Beyond the Americana: Henry James reads George Eliot

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With typically magisterial conviction, F.R. Leavis announced in the first chapter of *The Great Tradition* that 'it can be shown, with a conclusiveness rarely possible in these matters, that James did actually go to school to George Eliot'.¹ His argument is certainly convincing but his acute observations about the development of *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) out of *Daniel Deronda* (1876), include the assertion that 'Isabel Archer is Gwendolen Harleth and Osmond is Grandcourt' or, on concession, that 'Isabel Archer is Gwendolen seen by a man'.² Leavis does not crudely suggest that the fruit of George Eliot's tutelage is plagiarism: the influence of Gwendolen and Grandcourt on *The Portrait of a Lady* must have suggested itself to many readers. But James's assiduous reading of George Eliot and particularly his reflections on her heroines offered him much more than a set of characters to borrow. This essay will trace the progress of an important and far-reaching lesson James drew from this literary mentor along a trail to be found in his essays and reviews of the older novelist. He read and studied her in the 1860s and 1870s, during her years of major achievement and his apprenticeship. In 1880 he began *The Portrait of a Lady* and George Eliot died. I shall begin to explore, through those essays and reviews, how the woman he described wonderingly, after her death, as 'this quiet, anxious, sedentary, serious, invalidical English lady'³ helped the ambitious young American writer to an understanding of the possibilities of fiction far beyond the adventures of the American Girl, with which he was fast becoming associated.

Although they were almost a generation apart in age (Eliot was born in 1819 and James in 1843), the two novelists shared a transatlantic literary network which embodied an easy flow of mutual interest and appreciation between their two milieux. Ralph Waldo Emerson, a close friend of Henry James Snr, was also a long-standing friend of Thomas Carlyle and

visited and lectured in England. In 1848 (when Henry James Jnr was five years old) Mary Ann Evans, having rebelled against her father's Evangelical Anglicanism, was introduced to Emerson by her friends the Brays and exclaimed in a letter to Sarah Hennell, 'I have seen Emerson – the first *man* I have ever seen'.⁴ On moving to London and entering the intellectual circle around the *Westminster Review* that brought her to George Henry Lewes, she went on to review a range of religious and philosophical books. In 1855, two of these were texts by writers from Emerson's immediate circle, also well known to Henry James Snr, Thoreau's *Walden* and Margaret Fuller's *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*. In discussing Fuller's book in 1855 (ten years after its publication), in conjunction with Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), the still anonymous George Eliot justified her choice of Fuller's book like this:

because we think it has been unduly thrust into the background by less comprehensive and candid productions on the same subject. Notwithstanding certain defects of taste and a sort of vague spiritualism and grandiloquence which belong to all but the very best of American writers, the book is a valuable one.⁵

In view of the comprehensive neglect that Fuller was to suffer over the following century, it is significant to see that for George Eliot she was a figure who needed no introduction. For Henry James, a generation later, although her death in a shipwreck in 1850 and the shock and distress that caused his parents was one of his earliest memories, she remained a poignant and virtually legendary figure.⁶

In October 1856, George Eliot reviewed a very different group of texts: novels which included Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Dred*. She expressed her admiration for the American author and refused to deprecate her production of 'a second Negro novel' because:

her genius seems to be of a very special character: her *Sunny Memories* were as feeble as her novels are powerful. But whatever else she may write, or may not write, *Uncle Tom* and *Dred* will assure her a place in that highest rank of novelists who can give us a national life in all its phases – popular and aristocratic, humorous and tragic, political and religious.⁷

Stowe's record-breaking success with *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) was in fact part of an unprecedented phenomenon in the United States: homegrown best-selling novels by authors now celebrated as Hawthorne's deplored 'scribbling women'. In the absence of international copyright arrangements, homegrown fiction was an uncertain investment for American

publishers, in competition with established English favourites such as Dickens, whose work could be imported and reproduced with impunity and success. To set out to be a professional writer, as Hawthorne and Melville did, was to face grave financial uncertainty at best. Meanwhile, a series of women who took to writing as a means of financial support, Susan Warner, Fanny Fern and others, found themselves rewarded beyond their wildest expectations. This discrepancy was not lost on the young Henry James, surveying the literary scene as a scribbling adolescent whose first story was published in 1864, the year that Hawthorne died.

George Eliot's work was readily available and admired by American readers. In James's account of his own growth in both *Notes of a Son and Brother* (1914) and *The Middle Years* (1917) and in his notebooks, George Eliot and her work were very early part of his emotional and aesthetic consciousness. In them he recalls, in connection with her, more than one of those moments of revelatory bewilderment—later a feature of his own narrative method—which mark key passages of transition in the development of an individual. For example, James remembers how, in Geneva in 1860, on one of the family's European journeys, his parents were 'in their prompt flush of admiration for George Eliot's first novel, *Adam Bede*'. Having excitedly lent their copy to an English family, they were astonished and mortified to hear that 'their fellow Anglo-Saxons' had found it impossible to be interested in 'village carpenters and Methodists'. Such a discrimination had a profound and lasting effect on the impressionable seventeen-year-old Henry James. There was his parents' outrage but also his

own excited wonder about such other people, those of the style in question . . . It *referred* them, and to a social order, making life more interesting and more various; even while our clear democratic air, that of our little family circle, quivered as with the monstrosity. It might . . . fairly have opened to me that great and up to then unsuspected door of the world from which the general collection of monstrosities, its existence suddenly brought home to us, would doubtless stretch grandly away.⁸

That powerful intimation of 'a world elsewhere' awaiting him, beyond New England where the family settled in 1860, of its social and imaginative dimensions and the possible relations between them, were among the strongest claims that Europe, and England above all, were to have on James's life and art. During the summer of 1866, he recalls hearing news of his friend Oliver Wendell Holmes, far away on tour in England, which provoked an emotion, 'exquisite of its kind' that was to make 'a sovereign contribution . . . so much later on (ten years!) [to] my own vision-haunted

migration'.⁹ And in the same overpowering flood of memory 'linking on . . . somehow', comes that of lying on his bed, on holiday at Swampscott, Massachusetts, and reading George Eliot's newly published *Felix Holt* – 'in ever so thrilled a state'¹⁰ – for which he was to write a review for the *Nation*.

That review of *Felix Holt* in 1866, was by no means James's first attempt at the form. He had begun sending 'notices' to the *North American Review* in 1864, and immediately finding a mentor and friend in the coeditor, of the *Review* and the *Nation*, Charles Eliot Norton, had reviewed for both journals regularly for two years. In fact, in the 1860s and 1870s, the initial phase of his career which led up to the writing of *The Portrait of a Lady*, James wrote more reviews than in any other period of his career: a stream of essays about a huge range of his contemporaries, European, English and American, at all levels of literary art. Though they often adopt the fashionably avuncular tones of the book reviewer, they actually contain the reactions of a hungry young pretender: feedback to himself on the art of fiction and, as it happens, more of them on George Eliot than on anyone else. These were the great years of George Eliot's settled creative success and literary acclaim on both sides of the Atlantic and while she emerged as a great practitioner of the novel, he read her work, absorbed his own lessons from it and experimented with fiction himself.

His review of *Felix Holt* was, however, James's first public pronouncement about George Eliot, a writer whom, if later memory is to be trusted, he already greatly admired and enjoyed. The review is anonymous, dogmatic and very revealing. The reviewer was just twenty-three years old with three published stories to his name. George Eliot, on the other hand, was the acclaimed author of *Scenes of Clerical Life* (1857), *Adam Bede* (1859), *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), *Silas Marner* (1861) and *Romola* (1863). But he had no compunction about taking the lofty view of the experienced critic. He complains that her plots 'have always been artificial – clumsily artificial – the conduct of her story slow, and her style diffuse. Her conclusions have been signally weak'.¹¹

In fact not very much about the book impresses him. He warns against overestimation of the novel and of the novelist herself: her works are not masterpieces. They belong to the same English tradition as Miss Edgeworth and Miss Austen, the 'clever, voluble, bright-coloured novel of manners'. And with a flourish, he concludes:

With a certain masculine comprehensiveness which they [Edgeworth and Austen] lack, she is eventually a feminine – a delightfully feminine – writer.

She has the microscopic observation, not a myriad of whose keen notations are worth a single one of those great synthetic guesses with which a real master attacks the truth, and which, by their occasional occurrence in the stories of Mr. Charles Reade (the much abused *Griffith Gaunt* included), make him, to our mind, the most readable of living English novelists, and prove him a distant kinsman of Shakespeare.¹²

Here the callow youth betrays more than just his failures of taste and critical judgement; his anxiety to deprecate George Eliot as ‘delightfully feminine’ has as much to do with his nationality as with a crude chauvinism. The anxiety of the young, male, would-be novelist in mid-century America arose from a painful mixture of morality, financial necessity and gender role-modelling. Young men, even unusual creatures like the Jameses with their inherited family income, needed ‘proper’ work to support themselves and to be respectable, democratic Americans. Writing fiction was beginning to be more profitable and respectable than it had been for Hawthorne, in the previous generation, but in practice, earning a regular living from fiction was visibly ‘women’s work’. In effect, what James displays here is an anxiety of influence which is unmistakably maternal – but reading George Eliot was, quite dramatically, to help him grow out of it.

There was, however, already at least one sign that amid his haste to point out her weaknesses James was paying attention to Eliot with an eye to his own embryonic creative interests. He appreciated the reflection of her ‘intellectual culture’ in her style: ‘a style the secret of whose force is the union of the tenderest sympathies with a body of knowledge so ample and so active as to be absolutely free from pedantry.’¹³ It seems curiously prescient that the young reader/writer should articulate and admire this observed quality in the older novelist which was to be so fatally lacking in Edward Casaubon, in the yet unwritten *Middlemarch*, and so malignantly perverted in Gilbert Osmond in the *Portrait of a Lady*. Dorothea Brooke and Isabel Archer could both be said to long for ‘knowledge so ample and active’ as indeed the heroines of his little clutch of stories already showed interesting signs of doing – and continued to do throughout his work.

Reviewing *Felix Holt* sent James back to George Eliot in earnest and he published a long article called ‘The Novels of George Eliot’ later the same year, in the *Atlantic Monthly*. This article is full of the young writer’s real interest and desire to understand his response to a major novelist. It drew from him attempts at critical discrimination and articulation that show he was growing in seriousness and subtlety. For reviewing his contemporaries had a multiple function for the young James in his struggle to

become a *professional* writer. While providing him with tangible financial evidence of his professionalism, it gave him ample opportunity to practise the art of criticism, to rehearse and articulate his own ideas, not only by taking on the great and the good, but the flawed and mediocre as well. It helped him to develop a critical vocabulary and to define the elements of aesthetic response which were directly related to the forms and principles of fiction.

In this second Eliot article of 1866, he is still occasionally hampered by a dependence on unexamined – perhaps defensive – stereotypes; but overall he has moved on. While Eliot's powers of observation are still 'decidedly of the feminine kind', she shapes up well against other models – all of them transatlantic. She is more of a thinker than Dickens or Thackeray and her study of the Dodsons in *The Mill on the Floss* is 'not unworthy of Balzac'. Even at this early stage, the heroine, Maggie Tulliver catches at his imagination and he embarks on a lifelong habit of rewriting other people's novels for them. He is unhappy with the flood at the end of the *Mill on the Floss*, which sweeps Maggie to her death after she rejects her lover, Stephen Guest. James does not want Maggie to drown, helplessly, by the agency of the flood. He would have 'infinitely preferred that Maggie should have been left to her own devices'. He questions that 'a lonely spinsterhood' would have been her only alternative and suggests that 'a denouement by which Maggie should have called Stephen back would have been extremely interesting and would have had far more in its favor than can be put to confusion by a mere exclamation of horror'.¹⁴

The exclamation of horror refers to the outrage he well knows would have met such an immoral conclusion. Indeed there is a long tradition stretching from the first reviewers, through Swinburne to Leslie Stephen then F.R. Leavis, that the suave Stephen and their guilty love were misconceived by George Eliot, that a girl of Maggie's quality would have been disgusted by him, not passionately attracted. But Henry James, at twenty-three, not only knows that Eliot is right but longs to take the erotic suggestion to its conclusion, imagining a possibly reprehensible but possibly more exciting and challenging conclusion to the couple's dilemma. George Eliot has him engaged and working and he offers this interesting reflection, which seems to contain a tacit aspiration:

In every novel the work is divided between the writer and the reader; but the writer makes the reader very much as he makes his characters. When he makes him ill, that is indifferent, he does no work; the writer does it all. When he makes him well, that is makes him interested, then the reader does quite half the labor . . . I hold there is a way. It is perhaps a secret; but until

it is found out, I think the art of story-telling cannot be said to have approached perfection.¹⁵

In 1868 George Eliot published something entirely different, a long dramatic poem called *The Spanish Gypsy*, and James reviewed it for both the *Nation* and *The North American Review*. Now Eliot is a 'real novelist' with 'a large, rich intellect which shines in her writings'.¹⁶ To follow her successful novels with a long poem is to court disaster, he warns, but she has carried it off and, if not pure poetry, the work has other strengths. For the aspiring young novelist it also had considerable theoretical interest. The work is above all 'a romance' and 'carries much farther that compromise with reality which is the basis of all imaginative writing. In romance this principle of compromise pervades the superstructure as well as the basis'.¹⁷

While James is pursuing this idea, but before he has written a single novel himself, the heroine of George Eliot's poem appears to give him a transparent pause for thought which was to have a lasting influence on his work. Quite suddenly he can be seen finding words for his growing interest in the representation of women – already visible in his stories – an interest in the difference between the real and ideal, actual or stereotypical, admirable or merely palatable. The romantic nature of the poem enables the heroine, Fedelma, a beautiful young gypsy, to renounce her aristocratic lover in order to lead her people, out of loyalty to them and to their last great leader, her dead father. Such a renunciation would be impossible, James observes, 'In our modern novels', where the interest depends upon a similarity of circumstances between the heroine and the reader. But that raises an important question about what might be expected of the heroine of a novel. Fedelma is in a higher key than what he calls 'ordinary women, or even ordinary heroines', and here he makes a discovery, while he works through the implications of what he has said, which indicates how his own assumptions have developed and which is worth quoting at length:

[Fedelma] is natural, I think, in a poetical sense. She is consistent with her own superfine character. From a lower point of view than that of the author, she lacks some of the desirable feminine qualities – a certain womanly warmth and petulance, a graceful irrationality. Her mind is very much too lucid, and her aspirations too lofty. Her conscience, especially is decidedly over-active. But this is distinction which she shares with all the author's heroines. Dinah Morris, Maggie Tulliver, Romola and Esther Lyon – a distinction moreover, for which I should be very sorry to hold George Eliot to account. There are assuredly women and women. While Messrs. Charles Reade and Wilkie Collins, and Miss Braddon and her school, tell one half of

the story, it is no more than fair that the author of the *Spanish Gypsy* should, all unassisted, attempt to relate the other.¹⁸

So it is a 'lower point of view' than George Eliot's which regards 'womanly warmth and petulance and a certain graceful irrationality' as 'desirable feminine qualities'. This inferior position is now identified with Charles Reade – whose 'great synthetic guesses', so superior to Eliot's 'myriad of keen notations', were the mark of a 'real master' just two years before. Furthermore, what is distinguished and admirable about George Eliot's heroines – lucidity, aspiration, conscience – is unique to her, 'developed all unassisted'. There is evident confusion in the mind of the young critic over the nature of *The Spanish Gypsy* as literary achievement, but that may be in part because it has elicited some articulation of a developing idea of his own. Heroines like Fedelma and her predecessors in George Eliot's work may not be 'ordinary women', but then whose is the standard, especially the literary standard, for what is 'ordinary' or to stretch a point 'real' – Charles Reade's or George Eliot's? Might not the fine conscience which distinguishes George Eliot's heroines itself become a vehicle for exploring what is real? Here, indeed, George Eliot was ahead of him, having long before made some acutely discriminating remarks about Charles Reade in the review of 1856 which included Stowe's *Dred*. Referring to his *It is never Too Late to Mend*, she had commented:

Mr. Reade's novel does not rise above the level of cleverness: we feel throughout the presence of remarkable talent, which makes affective use of materials, but nowhere of the genius which absorbs material and reproduces it as a living whole . . . Mr. Reade, on the contrary, seems always self-conscious, always elaborating a character, after a certain type, and carrying his elaboration a little too far.¹⁹

The year that followed *The Spanish Gypsy*, 1869, was a momentous one for the young Henry James. He took his first adult journey to Europe, alone, and at last gained from his experiences there the inner confidence to be a literary artist himself. One of the first of these experiences was meeting George Eliot. Unfortunately for all concerned, his visit on 8 May, sponsored by Charles Eliot Norton who was staying nearby with his family, coincided with the return home of G.H. Lewes's son Thornie, desperately ill and in agony with undiagnosed tuberculosis of the spine. Eliot, none the less, appears to have received the young American graciously and kindly, presumably for the sake of his family connections and perhaps his aspirations, since he had written only a handful of undistinguished

stories for the *Atlantic Monthly* by then. In spite of the briefness of the visit, which closed with his rushing out to find the doctor, he was captivated by her and wrote home exuberantly:

I was immensely impressed, interested and pleased. To begin with she is magnificently ugly – deliciously hideous . . . Now in this vast ugliness resides a most powerful beauty which, in a few minutes steals forth and charms the mind, so that you end up as I ended, in falling in love with her. Yes, behold me literally in love with this great horse-faced blue-stocking.²⁰

At the time, George Eliot was beginning on the long labour of composing *Middlemarch*, which appeared in serial form during 1872. By then Henry James had reluctantly been home to Cambridge in 1870 and mourned the loss of his cousin Minny Temple, but returned delightedly to Europe to chaperone his sister Alice and Aunt Kate on their own grand tour in 1872. When they recrossed the Atlantic he remained in Paris, determined to support himself by writing if he could. He also read *Middlemarch* and sent a review, as usual, to the *Nation*. They had already assigned the work to another reviewer and his piece appeared in the *Galaxy* in March 1873. In January of that year he wrote about it in a letter to his brother William, having moved on to Rome:

I am far from surprised at the admiration you express in your last for *Middlemarch* . . . I admired and relished [it] hugely and yet I am afraid you will think I have spoken of it stingily . . . I didn't make perhaps, a sufficiently succinct statement of its rare intellectual power. This is amazing.²¹

The novel, James claimed in his review for the *Galaxy*, is the work of a natural idealist who has 'commissioned herself to be real'. He could see the panorama but missed the pattern, the reflective analysis he pronounced 'obscure' and he suspected her of trying to 'recommend herself to a scientific audience . . . *Middlemarch* is too often an echo of Messrs. Darwin and Huxley'.²² While hugely admiring the novel, he had missed a great deal and actually objected to some of the sources of its greatness. But this may be explicable in part by the intense but limited focus of his own interest in the book and his frustrated sense that it had been curtailed in the service of a diffuse and unsatisfactory form. For:

nominally, *Middlemarch* has a definite subject – the subject indicated in the eloquent preface. An ardent young girl was to have been the central figure, a young girl framed for a larger moral life than circumstance often affords, yearning for motive for sustained spiritual effort and only wasting her ardor and soiling her wings against meanness of opportunity.²³

Such a figure was and continued to be very much in James's mind, already a recurrent character in his stories – the novella *Watch and Ward* (1870) was as yet his only longer fiction – and for a moment he came revealingly close to losing his critical objectivity in considering Dorothea:

With its abundant and massive ingredients 'Middlemarch' ought somehow to have depicted a weightier drama. Dorothea was altogether too superb a heroine to be wasted; yet she plays a narrower part than the imagination of the reader demands. She is of more consequence than the action of which she is the nominal centre.²⁴

So it is clear that what the imagination of this highly interested reader demanded, to the disparagement of what the novel actually achieves, is an 'ado' about Dorothea Brooke. To his preoccupied sense it would have done justice to her 'consequence' if she *were* the centre of the action, and therein would be depicted a 'weightier drama' than the vast array of contributory dramas *Middlemarch* provides. It took fifteen years of preliminary writing to produce the 'ado' about Isabel Archer, as he calls it in the Preface, but here the process of inner discussion and discrimination is suddenly visible.

Indeed, the declared frustration over Dorothea is not the only revelation of an important lesson James learned – and learned to articulate – in reading and writing about *Middlemarch*. In exploring his unconditional admiration for the drawing of Lydgate, 'a really complete portrait of a *man*', James identifies something else of supreme significance in his own contribution to the art of fiction. In creating 'the real hero of the story', Eliot has remained 'serenely impersonal' and:

It is striking evidence of the altogether superior quality of George Eliot's imagination that, though elaborately represented, Lydgate should be treated so little from what we may roughly (and we trust without offence) call the sexual point of view . . . Several English romancers – notably Fielding, Thackeray and Charles Reade – have won great praise for their figures of women; but they owe it, in reversed conditions, to a meaner sort of art, it seems to us, than George Eliot has used in the case of Lydgate; to an indefinable appeal to masculine prejudice – to a sort of titillation of the masculine sense of difference.²⁵

In this bold, radical and astonishingly perceptive piece of critical discrimination, the young James (still only twenty-nine years old) finds words for something he recognises as 'indefinable'. He makes explicit the invisible and unquestioned attitudes behind the writing of some admired male writers – including the now much deplored Charles Reade – and their

impoverishing effect on the creation of women characters. It is a form of cheating, he maintains, resourced and defined by 'masculine prejudice' and owing its specious success to 'a sort of titillation of the masculine sense of difference'. He identifies the existence of specifically male-oriented representation of character and calls it a 'meaner sort of art', which denies the fictional character independent subjecthood and implicitly positions woman as 'other'. Merely eliciting a vaguely erotic response in a section of the audience or conforming with stereotype, no matter how ingrained in the lives and imaginations of readers, he maintains is not a respectable or ultimately productive basis for the creation of character. George Eliot has risen above it, with Lydgate, her 'really complete *portrait of a man*' (my emphasis) and set the younger writer an invaluable example and encouragement.

By 1873 when his *Middlemarch* review shows him to have drawn such thoughtful, if idiosyncratic, conclusions from reading George Eliot, he had published twenty-one stories and a novella, *Watch and Ward*, over nine years in the American magazines *Atlantic Monthly* and *Galaxy*. Learning to be literary was a slow process on the surface, but much had taken place beneath. Among the stories he wrote during this time of transatlantic journeying and literary experimentation, there were several about or including artists – frequently painters – and their models, stories about the creative process, the artistic personality and the relation of art to life. As had been the case from his earliest stories, there was often an interesting young woman at the centre of the text. Reading *Middlemarch* he was powerfully receptive to the potential in Dorothea and in a state of mind in which he could grasp what he saw as Eliot's achievement in the disinterested representation of Lydgate. George Eliot's work of art was in creating a fully realised character, taken from the opposite sex from her own, but 'serenely impersonal', without resorting to the 'meaner sort of art' which indulges, or fails to transcend, the attraction and limitation of sexual difference. What he saw done in Lydgate was at the heart of what in story after story, and at full length in *Roderick Hudson*, with Rowland Mallet, Roderick Hudson and Christina Light, he explored and dramatised. Moving from Paris to Rome, James wrote his way through 1873 in this vein, starting *Roderick Hudson* in 1874. He finished it in 1875 in New York, where he made a final attempt to live and work in America. At the very end of 1875 he gave up and returned to Paris, spending most of 1876 there before his last move to London, his future home.

Paris in 1876 was an invigorating place for the 33-year-old writer, albeit

an outsider, an American. But James's French was fluent, he was sure of his vocation and felt he was coming into possession of his powers. Befriended by Turgenev and the Flaubert circle, he wrote a new novel, *The American*, and, while sending the chapters for publication to W.D. Howells at *The Atlantic*, started to tell him about what he called 'my new novel'. In October 1876 he refers to it specifically: 'My novel is to be an *Americana* – the adventures in Europe of a female Newman, who of course equally triumphs over the insolent foreigner.'²⁶

That letter to Howells also refers gratefully to his friend's positive reaction to a newly submitted critical review. For something else happened in 1876 which made a significant impact on James's creative life and plans. George Eliot published *Daniel Deronda* and James read and wrote about it. Like other commentators, he had mixed feelings about what George Eliot had done. His review for the *Atlantic* takes the form of a 'Conversation' where three notional characters conduct a dialogue representing their differing responses to the novel. Their discussion voices a range of the thoughts, doubts and pleasures that had appeared in James's letters home, all that year as the book was serialised, and it was only at the end, after long reflection that his admiration for it matured.

The three disputants in the review are Theodora, who likes the novel, Pulcheria who is sceptical about it and Constantius – a young critic who has published one novel – who tries to see both sides. This is Theodora's judgement on Gwendolen Harleth:

Gwendolen is a perfect picture of youthfulness – its eagerness, its presumption, its preoccupation with itself, its vanity and silliness, its sense of its own absoluteness... I can think of nothing more powerful than the way in which the growth of her conscience is traced, nothing more touching than the picture of its helpless maturity²⁷

George Eliot's Gwendolen is not Isabel Archer, but James's portrait of Gwendolen involves an important observation which contributes to her gestation. His Theodora reflects that, through Gwendolen's intelligence and her response to events, George Eliot goes beyond the familiar salutary tale of remorse, to trace the very formation of conscience, exploring the growth of moral consciousness itself. That, Theodora maintains, has tragic potential. In *Daniel Deronda* James saw this literary achievement playing a major part in a substantial novel. Constantius agrees with Theodora and amplifies her sense of the pain of Gwendolen's particular tragedy of consciousness in a description which could almost be a rough sketch for Isabel's:

The universe forcing itself with slow inexorable pressure into a narrow, complacent, and yet after all extremely sensitive mind and making it ache with the pain of the process . . . the very chance to embrace what the author is so fond of calling 'a larger life' seems refused to her. She is punished for being narrow and she is not allowed a chance to expand²⁸

In Grancourt, after Casaubon, there is a husband not only sterile but malignant and cruel. Is Gwendolen more afraid of him or of admitting her mistake, James wonders. Would she be afraid of him because he is a lord? Would an American girl be any more afraid of him for the same reason – or just amused? Finally, a passing comment by Constantius may be one of the most interesting in this process of tracing James's long-term train of thought. Speaking as James himself once did, ten years before, about George Eliot's 'delightfully, almost touchingly feminine' way of indulging herself – here over the personality of Deronda himself – he cites other examples in George Eliot's work including the marriage of Dorothea and Will Ladislav and observes: 'if Dorothea had married anyone after her misadventure with Casaubon, she would have married a trooper'.²⁹ If it is not fanciful to trace the origin of this odd remark, it could be a reference to Bathsheba Everdene and Sergeant Troy in *Far From the Madding Crowd*, which James had reviewed in New York the year before. He had thought the novel was at best second-rate George Eliot and he objected to the presentation of the heroine in ways which emerge as familiar:

But we cannot say that we either like or understand Bathsheba. She is a young lady of the inconsequential, wilful, mettlesome type which has lately become so much the fashion for heroines, and of which Mr. Charles Reade is in a manner the inventor – the type that aims at giving one a very intimate sense of a young lady's womanishness. But Mr. Hardy's embodiment of it seems to lack reality; he puts her through the Charles Reade paces, but she remains alternately vague and coarse, and seems always artificial.³⁰

Here, rightly or wrongly, relegating Hardy to the ranks of the practitioners of 'a meaner sort of art', James identifies again an approach to writing about women he finds intolerable. In her glancing reference to the trooper marriage, the cynical and disapproving Pulcheria gestures towards this other kind of heroine, closer to fantasy than reality or tragedy. But James is on his guard against Charles Readeism and 'the titillation the masculine sense of difference'. He will try instead, as his other character, Theodora puts it 'to unlock with as firm a hand as George Eliot some of the greater chambers of the human character'.³¹

Daniel Deronda and his reflections on it clearly remained very powerfully with Henry James after he had written his review and received Howells's approval. Three months after the letter acknowledging that approval and containing his reference to 'an *Americana*', he wrote to Howells again and it was clear that something much bigger and, to his sense, more significant was growing in his mind. Indeed, the subject in mind had meanwhile subtly changed its character and emphasis. Now: 'It is the portrait of the character and recital of the adventures of a woman – a great swell, psychologically; a *grande nature* – accompanied with many "developments"'.³² The language of this revelation is obviously very interesting in itself but doubly so in the light of the language of the 'Conversation', in which James had celebrated George Eliot's achievement the year before. Constantius, who praises Gwendolen as a 'masterpiece', admires her as 'known, felt and presented psychologically, altogether in the grand manner'. He also exclaims, 'see how the girl is known, inside and out, how thoroughly she is felt and understood, it holds such a wealth of psychological detail, it is more than masterly'.³³ So much comes together here; if James deprecated Hardy's Bathsheba because he had failed to 'understand' her and found her lacking 'reality' and 'artificial', the strength of Eliot's creation is that she is 'known', 'felt' and 'understood' 'inside and out'. Her presentation 'psychologically' is in 'the grand manner' – befitting a *grande nature* – through 'a *wealth* of psychological detail'. The conception of this book then is to supersede the simple transatlantic scenario of an *Americana*; indeed of the simple American Girl herself. It is to be, essentially, centrally, 'the portrait of a woman' and her large and interesting inner life. Under George Eliot's hand, as an invaluable example, such a woman, though only part of a novel, was 'a masterpiece' and her rendering earned Eliot the ultimate – and as it turned out the final – accolade, 'more than masterly'.

The gestation of *The Portrait of a Lady* took another three years, during which James finally found that his most congenial habitat was London. Here and in England as he explored it, he found the kind of complex social environment of which he had had such excited intimations as a boy when his parents read *Adam Bede*. He visited the Lewes household several times; for literary bachelors were among the most common and welcome guests in that socially anomalous ménage. He also wrote, with some diffidence, his short literary biography of Hawthorne for John Morley's *English Men of Letters* series, published in 1879. James's diffidence is not hard to understand. At this moment, when he had decided to commit himself to a working life outside his homeland, he

was confronted with a request to consider the life and work of his own most admired literary compatriot. Indeed, in the event, much as he admired Hawthorne's work, it was his ability to do it and to do it uniquely well from purely American materials that won his highest praise. Putting himself in Hawthorne's place, he considered what he saw as his peculiar difficulties.

If one were to enter as closely as possible into Hawthorne's situation one must endeavour to reproduce his circumstances. We are struck by the number of elements that were absent from them and the coldness, the thinness, the blankness . . . If Hawthorne had been a young Englishman, or a Frenchman of the same degree of genius . . . his sense of the life of his fellow-mortals would have been almost infinitely more various.³⁴

He pondered these problems for several pages and concluded with the notorious – and ultimately tongue-in-cheek – list of omissions from the scene available to the young American writer. Yet while this reading of Hawthorne's achievement was arguably an act of covert, or unconscious, self-defence, James was publishing and delighting a growing audience with a whole series of stories about Americans and their transatlantic adventures, especially those of young American women, including the one who finally brought him unequivocal fame – and some sharp disapproval – *Daisy Miller* (1878–79). But in the late summer of 1880, a few months before George Eliot's death in December, James began *The Portrait of a Lady*, that first 'masterpiece' in which an American girl develops suddenly and irrevocably into something deeper and more interesting; what he was to call in the Preface, the 'Subject'. Well beyond the *Americana*, James showed that he had learned to place a woman, in her own right, in the centre of his stage, and through her begin to dramatise the growth and transformation of consciousness itself.

Twenty-seven years later, reviewing his life's work in the prefaces to the New York Edition, he calls *The Portrait of a Lady* a 'monument' built, rather surprisingly, upon a 'single small cornerstone, the conception of a certain young woman affronting her destiny'.³⁵ He goes on to ask himself, somewhat disingenuously, 'By what process of logical accretion was this slight "personality", the mere slim shade of an intelligent but presumptuous girl, to find itself endowed with the high attributes of a Subject?'³⁶ and he turns at once, for reassurance and justification, to George Eliot. He cites her heroines and quotes her own answer to an identical question posed by her in *Daniel Deronda*: 'George Eliot has admirably noted it – "In these frail vessels is borne onward through the

ages the treasure of human affection.”³⁷ He is, in fact, deeply interested in the provenance of this young woman and with reason. She had been vivid and familiar to him for ‘a long time’ and to account for her would be, he claims, no less than ‘so subtle, if not so monstrous, a thing as to write the history of the growth of one’s imagination.’³⁸ The Prefaces are full of such tantalising revelations and mystifications, but for once it is tempting to take James at his word and follow up this invitation to study the growth of his imagination. For the figure he describes is clearly fundamental to his art and the recourse to George Eliot and her heroines is a generous clue. In revisiting old haunts of the imagination he recognised her defining presence and the way in which her understanding had enriched and extended his own. When he summed up what he felt the writing of *The Portrait of a Lady* had taught him, he seems to sum up what he had learned from George Eliot as he thought aloud in review after review:

the frail vessel, charged with George Eliot’s ‘treasure’, and thereby of such importance to those who curiously approach it, has likewise possibilities of importance to itself, possibilities which permit of treatment and in fact peculiarly require it from the moment they are considered at all . . . ‘Place the centre of the subject in the young woman’s own consciousness’ I said to myself, ‘and you get as interesting and as beautiful a difficulty as you could wish.’³⁹

That richly productive ‘difficulty’ was to occupy him for the rest of his creative life.

But what of George Eliot, the ‘delightfully feminine’ writer of *Felix Holt* in 1866, incapable of ‘those great synthetic guesses with which a real master attacks the truth’; then the ‘masterly’ author of *Daniel Deronda*, her last novel, in 1876. James did not write of her again until 1885, in response to the biography written by John Cross, to whom she had been briefly married in the months before her death. He does not question in his article, which is not simply an effusion, the magnificent stature of her literary achievement. The effect of Cross’s book, furthermore, containing letters and journal entries, is that she strikes him as ‘one of the noblest and most beautiful minds of our time . . . living, in the intelligence, a freer, larger life than probably had ever been the portion of any woman’. And here, at last, he reconsiders and integrates his sense of her achievement as a woman, an Englishwoman, and an artist. She put paid forever, he maintains, to any essentialist assumption of *inherent* limitation in women. She could not, practically, go swashbuckling and produce the works of

Dumas, he points out, and G.H. Lewes may even have cramped her style while providing her with invaluable protection; but James's conclusion reveres her as his idea of a model artist and a 'master':

There is much talk today about things being 'open to women'; but George Eliot showed that there is nothing that is closed . . . What is remarkable, extraordinary, – and the process remains inscrutable, mysterious – is that this quiet, sedentary, serious, invalidical English lady, without animal spirits, without adventures or sensations, should have made us believe that nothing in the world was alien to her; should have produced such rich, deep, masterly pictures of the multiform life of man.⁴⁰

Notes

- 1 F.R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1972, p. 24.
- 2 Leavis, *The Great Tradition*, p. 104.
- 3 *Atlantic Monthly*, May 1885, reprinted in *Partial Portraits*, 1888. Reprinted in Henry James, *Literary Criticism; Essays on Literature, American Writers, English Writers*, New York, The Library of America, 1984, p. 1010. All references to James's essays on George Eliot will be taken from this edition.
- 4 George Eliot, *The George Eliot Letters*, ed. Gordon Haight, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1954–78, Vol. 1, p. 270, 14 July 1848, to Sarah Hennell (ms. Harvard).
- 5 George Eliot, 'Margaret Fuller and Mary Wollstonecraft', in the *Leader*, 13 October 1855, reprinted in *George Eliot, Selected Essays, Poems and Other Writings*, eds A.S. Byatt and Nicholas Warren, London, Penguin, 1990, p. 332.
- 6 See Henry James, *William Wetmore Story and his Friends*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1903, pp. 121–31.
- 7 Eliot, *Selected Essays*, p. 380.
- 8 Henry James, *Autobiography*, ed. F.W. Dupee, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1983, p. 250.
- 9 Henry James, *The Notebooks of Henry James*, eds F.O. Matthiessen and Kenneth B. Murdock, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1981, pp. 319–20.
- 10 James, *Notebooks*, p. 320.
- 11 James, *Literary Criticism*, p. 907.
- 12 James, *Literary Criticism*, p. 911.
- 13 James, *Literary Criticism*, p. 908.
- 14 James, *Literary Criticism*, pp. 930–1.
- 15 James, *Literary Criticism*, p. 922.
- 16 James, *Literary Criticism*, pp. 933–4.
- 17 James, *Literary Criticism*, p. 948.
- 18 This quotation and preceding paragraph: James, *Literary Criticism*, pp. 949–50.
- 19 Eliot, *Selected Essays*, p. 283.

- 20 26 April 1869, see Henry James, *Letters*, ed. Leon Edel, London, Macmillan, 1974–84, Vol. 1, pp. 116–17.
- 21 James, *Letters*, Vol. 1, p. 324.
- 22 James, *Literary Criticism*, p. 965.
- 23 James, *Literary Criticism*, p. 959.
- 24 James, *Literary Criticism*, p. 960.
- 25 James, *Literary Criticism*, p. 962.
- 26 James, *Letters*, Vol. 2, pp. 70–2.
- 27 James, *Literary Criticism*, pp. 989–90.
- 28 James, *Literary Criticism*, p. 990.
- 29 James, *Literary Criticism*, p. 985.
- 30 James, *Literary Criticism*, p. 1048.
- 31 James, *Literary Criticism*, p. 983.
- 32 James, *Letters*, Vol. 2, p. 97.
- 33 James, *Literary Criticism*, p. 979.
- 34 James, *Literary Criticism*, p. 351.
- 35 Henry James, *The Art of the Novel*, ed. R.P. Blackmur, New York, Scribner's, 1962, p. 48.
- 36 James, *The Art of the Novel*, p. 48.
- 37 James, *The Art of the Novel*, p. 49.
- 38 James, *The Art of the Novel*, p. 47.
- 39 James, *The Art of the Novel*, p. 51.
- 40 All quotations in this paragraph from James, *Literary Criticism*, p. 1010.

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