice.

Irvine is much more successful as a characterization than either Adam or Dinah. George Eliot pictures him as a handsome, middle-aged man, somewhat jaded but with an aristocratic bearing and love of ease which suggests that his divine calling is not taken as seriously as it might be. Indeed his 'mental palate...was rather pagan' and his 'recollections of young enthusiasm and ambition were all associated with poetry and ethics that lay aloof from the Bible'.<sup>36</sup> George Eliot shows herself all too aware of his shortcomings:

Such men, happily, have lived in times when great abuses flourished, and have sometimes even been the living representatives of the abuses.<sup>37</sup>

Consequently when she answers possible objections to him and argues for his good features: his liberality, his sensitivity to others and his ready sympathy, she is not engaging in an empty rhetorical gesture as she is when defending Adam and Dinah. Irvine really is limited and his limitations are representative of actual social abuses, whereas Adam and Dinah do not embody moral limitations and still less limitations of sensibility peculiar to their social class. George Eliot's handling of Irvine seems to be correspondingly surer.

The dialogue between himself and his aristocratic old mother is crisp and witty. In the evocation of the general relation he bears to society and his own feelings of inadequacy we sense that awareness of psychological and social nuance that George Eliot shows in 'Amos Barton' and 'Janet's Repentance'.

It is a pity that Irwine does not seem to project the dimensions of his limitations into his interaction with others. In his tête à tête with Dinah which he has decided on purely for the purpose of investigating her Methodism and judging for himself whether or not he approves of its practice in his parish, he is perhaps too understanding, too sympathetic and even too admiring. It is significant that in the exchange he hardly speaks at all except to give Dinah the opportunity to hold forth about her vocation. We get the impression that he is being used to underline the point that Dinah's enthusiasm is eminently reasonable and enlightened. Sympathy and understanding are certainly legitimate characteristics of Irwine but so are his limitations, and because he never seems to encounter a situation in which these would be emphasized their implications are never explored. Whether Irwine is shown in conversation with Dinah, advising Arthur or comforting Adam during Hetty's trial, there is never the slightest suggestion that he might compromise himself or actively betray his acknowledged limitations.

If George Eliot is lenient with Irwine she is

severe in her treatment of Hetty. When we first meet Hetty in Mrs. Poyser's dairy she is flirting with Arthur. George Eliot informs us that not only is Hetty beautiful but that there is something enervating in the very quality of her beauty:

It is a beauty like that of kittens, or very small downy ducks making gentle rippling noises with their soft bills...a beauty with which you can never be angry but that you feel ready to crush for inability to comprehend the state of mind into which it throws you.<sup>38</sup>

George Eliot's means of relating Hetty's charms suggests that she is reacting against a convention in which beautiful heroines are introduced by way of a catalogue of their perfections:

It is of little use for me to tell you that Hetty's cheek was like a rose petal...it is of little use for me to say how lovely was the contour of her pink and white neckerchief... of little use, unless you have seen a woman who affected you as Hetty affected her beholders.<sup>39</sup>

But the author does not leave us with the simple fact of Hetty's beauty but suggests that we should adopt a very definite attitude towards it:

...it was the beauty of young frisking things, round-limbed, gambolling, circumventing you by a false air of innocence - the innocence of a young star-browed calf for example.<sup>40</sup>

Certainly we cannot expect this 'distracting kitten-like beauty maiden' to be capable of much more than what we first see her doing, which is flirting. It soon becomes obvious that Hetty is shallow, vain, sensual and supremely selfish. George Eliot tells us that not only is

she indifferent to Adam but that 'she liked to think that this strong, skilful, keen-eyed man was in her power'.<sup>42</sup> She is gleefully conscious that Adam could be made turn 'pale or red any day by a word or a look from her'.<sup>43</sup> This is not an unfair assumption to make of an egoistic young girl, but we may well wonder if the author does not overstep the limits of psychological discretion when she suggests that Hetty's indifference to Adam is a result of his being poor:

She saw him as he was - a poor man, with old parents to keep, who would not be able for a long while to come to give her even such luxuries as she shared in her uncle's house. And Hetty's dreams were all of luxuries... She thought if Adam had been rich and could have given her these things [luxuries], she loved him well enough to marry him.<sup>44</sup>

George Eliot does not seem to allow room for the possibility that Adam may simply be physically undesirable to Hetty. We are unable to form any very clear impression of Hetty as an individual. She is given very little dialogue and there are virtually no means of expressing her fictional presence apart from the narrative. Thus she is filtered to us through the medium of George Eliot's uniform disapproval. For much of the description we can rely on the author for an accurate and penetrating analysis of Hetty. Her explanation of Hetty's feeling for Arthur as the result of a tissue of unreal hopes and dreams tinged by egoism is quite plausible. However as in the author's explanation of Hetty's indifference to Adam she is often unfair to her. For example when Hetty is

admiring herself in the mirror in the first thrill of certainty that Arthur cares for her, we may feel that George Eliot's disapproval prevents her from understanding the situation with the sympathy it deserves:

The vainest woman is never thoroughly conscious of her beauty till she is loved by the man who sets her own passion vibrating in return. <sup>45</sup>

This remark may be true in itself, but when used as the authoritative interpretation of Hetty's rapture we may feel it is unsubtle. There is a disturbing feeling that Hetty's psychological reality is not adequately contained by the author's sweeping disapprobation.

Though George Eliot disapproves of Arthur also, she makes a real attempt to imagine his psychological process and so to understand him. In fact the portrait of Arthur is the first instance in George Eliot's fiction of a fully sustained imaginative representation of the process of egoism. As with the other characters the author points out that Arthur's surface characteristics would have assured a different treatment in contemporary sentimental literature. Prevailing literary fashion would have elevated his surface features into virtues and would have neglected to consider his faults:

...he was but twenty one, you remember; and we don't enquire too closely into character in the case of a handsome generous young fellow, who will have property enough to support numerous peccadilloes - who, if he should unfortunately break a man's legs in his rash driving, will be able to pension him handsomely; or if he should happen to spoil a woman's existence for her, will make it up to her with expensive bon-bons, packed up and directed by his own hand. It

would be ridiculous to be prying and analytic in such cases... We use round general, gentlemanly epithets about a young man of birth and fortune... The chances are that he will go through life without scandalising any one...<sup>46</sup>

Unlike Adam and Dinah, Arthur is treated with a great degree of social and psychological intelligence. When we first meet him we notice that Arthur's most characteristic trait is his belief in his own openness:

No young man could confess his faults more candidly... But he had an agreeable confidence that his faults were all of a generous kind - impetuous, warm-blooded, leonine; never crawling, crafty, reptilian.<sup>47</sup>

We are told that he is generally liked by the whole community for his friendliness and good nature, qualities that the old squire notably lacks. However we are soon alerted to realizing that his liberality is really condescension, and that his manner becomes peremptory and dictatorial if people do not act as he wishes them to. For example, Arthur's liberality does not include Old John the ostler who insists on minding the horses in his own way. Similarly it is almost beyond Arthur's social comprehension that Adam Bede the carpenter on whom he has bestowed many proofs of his patronage should presume to challenge his conduct in relation to Hetty. Unlike every other character in the novel, we are aware of Arthur as a psychological process. He is not fixed and determined in his essential being but is continually creating his own destiny and being shaped by it in return. From the time that we first

see him in the dairy with Hetty, when he contrives to be alone with her for a few minutes, we are aware that his opinion of himself is less than exact. It soon becomes obvious that his personality functions as a continuous dialectic between his generous opinion of himself as a man who is open and never crafty and his marked tendency towards insincerity and craftiness. We see in Arthur a gradual degeneration of will and a consequent increase in his powers of rationalization. Though he originally resolves to tell Irwine of his attraction towards Hetty he fails to do so, telling himself that the whole affair is too trivial to bother about. Though he rides miles to avoid meeting Hetty and congratulates himself on his strong-mindedness, he somehow returns home early enough to risk meeting her on the way:

But I believe there have been men since his day who have ridden a long way to avoid a rencontre, and then galloped hastily back lest they should miss it. It is the favourite stratagem of our passions to sham a retreat, and to turn sharp around upon us at the moment we have made up our minds that the day is our own.<sup>48</sup>

Arthur's moral resistance is gradually overcome as his powers of rationalization grow. This tendency blinds him to the consequences of each of his actions, and after he is finally led to kiss Hetty he is genuinely bewildered by and annoyed at his own folly:

As for Arthur, he rushed back through the wood, as if he wanted to put a wide space between himself and Hetty. He would not go to the Hermitage again;

he remembered how he had debated with himself there before dinner, and it had all come to nothing - worse than nothing. He walked right on into the Chase, glad to get out of the Grove, which surely was haunted by his evil genius. Those beeches and smooth limes - there was something enervating in the very sight of them; but the strong knotted old oaks had no bending languor in them - the sight of them would give a man some energy. Arthur lost himself among the narrow openings in the fern, winding about without seeking any issue, till the twilight deepened almost to night under the great boughs, and the hare looked black as it darted across his path.<sup>49</sup>

By this time his fall is almost complete and the underplaying of his assumed seduction of Hetty is a fine psychological touch. No fuller account of his moral vacillations is necessary and it is left to the reader to imagine him finally sinking beneath an ocean of self-deception and indirection. The process is so completely understood that George Eliot's description of Arthur and Hetty in terms of images suggesting deterministic natural processes is quite appropriate:

Such young unfurrowed souls roll to meet each other like two velvet peaches that touch softly and are at rest; they mingle as easily as two brooklets that ask for nothing but to entwine themselves and ripple with interlacing curves in the leafiest hiding places.<sup>50</sup>

The degree to which the plot of Adam Bede is dependent on the actions of Arthur Donnithorne is surprisingly great. Apart from Hetty, none of the other main characters has anything to do with influencing the direction of the plot until it has already been shaped and given direction by Arthur's seduction of Hetty. Lewes showed he was alive to this inconsistency of plot, even before the novel was half

completed, when he complained that Adam was too passive. Indeed it was on his suggestion and to remedy this situation that the author contrived to have Adam fight Donnithorne.<sup>51</sup> However, though the fight has a great dramatic effect it does not really contribute towards strengthening the plot. The same thing could be said of just about everything that happens after Arthur leaves the district to go into the army. With Arthur gone, the main burden of the plot falls on Hetty who is pregnant by him. The pathetic search she makes for Arthur which ends with her murdering her child is compellingly told. The drama and pathos of her fate and the agony she causes Adam give the appearance of being high points in the development of the plot. But for all its excitement the plot is by this time a mechanical extension of the events which Arthur set in motion. Hetty is completely passive and what there is of her character has virtually nothing to do with the direction of events culminating in the murder of her child. The plot has become an abstract embodiment of fate or the consequences of Arthur's fall. There is no sense of character interacting creatively with the passage of events. Adam's suffering is passive and quite predictable and though Dinah and Irwine figure prominently in alleviating the general suffering they are only acting as we would expect them to under the circumstances.

Dinah's success in eliciting Hetty's repentance is

dramatically effective, but fails to add a psychological dimension to the plot. Of course it is entirely believable that an ignorant girl in Hetty's position should be won over by Dinah's impressive insistence on repentance. However this is not quite the point. When Hetty says

'O Dinah, won't nobody do anything for me?  
Will they hang me for certain?... I wouldn't mind  
if they'd let me live' 52

the less faithful among us may feel that this fear of death and desire for life is quite understandable and that Dinah glosses over it:

'My poor Hetty, death is very dreadful to you...  
But if you had a friend to take care of you after  
death...' 53

Consequently we may feel that Hetty's repentance is the result of an Evangelical confidence trick. We cannot say that her character is changed by the experience because we have so little sense of it as an independently existing force.

We are meant to see Adam undergoing a character change both during and after the tragedy. Under Irwine's guidance he gradually becomes more able to control his anger, until after some years he brings himself to forgive Arthur in quite an effective scene. But it is Arthur's presence which makes the scene effective. Even after the horrible suffering he has been responsible for there is yet a touch of his old tendency to think a little better of himself than others do. Arthur's incorrigibility makes Adam's forgiveness of him seem more

impressive than it would otherwise have been. Arthur is then banished to his regiment yet again and the plot never seems to recover from the loss of him. Without him it lacks a certain psychological toughness or cohesion. The remaining characters are both too good and too passive. They are neither psychologically compelling nor are they really capable of initiating developments in a world from which the sinners have been banished.

Thus we sense a certain psychological thinness in the pious altruism with which Seth resigns himself to the loss of Dinah. Apart from this the growing love of Adam and Dinah is sensitively handled. But in the absence of that psychological dimension which conceives real human limitation the whole event is an anticlimax and is provided with insufficient context. One cannot help thinking in the midst of this idyll that Hetty's fate in being transported to Australia or Arthur's life in the army would provide much more interesting reading. As they disappear from sight we must certainly feel that their fates have drawn them to participate far more than either Adam or Dinah in the historical forces of expansion and change which appear to us to characterize their time.

If my analysis of Adam Bede seems harsh it is because I have been judging it by high standards. But the standards are those that George Eliot herself insists upon in the pages of the Westminster Review. Though the realistic intention of Adam Bede is apparent, its lack of a thoroughgoing awareness of moral, social, psychological and historical

issues makes it inadequate as a guide to the age and the place it is intended to represent. In the figures of Adam and Dinah we sense a tendency in the author to draw back from a documentary realism in an endeavour to come to grips with more essential, which is to say ahistorical, moral questions. But this intention is inadequately fulfilled because of an overall inadequacy of awareness of the complex psychological and social processes in which morality must have its being.

While George Eliot recognizes and includes certain moral and social issues, her uncertain handling of character, plot and background means that the issues are resolved at a simplistic level.

1. Haight, George Eliot: A Biography, op. cit., p. 249.
2. G.E.L., II, 387.
3. G.E.L., III, 174.
4. Ibid., 502.
5. Ibid., 381.
6. Ibid.
7. Cf. Speaight's introduction to Adam Bede, Dent (Everyman), London, 1960, p. v.
8. Haight, op. cit., pp. 248-9.
9. Ibid., pp. 249-50.
10. Ibid., p. 467.
11. Adam Bede, ed. cit., p. 13.
12. Ibid., p. 15.
13. Ibid., p. 17.
14. Ibid., p. 28.
15. Ibid., p. 33.
16. Ibid., p. 20.
17. See footnote 2.
18. G.E.L., III, 17-8.
19. Cf. Raymond Williams, The English Novel From Dickens to Lawrence, Chatto and Windus, London, 1970, p. 78.
20. Adam Bede, ed. cit., p. 40.
21. Ibid., p. 48.
22. Ibid., p. 50.
23. Ibid., p. 173.
24. Ibid., p. 91.
25. Ibid., p. 120.
26. Review of The Natural History of German Life, Westminster Review, LXVI, 1856, in Essays, ed. cit., p. 270.

27. Adam Bede, ed. cit., p. 207.
28. Ibid., p. 38.
29. Ibid., pp. 38-9.
30. Ibid., p. 39.
31. Ibid.
32. Ibid.
33. Ibid.
34. Ibid., p. 36.
35. Ibid., p. 37.
36. Ibid., pp. 68-9.
37. Ibid., p. 69.
38. Ibid., p. 82.
39. Ibid., p. 83.
40. Ibid.
41. Ibid.
42. Ibid., p. 97.
43. Ibid., p. 96.
44. Ibid., p. 98.
45. Ibid., p. 147.
46. Ibid., pp. 122-3.
47. Ibid., p. 121.
48. Ibid., p. 125.
49. Ibid., p. 135.
50. Ibid., p. 129.
51. Haight, op. cit., p. 265.
52. Adam Bede, ed. cit., p. 431.
53. Ibid.