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Source: *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, Vol. 5, No. 4, Nineteenth Century (Autumn, 1965), pp. 651-662

Published by: [Rice University](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/449433>

Accessed: 29/05/2013 16:54

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George Eliot's Conception of "Form"

DARREL MANSELL, JR.

GEORGE ELIOT'S LATE NOVELS are very complex. They attempt to embrace a broad diversity of characters and events (the "panoramic view" she says she had tried to achieve in *Middlemarch*¹); and it is not obvious what, if anything, she considers the unifying principle that should bring all the parts together into a unified whole. In a letter written in 1866 John Blackwood comments that *Felix Holt* is "not like a Novel"; it is, he thinks, a "series of panoramas" (*Letters*, IV.243). The reviewer of *Felix Holt* for the *Edinburgh Review* objects that the "story has the defect of running in two parallel lines with only an occasional and arbitrary connexion."² Henry James finds *Middlemarch* a "treasure-house of details, but . . . an indifferent whole."³ And F. R. Leavis in *The Great Tradition* is willing to cut away the "bad part" of *Daniel Deronda* and allow the story of Gwendolen Harleth to stand by itself.⁴

Recent criticism has developed the idea that one unifying principle in *Middlemarch* is the principle of analogy: that Casaubon and Lydgate (as one instance), who have very little to do with each other in the plot, are related by the analogy that both are searching for a kind of "primitive tissue" (Casaubon's "Key to all Mythologies"; Lydgate's medical research).⁵ Likewise, Rosamond Vincy and Madame Laure, who have nothing whatever to do with each other in the plot, are related by the analogy that both are a kind of basil plant which flourishes on a murdered man's brains. (Madame Laure murders her husband for her own convenience; Rosamond forces Lydgate to give up his research and become a successful spa doctor.)⁶

¹*The George Eliot Letters*, ed. Gordon S. Haight, 7 vols. (London, 1954-1956), V.241. Hereafter cited as *Letters*.

²"Felix Holt, the Radical," *Edinburgh Review*, CXXIV (1866), 444.

³"Middlemarch," *Galaxy*, XV (1873), 425.

⁴See *The Great Tradition* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1954), p. 150.

⁵See David R. Carroll, "Unity Through Analogy: An Interpretation of *Middlemarch*," *Victorian Studies*, II (1959), 310-311.

⁶See Suzanne C. Ferguson, "Mme. Laure and Operative Irony in *Middlemarch*: A Structural Analogy," *Studies in English Literature*, III (1963), 513.

There is more evidence than what can be gathered from the novels themselves that George Eliot intended analogies like these to be a unifying principle in her fiction. A most important piece of evidence has been overlooked: George Eliot has given a kind of theory of art, in her "Notes on Form in Art (1868)." These notes have received almost no attention in the vast criticism of her fiction during the past few years; yet they are the most important single source of information on what George Eliot was trying to do in her novels. As I shall try to show, they make clear how the principle of analogy is a unifying principle at work in her novels; they explain her conception of "form"; they reveal a reason why she does not consider the beginnings and endings of her novels as important as the "inner relations"; and they hint, I think, that at the end of her career she had pressed her conception of "form" so far that the beginnings and endings of her novels had become a source of frustration.

In these "Notes on Form in Art (1868)" George Eliot maintains that, when we consider any object (as an instance not given in the "Notes" we might consider a tree), we first consider the thing as a whole in itself. We then discriminate that the whole is composed of parts (the trunk and leaves); and that the whole is part of a larger whole (a meadow). It is our act of discriminating that the original whole is composed of parts, and that the original whole is itself a part of a larger whole, that, to George Eliot's mind, gives the tree "form" for us. The "form" of anything is our discrimination of "the relation of multiplex interdependent parts to a whole which is itself in the most varied & therefore the fullest relation to other wholes."⁷ Form shows how something is related to its environment; and if George Eliot wanted to give the form (as distinct from the "outline": see below) of a tree, she would feel bound to introduce the relations of the tree to the soil, of the soil to the grass, and so on. A visual description of what the tree looks like does not constitute its form; the form

⁷Notebook, ca. 1865-1869 (Yale University Library), p. 2. The "Notes" begin in the back of the Notebook and proceed toward the front, Notebook inverted. The references are to George Eliot's page numbers. The Notebook is described by Bernard J. Paris, "George Eliot's Unpublished Poetry," *Studies in Philology*, LVI (1959), 539-558; and the "Notes" have been published in *Essays of George Eliot*, ed. Thomas Pinney (New York, 1963), pp. 431-436.

is rather the relation of the tree to its environment. Form is not outward appearance but "inward" relations.

She thinks the "highest Form" is "the most varied group of relations bound together in a wholeness which again has the most varied relations with all other phenomena" (p. 3). Taken strictly, such a conception of form frustrates her art: she could completely render the form of the tree only by giving all the relations of the tree to the rest of the universe, for everything is in some way related to everything else. Her universe is bound together by Carlyle's "organic filaments." For Carlyle there is not a "leaf rotting . . . but is indissoluble portion of solar and stellar systems . . .";⁸ and for George Eliot in *Middlemarch* the universe is a "tempting range of relevancies" (II.xv; I.214).⁹ She despairs of ever giving a complete account in her fiction of how any part of it is related to the rest. The "narrator of human actions," if he did his work with completeness, "would have to thread the hidden pathways of feeling and thought which lead up to every moment of action . . ." (an extract from the motto, *Daniel Deronda*, II.xvi; I.244).

Because the "highest Form" is "the most varied group of relations bound together in a wholeness which again has the most varied relations with all other phenomena," she strives to make the "relations" in her fiction as complex as possible. But the kind of complexity George Eliot tries to achieve has nothing to do with the mere number of characters and incidents in her novels. The complexity is rather the number of what she calls "relations" among what characters and incidents there are. In her "Quarry" for *Middlemarch* she has taken the trouble to enter under "Relations to be developed" a list of eleven, such as Bulstrode's to Raffles, and Ladislav's to Mr. Brooke.¹⁰ These "relations" give the novel its "form";

⁸For "organic filaments" see *Sartor Resartus* (first English edition 1838), Book I, Chapter xi. George Eliot praises *Sartor Resartus* in a letter of 1841 (*Letters*, I.122-123). The quotation above appears in "The Hero as Poet," *On Heroes, Hero Worship . . .* (1841), in *The Works of Thomas Carlyle*, 30 vols. (London: Centenary Ed., [1899-1923?], V.102.

⁹References are to the Cabinet Edition of George Eliot's works, 24 vols. (Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood, [1877-1885]). Volume and page numbers follow book and chapter.

¹⁰*Quarry for Middlemarch*, ed. Anna Theresa Kitchel (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1950), p. 45. The *Quarry* appears as a supplement to *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, IV (1949-1950).

and she thinks that the more relations there are, the higher the form.

George Eliot enthusiastically reviewed Ruskin's *Modern Painters, III* (1856) for the *Westminster Review*; and earlier that year she had noted in a letter that she and Lewes "are delighting ourselves with Ruskin's 3d volume, which contains some of the finest writing I have read for a long time . . ." (*Letters*, II.228). Her idea in the "Notes" that the form of art becomes higher as the art exhibits more and more relations, of the kind she lists in the *Quarry*, follows Ruskin's principle in *Modern Painters, III* that the "great artist chooses the most necessary [truths] first, and afterwards the most consistent with these, so as to obtain the greatest possible . . . *sum*."¹¹ Both Ruskin and George Eliot have a way of actually totaling up the number of "truths" (for Ruskin), or "relations" (for George Eliot), in order to determine whether a given work is great or not. Great art does not move toward simplicity, but toward complexity. Ruskin would accept the proposition that, if all other things could be considered equal, a work of art exhibiting three truths consistent with the most necessary ones would be greater than a work of art exhibiting two; and George Eliot would accept the proposition that a work of art in which the eleven relations she lists in the *Quarry* were bound together in a wholeness would exhibit a higher form than if only ten were bound together. There are degrees of form, and the higher the degree the better. George Eliot finds that as any art develops toward a higher degree of form it invariably becomes more complex as the artist develops more "relations" within the form. Her notes "Versification (1869)" observe that "in every art that reaches a high degree of practice, the use of the medium discloses new & newer relations in that medium, so that the artist in his turn confers fresh associations. . . ."¹²

She finds that the most perfect example of "the most varied group of relations bound together in a wholeness which again has the most varied relations with all other phenomena" is an organism, the human body. The "highest Form," she points out in the "Notes on Form in Art (1868)," is the "highest organism" (p. 3); and in a letter she refers to the process by

¹¹*Works*, ed. Cook and Wedderburn, 39 vols. (London: Library Edition, 1903-1912), V.59.

¹²Notebook, ca. 1865-1869 (Yale), George Eliot's p. 9.

which each of her own novels becomes a "complete organism" (*Letters*, V.324). In her letters she commonly uses organic metaphors to describe how her stories "grow" in her like plants, "unfold" themselves. But it is not merely the complexity of the human organism which makes it the highest form; it is the fact that the complex relations are bound together in a wholeness. In an organism, as opposed, for instance, to a rock, there is a "consensus or constant interchange of effects among its parts" ("Notes," p. 5). The word "consensus" to her "expresses that fact in a complex organism by which no part can suffer increase or diminution without a participation of all other parts . . . & a consequent modification of the organism as a whole" (p. 5). This "consensus" that makes it impossible to disturb any part of a complex organism without upsetting the whole may follow Ruskin's "Sincerity" in *Modern Painters, III*, which term George Eliot in her review paraphrases as "the largest possible quantity of truth in the most perfect possible harmony."¹³

George Eliot considers that her novels are bound together in such a "consensus" or harmony. In defending herself against "preaching" she declares in a letter that "if I have ever allowed myself in dissertation or in dialogue [anything] which is not part of the *structure* of my books, I have there sinned against my own laws" (*Letters*, V.459). She is more anxious, I think, than most Victorian novelists that her novels be considered as organic wholes. She refused at one point to tell John Blackwood the remainder of the "story" of *Adam Bede* "on the ground that I would not have it judged apart from my *treatment*" (*Letters*, II.503-504); and in a letter discussing *Daniel Deronda* she objects to the "laudation of readers who cut the book into scraps. . . . I meant everything in the book to be related to everything else there" (*Letters*, VI.290). If the form of the novel is "organic," there is a "consensus" or harmony of the parts that prevents excising any part without damaging the entire organism. In the "Notes" she makes a distinction between the "accidental" form of a rock, which allows the rock to be split without altering the composition of either half, and the form of an organism, which prevents the organism from being divided without altering the whole composition (pp. 4-5); and to Professor

¹³"Art and Belles Lettres," *Westminster Review*, LXV (1856), 628; see Ruskin's *Works*, V.58 ff.

Leavis's suggestion that the part of *Daniel Deronda* concerned with Daniel Deronda could be cut away from the part concerned with Gwendolen Harleth, she might have replied that, if the novel has achieved an organic form, it is no more possible to divide Deronda from Gwendolen than to divide Gwendolen herself.

Only the human organism, George Eliot points out in the "Notes," "comprises things as diverse as the fingernails & toothache, as the nervous stimulus of muscle manifested in a shout, & the discernment of a red spot on a field of snow; but all its different elements . . . are bound together in a more necessary wholeness . . . than can be found in any other existence known to us" (pp. 2-3). In striving for the highest possible form in her novels, she tries to bring together into a "wholeness" characters and events of the most diverse possible "relations." In letters she mentions the "*epische Breite*" of *The Mill on the Floss*, and the "panoramic view" she had tried to achieve in *Middlemarch* (*Letters*, III.317; see also III. 362; V.241). The more varied the relations she can present in her fiction, the higher the degree of form she can attain if she is successful in binding everything together in a wholeness.

She presses the reader to find relationships among the most seemingly disconnected events. Even in the early "The Sad Fortunes of the Rev. Amos Barton," for instance, the architectural history of Shepperton Church and the sad fortunes of its curate are brought into a relationship: it is when the old church is "half pulled down" (*Scenes of Clerical Life*, "Amos Barton," v; I.69) that his wife Milly falls ill; and the sentence revealing the completion of the new church (ix; I.118) is followed by the appearance of the letter from Carpe which forces Barton to resign. In "Mr. Gilfil's Love-Story," "while Cheverel Manor was growing from ugliness into beauty, Caterina too was growing . . ." (iv; I.193). In *Silas Marner*, as Eppie's "mind was growing into knowledge, [Silas's] mind was growing into memory" (xiv; 193-194). In the first example the significance of the relationship seems to be that Amos Barton, who is "the quintessential extract of mediocrity" (v; I.73), cannot survive in the world of "New-varnished efficiency" (i; I.4) which the new church has been made to symbolize; in the second example the new Cheverel Manor is built by Italian workmen brought from Italy by Sir Christopher, just as he has brought Caterina; and in the

third (and most obvious) Silas's caring for Eppie's education has caused him to remember his own tender past.

As George Eliot develops her art to a higher and higher degree of form, the "relations" she tries to bind together in a wholeness become much more diverse than these. The Proem of *Romola* prepares the reader to find the "broad sameness of the human lot" in what follows. By "broad sameness" she means more than that "we still resemble the men of the past more than we differ from them" (Proem; I.2); for in the novel itself characters who run through their careers for the most part independent of one another (as do Casaubon and Lydgate in *Middlemarch*) are shown to have broadly the same lots. As Tito Melema, for instance, looks down on Savonarola on the day of the Trial by Fire, George Eliot points out the "common turning-point towards which those widely-sundered lives had been converging" (III.lxv; II.371); and it is on the day Tito dies that Savonarola is tortured into confessing (see III.lxvii; II.395). Likewise, *Romola* and Savonarola run through their careers for the most part independent of each other. Savonarola personally interferes in *Romola*'s life only when he turns her back to Florence (II.xl); and she personally interferes in his life only when she pleads in vain for her godfather (III.lix). Yet George Eliot emphasizes that the "problem before . . . [*Romola*] was essentially the same as that which had lain before Savonarola—the problem where the sacredness of obedience ended, and where the sacredness of rebellion began" (III.lvi; II.273); and apparently with this passage in mind she points out in a letter that the "great problem" of *Romola*'s life "essentially coincides with a chief problem in Savonarola's" (*Letters*, IV.97). It is a rough index of how far George Eliot reaches out after more and more diverse "relations" to bind together in a wholeness that in *Romola* she makes the relation of *Romola* and Savonarola explicit by a statement in the text; and in *Middlemarch* the similar relations of Casaubon and Lydgate, and of Rosamond and Madame Laure, have been the subject of articles by critics.

Just as *Felix Holt*, which follows *Romola*, promises to show the "mutual influence of dissimilar destinies (iii; I.73), so *Middlemarch*, which follows *Felix Holt*, calls the reader's attention to the "stealthy convergence of human lots" (I.xi; I.142) that do not appear to be related. Featherstone and Casaubon, for instance, who have next to nothing to do with

each other in the plot, both die without having been able to deliver up their writings to the world in a decisive form: Featherstone while clasping the key to the chest containing his two wills (III.xxxiii); Casaubon after having "exhausted himself" (V.xlviii; II.317) on a work that is still in notebooks. Ladislaw's refusal to accept money from Bulstrode when the latter has been exposed (VI.lxi) is related to Caleb Garth's giving up the management of Bulstrode's lands (VII.lxix). As David Carroll has noticed, Lydgate's attempt to find the "primitive tissue" is related to Casaubon's Key to all Mythologies. Even Dorothea's marriage is obscurely related to Brooke's standing for Middlemarch in the election; and the two events are confused by Sir James Chettam and Mr. Cadwallader (see I.vi; I.viii).¹⁴

In *Middlemarch* George Eliot has come a long way from the more or less obvious "relations" of Amos Barton and Sheperton Church. In *Middlemarch* the reader is offered little help: he must establish the relations as best he can. To repeat, the relation of Savonarola and Romola is made explicit; the relation of Casaubon and Lydgate is not. In her late fiction George Eliot moves from easy and explicit relations to obscure implicit ones. The Introduction to *Felix Holt* describes the enchanted forest where there are thorn-bushes that have human histories hidden in them (I.13); and the final words of the Introduction, "These things are a parable," give the reader a clue that these things are related to the "secrets" (i; I.23) in the history of Mrs. Transome which follows. The Prelude to *Middlemarch* introduces Saint Theresa and "later-born Theresas" (I.2); but the Prelude concludes without any word of advice on how the Prelude is related to the story of Dorothea Brooke which follows. The relation of these two human lots develops stealthily in the novel, and the relation is confirmed only in the Finale, where the "many Theresas" of the Prelude become "many Dorotheas" (III.465).

In George Eliot's last novel, *Daniel Deronda*, the two human lots, Daniel Deronda's and Gwendolen Harleth's, run through

¹⁴For Carroll's article, see note 5. The relation of Lydgate's project to Casaubon's is further borne out in *Theophrastus Such* by the dilettante Merman, who himself attempts two similar projects: the "ultimate reduction of all the so-called elementary substances" (p. 48), and the "possible connection of certain symbolic monuments common to widely scattered races" (p. 50).

the novel almost completely independent of each other (the two characters, for instance, exchange glances in the first scene, part, are not introduced to each other until Book IV, Chapter xxix, and at the conclusion have parted forever). The "occasional and arbitrary connexion" of two parallel plot lines which the early critic complained of in *Felix Holt* has been carried so far here that Professor Leavis could propose cutting one from the other. What makes the two a "wholeness" is the complex of analogical relations between them (for instance, both Deronda and Gwendolen are searching for a duty to submit to, which Deronda at last finds in his Jewish heritage, and which Gwendolen never finds). By so reducing the interrelations in the plot itself, George Eliot has pressed the principle of unity by analogy to an extreme; and has in a sense opened the way for James Joyce's *Ulysses*, in which Stephen Dedalus and Leopold Bloom run for the most part independent courses which generate between them the analogical relations (such as Stephen's search for a father, Bloom's for a son) that are the important meaning of the novel.

Indeed in *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda* the "relations" among characters and events have become so diverse that the "wholeness" threatens to be George Eliot's private experience which the reader experiences only partially and tentatively. The diversity which her kind of form can include is limited only by what she herself thinks she is able to bind together in a wholeness in her own mind. What is structure, she asks in the "Notes," except a "set of relations selected & combined in accordance with the sequence of mental states in the constructor, or with the preconception of a whole which he has inwardly evolved?" (p. 3.) She is apparently not at all concerned that if this definition of structure is pressed to the limit anything that comes into the author's mind as he writes can find a place in his fiction. For George Eliot the psychology of the author makes just as valid a relation between characters and events as the logic of time and place in the plot. She maintains in the "Notes" that the structure of fiction is determined by the "sequence of mental states" (p. 3) in the mind of the author; and not necessarily, for instance, by the sequence of the events the author is talking about. The reader, forced in this late fiction to make relations which rise, as it were, above what is happening in the plot, is thrown upon his own ability to re-experience intellectual, thematic relationships which

existed in the author's mind. He must see the "analogies" which David Carroll and Suzanne Ferguson discuss. He must see what Barbara Hardy calls "formal" relationships¹⁵ among characters who have never met.

George Eliot's idea that form is "the most varied group of relations bound together in a wholeness which again has the most varied relations with all other phenomena" causes her to emphasize the multiplicity of "relations" within the novel, and to play down the novel's beginning and conclusion. These for her are not especially important. In the "Notes" she attempts to make a distinction between "form" and "outline." Outline is a "derivative meaning" of form, and is the "limit of that difference by which we discriminate one object from another . . ." (p. 4). She means that the "outline" of something is its visual appearance (earlier, p. 3, she couples "outline & visual appearance"): the "line" for instance, "with which a rock cuts the sky" (p. 5). Outline is "determined partly by the intrinsic relations or composition of the object, & partly by the extrinsic action of other bodies upon it" (p. 4). In the case of an inorganic body, the outline is determined by a nearly equal struggle between these two forces; but in the case of an organic body the outline is determined almost entirely by the intrinsic relations. Thus, extending the examples that appear in the notes, the outline of a rock is determined by a nearly equal struggle between the attrition of wind and rain on the rock, and the intrinsic hardness of the rock; whereas the outline of a man is determined almost entirely by the intrinsic relations of muscle to bone, and so on.

The force of this distinction between how the outlines of inorganic and organic bodies are determined is to minimize the attention which the artist needs to give to the outline of an organic work of art. In an organic work the outline is determined almost entirely by the relations within (cf. Shelley's statement in *A Defense of Poetry* that poetry is a sword "which consumes the scabbard that would contain it"); and George Eliot expects the artist to concentrate his attention on the intrinsic relations. The outline, she maintains in the "Notes," will come from within, like a seashell (p. 6).

In the notes she does not make plain what the outline of a work of fiction would be; but by applying to a novel her general remark that outline is the "limit of that difference by

¹⁵*The Novels of George Eliot* (London, 1959), p. 4.

which we discriminate one object from another . . ." (p. 4) it is of course obvious that the outline of a novel is the beginning and ending. Throughout her career she discourages the reader from giving as much significance to the beginning and ending as to the intrinsic relations of which these are only the outer limits. The first words of the first chapter motto of *Daniel Deronda* tell the reader that the poet can do nothing "without the make-believe of a beginning." She makes the point in a letter that "endings are inevitably the least satisfactory part of any work in which there is any merit of development" (*Letters*, VI.241-242). She speaks in a review of the "artificial necessities of a denouement."¹⁶ And she maintains that "conclusions are the weak point of most authors, but some of the fault lies in the very nature of a conclusion, which is at best a negation" (*Letters*, II.324). Arthur Donnithorne's hellbent last-minute appearance with Hetty Sorrel's release, and the last-chapter flood that drowns Maggie Tulliver are, as it were, the negation of form by outline, the tree lopped and pruned into an artificial outline for reasons of necessity. We are not to scrutinize this outline, but the inner relations which constitute the form.

However this may be in theory (and there are serious objections to it), it does not in practice distract any reader from considering the conclusions of George Eliot's novels. The consensus is that they are her weak point. Ruskin, among many others, objects that she always makes her novels "end so wretchedly that they're worse than none. . . ." Henry James knows "few things more irritating in a literary way than each of her final chapters. . . ." And Jerome Thale, in *The Novels of George Eliot*, observes that the "ending of a novel . . . was for George Eliot . . . a stumbling block."¹⁷ But if her conception of form does not justify the endings, it indicates that to her they are not so important as the inner relations that give the novel form. If there has been any "merit of development" of these relations, the ending will not be satisfactory; there is a fault "in the very nature of a conclusion, which is at best a negation."

It is George Eliot's sense that there can be no satisfactory

¹⁶"Art and Belles Lettres," *Westminster Review*, LXV (1856), 639.

¹⁷*Fors Clavigera*, *Works*, ed. Cook and Wedderburn, XXVII.538; *Views and Reviews* (Boston, 1902), p. 37; *The Novels of George Eliot* (New York, 1959), p. 146.

ending to a novel which exhibits this kind of form that seems to have frustrated her at the end of her career. For her conception of form is in the end self-defeating. To the extent that she is able in her last novels to achieve a high degree of form by showing very intricate inner relations within a novel, the beginning and ending become increasingly false in that they artificially cut off relations which the novel itself sends outward, as it were, from its complexity to the rest of the universe. The more relations the novel establishes, the more must be severed where they do not end. When George Eliot says that the fault of a conclusion is that it is at best a "negation," she means that the form of the novel has shown "the most varied group of relations bound together in a wholeness which again has the most varied relations with all other phenomena"; and that at best the conclusion can only cut off this network at some arbitrary point. Thus "the artificial necessities of a denouement." Form, which attempts to show as many as possible of the relations which connect everything in George Eliot's universe to everything else, must always be incomplete. And the higher the form, the more incomplete.

Form for George Eliot must end where it does not really end. Every novel is torn ragged from its real context. The universe is a "tempting range of relevancies." The Finale of *Middlemarch* is not a finale, and begins, "Every limit is a beginning as well as an ending"; and in her huge last novel, *Daniel Deronda*, she seems to have felt bound to make some apology for the "artificial necessities" her conception of form has imposed on her. The motto to the first chapter (noted above) refers to the "make-believe of a beginning"; and the motto concludes, "No retrospect will take us to the true beginning; and whether our prologue be in heaven or on earth, it is but a fraction of that all-presupposing fact with which our story sets out."

DARTMOUTH COLLEGE