Ca' Foscari
University
of Venice

European Joint Master's Degree in
English and American Studies

Second cycle (D. M. 270/04)

Final Thesis

Truthfulness and Sympathy in George Eliot's Aesthetics

Supervisor
Ch. Prof. Enrica Villari

Second Reader
Ch. Prof. Andrew Monnickendam

Candidate
Virginia Accardi
Matriculation Number 858508

Academic Year
2020 / 2021

Contents

Introduction………………………………………………………… p. 2

I. The Principle of Truthfulness

I.1. John Ruskin's *Modern Painters* …………………………………… p. 6

I.2. 'A Faithful Study of Nature': Ruskin and Eliot's Realism ………… p. 10

I.3. 'This rare, precious quality of truthfulness': George Eliot on Dutch Paintings …………………………………………………… p. 26

I.4. Sensationalism as Falsification: *Silly Novels by Lady Novelists*…… p. 42

II. Sympathy

II.1. Sympathy as "the raw material of moral sentiment" ………… p. 58

II.2. Widening Perspectives ……………………………………… p. 66

II.3. *Middlemarch* ……………………………………………….. p. 79

Conclusions…………………………………………………….. p. 97

Bibliography …………………………………………………… p. 100

Introduction

> [I] have gone through again and again the severe effort of trying to make certain ideas thoroughly incarnate, as if they had revealed themselves to me first in the flesh and not in the spirit. I think aesthetic teaching is the highest of all teaching because it deals with life in its highest complexity.[1]

In 1866, in this letter to Frederic Harrison, Eliot writes about her notion of 'embodied ideas'. As Eliot explains to Harrison, one of the most difficult tasks when writing a novel was, to her, "trying to make certain ideas thoroughly incarnate" in her characters. One of Eliot's abilities as a writer, indeed, was to make ideas, thoughts, emotions become as concrete as any physical object, so much so that they became the real subjects of her novels. Ideas are at the heart of Eliot's novels. And indeed, as Antonia Byatt defines her, George Eliot was the great "novelist of ideas"[2]. As a matter of fact, before being a writer George Eliot was an intellectual and spent many years writing for literary journals, such as the *Westminster Review* and the *Leader*. In the years that preceded the publication of her novels, George Eliot published numerous translations, articles, and reviews, in which she expressed ideas that were to have a distinct echo in her novels. One essay in particular seems crucial to understand Eliot's poetics: *The Natural History of German Life*, because in this essay, George Eliot describes two principles that will be central in her fiction: truthfulness and sympathy. In this dissertation we shall analyse how the principle of truthfulness and the notion of sympathy as expressed in *The Natural History of German Life* are at the basis of Eliot's poetics and of her novels.

---

[1] Eliot, G., *Letter* to Frederic Harrison, 15th August 1866, in Byatt, A. S., Warren, N., eds., *George Eliot. Selected Essays, Poems and Other Writings,* London, Penguin, 1990, pp. 248-250, p. 248.

[2] Byatt, A., *Passions of the Mind*, Chatto & Windus, 1991, pp. 75-76.

This dissertation is divided into two chapters, Chapter I: *The Principle of Truthfulness*, and Chapter II: *Sympathy*. Chapter I consists of four parts.

Chapter I.1, *John Ruskin's Modern Painters*, provides a short introduction to John Ruskin's *Modern Painters, Vol. I-V*, the work of art criticism that would influence Eliot's notion of realism, or truthfulness.

Chapter I.2, *'A Faithful Study of Nature': Ruskin and Eliot's Realism*, analyses and compares Ruskin and Eliot's notion of realism. By examining some excerpts from *Modern Painters* and Eliot's essay *The Natural History of German Life*, this chapter illustrates Ruskin and Eliot's similar views on realism, or truthfulness, and their argument of the dangers of generalisations in art.

Chapter I.3, *'This rare, precious quality of truthfulness': George Eliot on Dutch Paintings*, discusses the circumstance that, despite their similar views on realism, Ruskin and Eliot's opinions on the truthfulness of Dutch and Flemish painters differed. This chapter also illustrates how truthfulness becomes crucial in Eliot's novels and determines her choice of characters and setting, leading her to focus on the representation of the lower classes in her early novels.

Chapter I.4, *Sensationalism as Falsification: Silly Novels by Lady Novelists*, analyses how George Eliot tackles the problems of falsity in fiction, and the related omission of the lower classes from literature in such novels as those written by the 'Lady Novelists'.

Chapter II, on *Sympathy*, consists of three parts.

Chapter II.1, *Sympathy as "the raw material of moral sentiment"*, examines George Eliot's notion of sympathy by analysing two essays that Eliot wrote before publishing her novels, *Worldliness and Other-Worldliness: The Poet Young* and, again, The *Natural History of German Life*.

Chapter II.2, *Widening Perspectives*, discusses Eliot's choice to focus, from the publication of *Middlemarch* onwards, on characters belonging to the upper classes, while making of sympathy her crucial issue.

Chapter II.3, *Middlemarch*, examines Eliot’s representation of sympathy in her masterpiece, especially following the painful path of growth of the heroine, Dorothea.

Chapter I. The Principle of Truthfulness

Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.
John Keats, *Ode on a Grecian Urn*

I.1. John Ruskin's *Modern Painters*

In May 1843, John Ruskin published the first volume of *Modern Painters*, the momentous work that would absorb him until the publication of the fifth and last volume in 1860. The inestimable value of *Modern Painters* found wide recognition at the end of the nineteenth century and justly gained Ruskin the name of 'prophet of modernity', as Giuseppe Leonelli defined him[3]. Indeed, W. G. Collingwood, the principal biographer of Ruskin together with E. T. Cook, deemed *Modern Painters* "the first notable work of general criticism in the spirit of the modern age,—the pioneer and standard-bearer in the war against Philistinism and prejudice."[4] The publication of *Modern Painters* marked a turning point in the advancement of art criticism, since Ruskin provided the nineteenth-century middle-class British public with a new appreciation of art by apprising Victorian England of schools of art that had been disregarded before.

Ruskin was only twenty-four when he published *Modern Painters Vol. I*, yet the germ of his immense work dates back to earlier times, when he was only a seventeen-year-old student about to start his studies in Oxford. In October 1836, an anonymous reviewer of the *Blackwood's Magazine* reviewed a selection of paintings among those displayed at the annual Exhibition of the Old School, held by the British Institution, and others displayed at the Somerset House (i.e., the Royal Academy's) Exhibition.[5] One of the paintings displayed at the Royal Academy was *Juliet and her Nurse* by J.M.W. Turner, which was not at all appreciated by the anonymous reviewer of the *Blackwood's Magazine*.[6] The reviewer's sharp criticisms incensed Ruskin, who produced a fervent reply in defence of Turner, *A Reply to "Blackwood's" Criticism of Turner* (1836), in which Ruskin scathingly dissected the anonymous reviewer's remarks, expressed his admiration for Turner and touched upon issues that he would later discuss in depth in the five volumes of *Modern Painters*. Hence in the end, Ruskin's *Reply*, which should have been an impromptu, blunt answer to cutting remarks, led to the production of a lengthy, in-depth discussion, *Modern Painters Vol. I-V*. Ruskin's aim in *Modern Painters* would be the same as the aim of his *Reply*: to defend Turner from the "shallow and false criticisms of the periodicals of the day"[7], since Ruskin was enraged by the negative reviews appeared in the press against Turner's works. Nonetheless, differently from the *Reply*, *Modern Painters* cannot be solely considered a defence of Turner since Ruskin does not simply extol the virtues of his favourite contemporary painter. Ruskin also discusses his opinions about art, nature, and the role of the artist, presenting his personal *querelle des anciens et des modernes*, thus producing a reasoned discussion of contemporary art and ancient masters, and especially of the general principles of the Beautiful and the True. In fact, even if Turner's paintings are not discussed and analysed in all the sections of *Modern Painters Vol. I-V*, they remain a benchmark throughout the five volumes.

---

[3] Giuseppe Leonelli, *Il profeta della modernità*, Introduzione a *Pittori Moderni*, in J. Ruskin, a cura di G. Leoni, con la collaborazione di A. Guazzi, Torino, Einaudi, 1998, pp. XIII-LIV.

[4] Collingwood, W. G., quoted in Cook, E. T., and Wedderburn, A., *Introduction to Vol. III*, in Cook, E. T., and Wedderburn, A., eds., *The Works of John Ruskin*, London, Library Edition, 1903-1912, Vol. III, pp. xvii-lvi, p. xxxiii. Hereafter referred to as *The Works of John Ruskin*.

[5] Cf. *The Exhibitions*, 'Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine', October 1836, Vol. xl., No. 252, pp. 543-556.

[6] Ivi, p. 551: "[…] when human eyes shall be happily gifted with a kaleidoscope power to patternize all confusion, and shall become ophthalmia proof, then will Turner be a greater painter than ever the world yet saw […] It is grievous to see genius, that it might outstrip all others, fly off to mere eccentricities, where it ought to stand alone, because none to follow it."

Even though Ruskin and Turner's names will always be associated, since Ruskin's unwavering support helped disclose Turner's genius to the Victorian public, it cannot be said that Ruskin 'discovered' Turner: Turner was already a wealthy, well-known painter twenty years before Ruskin was even born[8]. What Ruskin did was to provide an interpretation of Turner's later manner, thus saving him from the misunderstanding of critics and public who did not appreciate his later works[9]. Indeed, the article published by the *Blackwood's Magazine* to which

---

[7] Ruskin, J., *Preface to the First Edition [1843]* of *Modern Painters Vol. I*, in *The Works of John Ruskin*, cit., Vol. III, pp. 3-6, p. 3.

[8] Ivi, p. xxxiii.

[9] *Ibidem*.

Ruskin had replied was only one of the many instances of negative reviews written by the critics of the time in response to Turner's later production. Marjorie Munsterberg stresses that it had become normal during the late 1820s to look back to Turner's earlier works in order to find evidence of his greatness.[10] As Cook and Wedderburn had already explained, Turner's later landscapes could not bear comparison, according to the critics and reviewers of the 1820s and 1830s, not only with his own earlier works, but also with the French and Dutch masters of the seventeenth century, such as Willem van de Velde, Nicolas Poussins, and Claude Lorrain, whose landscapes represented the accepted model[11]. Hence, since the 1820s, critics had already started to object to Turner's later manner, lamenting a downgrading of his talent. Set strongly against his later works were especially *The Athenaeum* and the *Blackwood's Magazine*, both journals complaining about Turner's "inventions" and extravagant use of colour, the latter being "once [his] chief excellence", but now "the rock upon which his fame will be wrecked"[12].

Ruskin's opinion was clearly different. These reviewers must have failed to fathom Turner's magnificent use of colour and light because, in Ruskin's opinion, "it [was] this power of giving light and shade by pure colour in which Turner so peculiarly [excelled]"[13]. Ruskin also underlined Turner's grasp of "the *spirit of things* […] drawn from the close study of nature (no artist has studied nature more intently) […] seizing the soul and essence of beauty"[14], in response to those reviewers who accused Turner of "want of *truth*"[15]. Ruskin would insist again on the faithfulness to nature of Turner's paintings in *Modern Painters*.

---

[10] Cf. Munsterberg, M., *Ruskin's Turner: The Making of a Romantic Hero*, 'The British Art Journal', 2009, Vol. X, No. 1, pp. 61-71, p. 62.

[11] Cf. Cook, E. T., and Wedderburn, A., *Introduction to Vol. III*, cit., p. xxxiv.

[12] *Fine Arts. Royal Academy*, 'The Athenaeum', 16 May 1840, No. 655, pp. 400-402, p. 400.

[13] Ruskin, J., *A Reply to "Blackwood's" Criticism of Turner*, in *The Works of John Ruskin*, cit., Vol. III, *Appendix*, pp. 635-640, p. 638.

[14] Ivi, p. 639.

[15] Ruskin, J., *Preface to the Second Edition [1844]* of *Modern Painters Vol. I*, in *The Works of John Ruskin*, cit., Vol. III, pp. 7-52, p. 51.

Indeed, truth to nature would become, together with the artist's imagination, a key element in Ruskin's conception of realism.

Ruskin's interpretation of Turner's paintings was, clearly, the component of *Modern Painters* most criticised by reviewers. Lester Dolk notices that early readers remained rather dubious about Ruskin's ideas on Turner, most of them rejecting Ruskin's conviction "that Turner, especially in his despised later manner, excelled all other landscape painters."[16] Critics and readers could not agree with the author's 'worship' of Turner and found his interpretations of the artist's landscapes wrong or far-fetched. Indeed, many a Victorian reader thought that Ruskin sought for meanings in Turner's pictures that the painter had not intended, basing their conviction on the repeated anecdote that Turner himself had once said so.[17] Moreover, various contemporaries of Ruskin's objected to the author's claim of having rescued Turner from contempt and neglect. As Munsterberg points out, Ruskin thought of Turner in terms of an artist blessed with extraordinary talent but persecuted by a neglectful world that could not appreciate his genius, a painter superior to his time, thus he assumed the role of the defender of such greatness.[18] Nonetheless, most art historians now agree that Ruskin contributed to create the image of Turner as a misunderstood genius, what Munsterberg defined as "Ruskin's making of a Romantic hero,"[19] an image of Turner which did not completely correspond with reality.

Despite the criticism, Dolk reports that the reception of *Modern Painters* was mostly favourable[20]. Among Ruskin's admirers can be counted distinguished readers such as Wordsworth and Tennyson, Miss Mitford, Elizabeth Gaskell, Oscar Wilde, Marcel Proust, and Charlotte Brontë, who famously stated that after reading *Modern Painters*, she felt as if she could see reality for the first time.[21] The early readers of *Modern Painters* praised the beauty of Ruskin's prose, his fresh approach to the subject and his thorough knowledge of it, the abundance of illustrations and references to paintings, and the exceptionally meticulous observation of natural phenomena described by the author.[22] Even Turner pronounced on *Modern Painters*, as Ruskin noted in his journal in October 1844, "I ought to note […] Turner's thanking me for my book for the first time."[23] Despite the recurrent criticism, by the end of the nineteenth century Ruskin's opinions about Turner prevailed. Ruskin's beautiful prose and modern approach to art criticism consecrated him as one of the most authoritative critics in the interpretation of Turner's paintings, and his work was widely acclaimed.

---

[16] Dolk, L., *The Reception of Modern Painters*, 'Modern Language Notes', Dec. 1942, Vol. 57, No.8, pp. 621-626, p. 623.

[17] Cf. Wyllie, W.L., *J.M.W. Turner*, London, George Bell and Sons, 1905, p. 101.

[18] Cf. Munsterberg, M., *Ruskin's Turner: The Making of a Romantic Hero*, cit., pp. 61-71, p. 63.

[19] *Ibidem*.

[20] Cf. Dolk, L., *The Reception of Modern Painters*, cit., p. 622.

I.2. 'A Faithful Study of Nature': Ruskin and Eliot's Realism

Among the readers who immersed themselves in Ruskin's work, was George Eliot, whose review of *Modern Painters* was enthusiastic. In a letter to her friend Sarah Hennell, Eliot wrote that "the last two volumes of Modern Painters [contained] … some of the finest writing of [her] age," and her admiration was so great as to draw Eliot to define Ruskin as a "prophet"[24] as far as art was concerned. Indeed, the reading of *Modern Painters* had a considerable influence on Eliot, contributing to the formation of her ideas on art and literature, and especially influencing her notions of truth, beauty, and nature. Among the numerous ideas that Ruskin discusses in *Modern Painters Vol. I-V*, one concept in particular was to be fundamental in the development of Eliot's aesthetics, that is, Ruskin's conception of realism.

---

[21] Cf. Cook, E. T., and Wedderburn, A., *Introduction to Vol. III*, cit., p. xxxix.
[22] Dolk, L., *The Reception of Modern Painters*, p. 623.
[23] Ruskin, J., quoted in Cook, E. T., and Wedderburn, A., *Introduction to Vol. III*, cit., p. xli.
[24] *Letter* to Sarah Hennell, 17 January 1858, in Haight, G. S., ed., *Selections from George Eliot's Letters*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1985, p. 183.

Eliot considered herself a realist writer and thought her novels realistic, yet there have always been mixed opinions regarding her being or not a realist writer. John P. McGowan underlines that some critics have argued that Eliot failed to achieve her goal of writing realist fiction.[25] Ulrich Knoepflmacher, for instance, defined realism as the representation of the commonplace and the actual, which was certainly one of Eliot's aims in fiction, yet believed that Eliot had not succeeded in her intent. According to Knoepflmacher, Eliot's failure depended on her characters, who were not, as Eliot wished, realistic but ideal, thus devised to accomplish her moral purposes.[26] Other critics, instead, are convinced of Eliot's success in writing realist fiction, also taking as supporting evidence Eliot's statements in her essays and novels about her realistic intents.

Whether or not George Eliot *is* a realist writer depends on the definition given of the term realism. What is truly relevant here is to define what Eliot meant with 'realism'. To do so, it is necessary to clarify the meaning Ruskin attributed to the term, since Eliot's conception of it, as we have said, had been deeply influenced by Ruskin's understanding of realism. In her review of *Modern Painters, Vol. III*, published in the *Westminster Review* in 1856, Eliot stated:

> The truth of infinite value that [Ruskin] teaches is *realism* – the doctrine that all truth and beauty are to be attained by a humble and faithful study of nature, and not by substituting vague forms, bred by imagination on the mists of feeling, in place of definite, substantial reality. The thorough acceptance of this doctrine would remould our life; and he who teaches its application to any one department of human activity with such power as Mr Ruskin's, is a prophet for his generation.[27]

---

[25] Cf. McGowan, J. P., *The Turn of George Eliot's Realism*, 'Nineteenth-Century Fiction', Sep. 1980, Vol. 35, No. 2, pp. 171-192, p. 171.

[26] Cf. Knoepflmacher, U.C., *George Eliot's Early Novels: The Limits of Realism*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968, p. 24.

[27] Eliot, G., *John Ruskin's 'Modern Painters, Vol. III'*, (1856), in Byatt, A. S., and Warren, N., eds., *George Eliot. Selected Essays, Poems and Other Writings*, London, Penguin, 1990, pp. 367-378, p. 368.

In a few lines, Eliot managed to condense what Ruskin had thoroughly explained and illustrated in five volumes, grasping the essence of Ruskin's realism. One of the central pillars of Ruskin's theory of realism is here described, indeed: the "humble and faithful study of nature", which excludes "vague forms, bred by imagination". Eliot's words clearly recall Ruskin's teaching in *Modern Painters*, where he insisted:

> on the necessity, as well as the dignity, of an earnest, faithful, loving study of nature as she is, rejecting with abhorrence all that man has done to alter and modify her.[28]

This sentence may be considered Ruskin's personal definition of realism as well as the basic premise of what he acknowledged as great art. Great art is based on a thorough observation of nature and does not admit any modification of nature on the part of artists. Hence, a faithful study of nature was a necessary preliminary phase to landscape painting. Ruskin suggested that landscapists should have a thorough knowledge of botany, in order to distinguish in their paintings between different types of trees; of geology, to be able to depict the difference between granite and shale; of physics, so that torrents might fall according to the laws of gravity[29], because the study of all the various elements of nature would help artists render a faithful representation of nature. Ruskin himself had submitted to this 'apprenticeship' in his youth when he used to spend long periods immersed in nature, which he deemed the greatest influence on the formation of his thought. His frequent stays in the mountains and at sea contributed to his intimate knowledge and worship of nature.

Walter Sargent argues that Ruskin's exhaustive, almost scientific approach to painting and his habit of examining the finest details of nature stemmed from his religious devoutness in his youth: to Ruskin, landscape was the work of the

---

[28] Ruskin, J., *Preface to the Second Edition, [1844]* of *Modern Painters Vol. I*, cit., p. 44.
[29] *Ibidem*.

"Divine Artist" and for this reason, should be represented faithfully[30]. John Rosenberg confirms Sargent's theory: to Ruskin, all great art was inevitably and simultaneously a celebration of God, of man, of nature[31]. According to Sargent, Ruskin's scientific approach and analysis of paintings was the means to discover the secrets and methods of the Divine Artist. Consequently, any landscape artist who modified nature would fail to understand the workings of the Divine Artist, while the artist who succeeded in providing a faithful account of nature would be like an "artist-priest" able to open the eyes of the public to the work of God.[32] In Ruskin's opinion, it was Turner the painter who, like a priest, better interpreted and revealed the work of God to mankind.

After establishing that a faithful study of nature should be the basis of great art, the second principle on which Ruskin based his conception of realism was the importance of details over general features:

> Every herb and flower of the field has its specific, distinct, and perfect beauty; […]. The highest art is that which seizes this specific character, […] Every class of rock, every kind of earth, every form of cloud, must be studied with equal industry, and rendered with equal precision.[33]

Great art is produced when the artist demonstrates his perfect knowledge of the object he wants to represent by rendering its general features, but also and especially its "specific character". Great art does not exclusively treat noble subjects like mountains, the sea, or important historical figures; it also portrays the smallest aspects of reality, like weeds, flowers, peasants. The thorough knowledge of the humblest details of reality is particularly important in those paintings that depict the highest subjects, since details do not divert attention from or interfere with the object, but rather elucidate it. More than that, noble subjects when coupled with minor details contribute to the attainment of truth in art, providing a complex and hence faithful depiction of reality.

---

[30] Sargent, W., *Ruskin as a Critic of Art*, 'The American Magazine of Art', Aug. 1919, Vol. 10, No. 10, pp. 387-393, p. 390.

[31] Cf. Rosenberg, J. D., *The Darkening Glass: A Portrait of Ruskin's Genius*, New York and London, Columbia University Press, 1961, p. 8.

[32] Ivi, p. 6.

[33] Ruskin, J., *Preface to the Second Edition [1844]* of *Modern Painters Vol. I*, cit., p. 34.

According to William Wright, Ruskin's emphasis on details is to be attributed to the fact that Ruskin shared William Hazlitt's romantic belief in an organic nature.[34] Ruskin recognised that nature consisted of different elements but believed that in nature's diversity there was a principle, defined by Wright as "characteristic Truth", that connected all the elements of nature and revealed a common divine origin.[35] Ruskin saw unity in diversity as the sign of God in the creation of the world[36], so truth to nature could be achieved only if the painter avoided modifications and rendered with fidelity every aspect and detail of nature. Truth to nature is, indeed, one of the qualities that Ruskin thought a painting should have in order to be considered great art.

The insistence of Ruskin on the depiction of details finds its origin also in Ruskin's bitter dissatisfaction with the degraded state of landscape painting in the nineteenth century, which according to Ruskin resulted from the modern tendency to generalise and idealise encouraged by such "parrot-critic[s]", like Sir Joshua Reynolds, who maintained that "the features of nature must be 'generalized'"[37] and the peculiar qualities of objects ignored instead. Wright explains that Reynolds, like Hazlitt and Ruskin, had based his theories on the principle that art must imitate nature, yet Reynolds's views departed from those of Hazlitt and Ruskin, since Reynolds pursued the ideal forms of nature, thinking that great art should embody ideals or general truths.[38] Hazlitt and Ruskin, instead, defended the very opposite position, resolutely refusing Reynolds' advocacy of idealisation and generalisation. Yet as Ruskin laments, most landscape artists “[neglected] *specific* form […] and [treated] […] materials in large masses, aiming only at general truths.”[39] So the lack of attention to details was the English artists’ greatest fault in landscape painting, according to Ruskin.

---

[34] Cf. Wright, W.C., *Hazlitt, Ruskin, and Nineteenth-Century Art Criticism*, 'The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism', Summer, 1974, Vol. 32, No. 4, pp. 509-523, p. 517.

[35] *Ibidem*.

[36] *Ibidem*.

[37] Ruskin, J., *Preface to the Second Edition [1844]* of *Modern Painters Vol. I*, cit., p. 34.

[38] Cf. Wright, W.C., *Hazlitt, Ruskin, and Nineteenth-Century Art Criticism*, cit., p. 513.

But if most landscape artists tended to pursue generalisations and false ideals to the detriment of the actual, specific features of nature, nonetheless, an excess of details should be avoided as well. As Ruskin states in *Modern Painters* about landscape paintings:

> That which ought to have been a witness to the omnipotence of God, has become an exhibition of the dexterity of man; and that which would have […] lifted our thoughts to the throne of the Deity, has encumbered them with the inventions of his creatures.[40]

Contemporary artists would focus on contemptible details, such as details of furniture, dresses, and jewels. As we shall see in the next section, this emphasis upon minutiae was considered by Ruskin nothing more than a mere exhibition of the “dexterity” of the artist, who would seek truthfulness in accurate but dreary imitation. What Hazlitt and Ruskin encouraged was, instead, a middle way between generalisations and excess of details.

The natural consequence of both generalisations and the opposite excess of minutiae, in Ruskin’s opinion, is falsehood. While discussing the representation of rocks in landscape art, Ruskin explains that “every attempt to produce that which shall be *any* rock, ends in the production of [that] which is *no* rock”[41]. In other words, any attempt to reproduce in art a general idea of reality, or an ideal of reality, would result in the representation of a lie which does not correspond to reality. Hence, in falsehood. Yet rocks, which epitomise minor details in landscape art, belong to the wider system of organic nature, where each rock is connected with and contributes to the existence of the rest. Thus, generalisations are not simply purposeless, as they do not truly represent reality; they also imply falsehood so are deleterious since, Ruskin argues, they only harden the human heart, leading it to appreciate false ideals that are only a figment of the artists' refined imagination. False ideals may corrupt the public's tastes in the direction of falseness and sophistication, leading them "from the love of what is simple, earnest, and pure, to what is as sophisticated and corrupt in arrangement, as erring and imperfect in detail"[42], hence hindering them from enjoying purity and simplicity.

---

[39] Ruskin, J., *Preface to the Second Edition [1844]* of *Modern Painters Vol. I,* cit., pp. 27-28.

[40] Ivi, p. 22.

[41] Ivi, p. 35.

Ruskin's notion of realism deeply influenced George Eliot, who inherited Ruskin's concern for the truthful representation of reality and his rejection of generalisations. In *The Natural History of German Life*, an article published in July 1856 in the *Westminster Review*, Eliot opens her discussion of Riehl's description of the German Peasantry with a reflection on the dangers of generalisations, deploying arguments that remind of Ruskin's considerations:

> It is an interesting branch of psychological observation to note the images that are habitually associated with abstract or collective terms […].
>
> 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 [a small] amount of concrete knowledge – that they are […] far from completely representing the complex facts summed up in the collective term, […]. 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.[43]

In this article, Eliot focuses on the representations of an aspect of reality to which she would devote many of her novels: the life and conditions of the lower classes.

---

[42] Ivi, p. 44.

[43] Eliot, G., *The Natural History of German Life*, (1856), in Byatt, A. S., Warren, N., eds., *George Eliot. Selected Essays, Poems and Other Writings,* London, Penguin, 1990, pp. 107-140, pp. 107-108.

Eliot here reflects upon a type of generalisation that she finds alarming but unfortunately widespread in the nineteenth century, concerning not only the arts, which however provide the best examples of this kind of generalisation, but also social and political theories, which is probably even more worrying: that is the habit of using abstract terms like ‘the people’, ‘the masses’, ‘the proletariat’, ‘the peasantry’, to refer to the people belonging to the lower classes. Yet Eliot notices how rarely do such terms correspond to the complexity of reality. A few years later, in *Notes on Form in Art*, Eliot would reiterate her argument:

> Abstract words and phrases […] are apt to live a little too much on their reputation and even to sink into dangerous impostors that should be made to show how they get their living. For this reason it is often good to consider an old subject as if nothing had yet been said about it; […] to simply ask what in the present state of knowledge are the facts which can […] be tied together and labelled by a given abstraction[44].

Too often are collective and abstract terms used inappropriately and sweeping generalisations made about the conditions and characteristics of the working classes, which do not correspond to reality. Like minor details in landscape painting, humble subjects were often left aside by writers, who preferred wealthy, fashionable members of society. Yet the omission of the lower classes in literature was as dangerous as the omission of minor details in paintings: their absence could only lead to a partial, if not false, depiction of reality. Therefore, in her writings Eliot frequently criticised those writers and artists who either provided a completely false narration of the lower classes because they based their knowledge of those people on prepossessions and traditions, or deliberately avoided the portrayal of humble characters in order to dedicate themselves to subjects that they considered more worth representing. In both cases, such artists and writers failed in providing a faithful representation of reality.

---

[44] Eliot, G., *Notes on Form in Art*, (1868), in Byatt, A. S., Warren, N., *George Eliot. Selected Essays, Poems and Other Writings,* London, Penguin, 1990, pp. pp. 231-236, p.231.

In *The Natural History of German Life*, Eliot thoroughly analyses Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl's study of the German peasantry. Eliot valued Riehl's study not only for its interesting subject but especially because she hoped that his books could serve as a model to her British contemporaries: Eliot hoped that in the future there might be someone who, inspired by what Riehl had done for the German, would be willing to provide a similar study of the British people:

> If any man of sufficient moral and intellectual breadth, whose observations would not be vitiated by a foregone conclusion, or by a professional point of view, would devote himself to studying the natural history of our social classes, especially of the small shopkeepers, artisans, and peasantry,– the degree in which they are influenced by local conditions, their maxims and habits, the points of view from which they regard their religious teachers, and the degree in which they are influenced by religious doctrines, the interaction of the various classes on each other, and what are the tendencies in their position towards disintegration or towards development,– and if, after all this study, he would give us the result of his observations in a book well-nourished with specific facts, his work would be a valuable aid to the social and political reformer.[45]

Eliot appealed for a detailed study of the British people since she could not stand the limited knowledge, and consequently countless misrepresentations, that most artists, writers, and politicians seemed to have of the British lower classes thus reinforcing deep-rooted prejudices and general misconceptions difficult to dispel. *The Natural History of German Life* is, therefore, both a review of Riehl's work and a strong criticism of the numerous misrepresentations of the lower classes in British literature in a fashion that recalls Ruskin's criticism of those mediocre landscape artists who would not devote part of their time to the faithful study of nature before painting it. Like Ruskin with the necessity to study nature before painting it, Eliot advocated a thorough study of the lower classes before writing about them. Indeed, Eliot attributed the cause of widespread misconceptions and prejudices right to the artists and the general public's unfamiliarity with the lower classes:

---

[45] Eliot, G., *The Natural History of German Life*, (1856), cit., p. 112.

> even those among our painters who aim at giving the rustic type of features […] treat their subjects under the influence of traditions and prepossessions rather than of direct observation.[46]

Generalisations and misconceptions about the lower classes, Eliot argued, were mostly due to prepossessions and traditions, which influenced artists' and writers' conception of reality. Thus, the description of the working classes did not result from direct observation, but from indirect knowledge. The indifference towards the real conditions and characteristics of the working classes was reflected in the "idyllic literature" that "[had] always expressed the imagination of the cultivated and town-bred" but that had little to do with "the truth of rustic life":

> 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. […] 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.[47]

The natural consequences of such disregard were the two great evils so much despised by Ruskin, i.e., generalisation and falsification. A true conception of the British people was necessary, therefore, and the reason was twofold:

---

[46] Ivi, pp. 108-109.

[47] *Ibidem*.

> 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.[48]

Firstly, false representations of the lower classes could never arouse sympathy in the public, as we shall see in chapter two. Moreover, a true conception of the life of the lower classes was crucial to those social and political reformers who wished to ameliorate society but who, nonetheless, based their knowledge on false notions of the People instead of direct observation. According to Eliot, instead, politicians and social reformers should draw on the experience of such members of society as the "landholder, the clergyman, the mill-owner, the mining-agent"[49]. Such people, who were actually well-informed about the conditions of the lower classes and knew about their needs and desires either because they dealt with them daily or because they belonged to the same social class:

> [had] each an opportunity for making precious observations on different sections of the working classes, but unfortunately their experience [was] too often not registered at all, or its results [were] too scattered to be available as a source of information and stimulus to the public mind generally.[50]

Unfortunately, the precious experience of these men was usually lost or, if it was recorded, it was not accessible to the general public, who, as a consequence, would hold a false idea of the working classes. For this reason, it appeared even more crucial to George Eliot that artists and writers should provide a faithful representation of the lower classes in art.

Ruskin and Eliot's animadversion against generalisation and falsehood might mislead the reader into thinking that their notion of realism was based on the exact imitation of nature. Rosenberg, indeed, points out the ambiguity of

---

[48] Ivi, p. 111.
[49] Ivi, p. 112.
[50] *Ibidem*.

Ruskin's use of the term 'truth', which at times seems to correspond to a flat account of facts,[51] as some of Ruskin's statements would suggest:

> Now there is but one grand style, in the treatment of all subjects whatsoever, and that style is based on the *perfect* knowledge, and consists in the simple unencumbered rendering, of the specific characters of the given object […]. Every change, caricature, or abandonment of such specific character is as destructive of grandeur as it is of truth, of beauty as of propriety.[52]

And indeed, Ruskin's statements that great art was based on a "*perfect* knowledge" of nature and on the "simple unencumbered rendering" of its features was misinterpreted by his contemporaries. Similarly, Eliot's conception of realism may run the same risk, since she used to repeat in her writings that her aim in fiction was that of reproducing reality without altering it, or making it look better than in actual reality. Yet neither Ruskin nor Eliot based their conception of realism on exact imitation. As Rosenberg acutely argues, Ruskin's notion of truth could not be limited to the simple imitation of nature, otherwise *Modern Painters* would turn from being a strong defence of Turner's later manner to being an attack against it.[53] While, as we have said, Ruskin appreciated that later manner right for its capacity to interpret reality. Hence, Ruskin's theory of realism seems to present a paradox: his wish for high fidelity to details seems to clash with his praise of Turner's interpretation of reality. Ruskin, however, explained this seeming paradox. Ruskin's theory of realism was based on two major components which might seem conflicting with each other but are not in Ruskin's thought: the faithful study and representation of nature and the creative mind of the artist. Nature and genius were indeed, according to Ruskin, the two necessary sources of great art:

---

[51] Cf. Rosenberg, J. D., *The Darkening Glass: A Portrait of Ruskin's Genius*, cit., p. 8.
[52] Ruskin, J., *Preface to the Second Edition [1844]* of *Modern Painters Vol. I*, cit., p. 25.
[53] Cf. Rosenberg, J. D., *The Darkening Glass: A Portrait of Ruskin's Genius*, cit., p. 8.

> great art […] must be inventive, that is, be produced by the imagination. […] there is at once a great art bar fixed between the two schools of Lower and Higher art. The lower merely copies what is set before it […]; the higher either entirely imagines its subjects, or arranges the materials presented to it, so as to manifest […] imaginative power. […] [However,] imaginative art always *includes* historical art; […] for all imagination must deal with the knowledge it has before accumulated; it never produces anything but by combination or contemplation. Creation, in the full sense, is impossible to it.[54]

A close reading of *Modern Painters* reveals the value of the artist's reworking of reality through imagination. Ruskin draws a distinction between lower and higher art based on the artist's imaginative faculties. Lower art slavishly imitates nature, but imitation pertains the material qualities of objects, it is an accurate yet cold reproduction of outward features that does not communicate emotions. On the contrary, great art always results from the artist's imagination. The more the artist manifests imaginative power, the greater his art will be. It should be noticed, however, that once again Ruskin seeks a *via media*: he praises the inventive faculties of artists but specifies that as great artists do not solely copy reality, so they do not totally invent their subjects out of thin air, but proceed from direct observation to then reproduce on canvas their *impression* of reality.

As a result, the role of the artist becomes complex and multifaceted in Ruskin's theory of realism since it entails the representation of nature enriched by the artist's impressions and reworking of reality. The artist's aim and greatest ability is to let the public see the world through his eyes, let them feel the same as he feels, but remaining hidden, so that the public can appreciate the object of the artist's painting, the impressions and truths that he wanted to convey, without being distracted by his skills.[55] In great art, reality is filtered through the artist's imagination and the painting becomes a mirror that reflects the artist's mind, impressions, feelings, and ideas:

---

[54] Ruskin, J., *Of the Real Nature of Greatness of Style*, in Ruskin, J., *Modern Painters Vol. III*, Pt. IV, Ch. III, in *The Works of John Ruskin*, cit., Vol. V, pp. 44-69, pp. 63-65.

[55] Cf. Ruskin, J., *Preface to the Second Edition [1844]* of *Modern Painters Vol. I*, cit., pp. 22-23.

> the landscape painter […] makes [the spectator] a sharer in his own strong feelings and quick thoughts; […] guides him to all that is beautiful; snatches him from all that is base; and leaves him more than delighted,—ennobled and instructed, under the sense of having not only beheld a new scene, but of having held communion with a new mind, and having been endowed for a time with the keen perception and the impetuous emotions of a nobler and more penetrating intelligence.[56]

By virtue of his heightened powers and deeper sensibility, the artist has the special role of guiding the public towards "all that is beautiful" by way of sharing with the public his viewpoint on the world and the emotions and impressions that were elicited in him by nature. The artist chooses subjects that he considers beautiful and praiseworthy not by reason of their actual beauty, but because they can be a vehicle of thoughts and emotions. The experience of art, according to Ruskin, should help the public develop an increased sensitivity to the beauty of God's creation. To exemplify the role of the artist Ruskin employs the image of a particular mirror:

> We do not want [the artist's] mind to be like a badly blown glass, that distorts what we see through it, but like a glass of sweet and strange colour, that gives new tones to what we see through it; and a glass of rare strength and clearness too, to let us see more than we could ourselves, and bring nature up to us and near to us.[57]

The mind of the artist becomes a coloured mirror that should reflect reality but not distort it. Through this mirror, the public see reality and are enabled to appreciate aspects of nature and reality yet unknown to them.

---

[56] Ruskin, J., *Of Ideas of Truth in their Connection with those of Beauty and Relation*, in Ruskin, J., *Modern Painters Vol. I*, Pt. II, Sec. I, Ch. I, in *The Works of John Ruskin*, cit., Vol. III, pp.133-139, pp. 133-134.

[57] Ruskin, J., *Of Ideas of Truth in their Connection with those of Beauty and Relation*, cit., p. 137.

George Eliot was deeply conscious of the two components on which Ruskin had based his theory of realism, i.e., truthfulness to reality and the artist's genius, as well as of his distinction between great art that reflects the mind of the artist and inferior art that impersonally reflects the object represented. So, as she followed Ruskin's teaching on the faithful study of nature, dedicating her early novels to the depiction of the lower classes, Eliot also adhered to the principle of inventiveness, considering her mind a mirror. The image of a reflecting surface already appears in the very opening lines of her debut novel, *Adam Bede*:

> With a single drop of ink for a mirror, the Egyptian sorcerer undertakes to reveal to any chance comer far-reaching visions of the past. This is what I undertake to do for you, reader. With this drop of ink at the end of my pen, I will show you the roomy workshop of Mr Jonathan Burge, carpenter and builder, in the village of Hayslope, as it appeared on the eighteenth of June, in the year of our Lord 1799.[58]

From this passage, it would appear that Eliot's purpose was that of rendering with precision the events that occurred in the village of Hayslope in 1799, as if she were provided with a mirror that could reflect faithfully "far-reaching visions of the past". Yet Eliot had developed her idea of truthfulness from Ruskin's theories, so later on in the novel she clarifies and illustrates the metaphor of the mirror. In chapter XVII, which can be considered as a literary manifesto about her intents in literature, Eliot states:

> my strongest effort is to avoid any such arbitrary picture, and to give a faithful account of men and things as they have mirrored themselves in my mind. The mirror is doubtless defective; the outlines will sometimes be disturbed, the reflection faint or confused; but I feel as much bound to tell you as precisely as I can what that reflection is, as if I were in the witness-box narrating my experience on oath.[59]

---

[58] Eliot, G., *Adam Bede* (1859), ed. M. Reynolds, London, Penguin, 2008, Book I, Ch. I, p. 9.
[59] Ivi, Book II, Ch. XVII, p. 193.

This excerpt has often been thought to mean the opposite of what Eliot meant. Since Eliot here declares that she will try to avoid any "arbitrary picture" of the world and characters she depicts in her novels, some readers might be misled into thinking that her aim was that of slavishly reproducing reality, yet Eliot had no intention of being included in the category, so much despised by Ruskin, of those inferior artists who simply limited themselves to impersonal imitation. Indeed, the artist's imagination and his/her reworking of reality play a prominent role in Eliot's novels and are epitomised by her image of the mirror. In the previous passage, Eliot states that she would be faithful to her impressions of the world as it has presented itself to her mind. Thus, the "faithful account of men and things" that Eliot presents in her books is based on how *she* had perceived reality, which she felt the obligation, as if she were a witness, to describe without any change. As she wrote in a letter in 1857, she admitted that in her stories she felt obligated "to exhibit […] things […] seen through such a medium as [her] own nature [gave her]"[60]. George Eliot felt bound to be faithful to *her impression* of reality.

Therefore, Eliot's conception of realism was different from what one would normally associate with this term and very similar to Ruskin's. Probably, instead of realism it would be better to talk of *truthfulness* in Eliot's case, because of the personal interpretation she gave to the term realism. Moreover, she rarely uses the term realism herself, preferring instead the words truthfulness and truth. As McGowan points out, Eliot knew the limits of mimesis, which has traditionally been associated with realism, hence according to McGowan she relied on a different criterion to achieve realism in fiction: reference, for which McGowan provides the following definition, "something represents something else "truly" when it successfully refers to it."[61] McGowan argues that Eliot's realism results from the relation that Eliot establishes between her fiction and the world, in which the object of reference, reality, should be represented truly. As McGowan points out, Eliot was aware of the difficult task she was undertaking trying to write "truthfully", since art is always the mirror of the mind, therefore Eliot acknowledged:

---

[60] Eliot, G., quoted in Mansell, D. JR, *Ruskin and George Eliot's "Realism"*, 'Criticism', Summer 1965, Vol. 7, No. 3, pp. 203-216, p. 206.

[61] McGowan, J. P., *The Turn of George Eliot's Realism*, cit., p. 173.

> how inevitably subjective art is, even when it professes to be purely imitative—how the most active perception gives us rather a reflex of what we think and feel, than the real sum of objects before us.[62]

Yet not only did she believe that truth in art could be achieved, but also that it was the writer's duty to do so. Thus, she tried to present the real world as she saw it, aiming to be the most faithful to her impression of reality, "dreading nothing, indeed, but falsity"[63].

I.3. 'This rare, precious quality of truthfulness': George Eliot on Dutch Paintings

Realism in the arts in the sense that Ruskin and Eliot attributed to the term had always been marginal since artists and writers tended to prefer more elevated subjects than scenes of ordinary life and humble characters. For instance, there was a general belief that landscape art was too commonplace to be depicted unless it was accompanied by remarkable characters of history or mythology. This belief derived from a long tradition that found its origins in Humanism and Italian Renaissance, which had led to the rediscovery and diffusion of Greek and Roman culture all over Europe. Indeed, the idealised representations that Italian painters made of men and nature consisted in the application of classical canons of beauty which promoted the pursuit of perfection, harmony, and grace, a suitable example being provided by Michelangelo's *Pietà* (1498-1499).

---

[62] Eliot, G., *Three Months in Weimer*, quoted in Mansell, D. JR, *op. cit.*, p. 206.
[63] Eliot, G., *Adam Bede* (1859), cit., Book II, Ch. XVII, pp. 194-195.

Nonetheless, not all European artists were engaged in the pursuit of perfect beauty. As Laurent Bove[64] argues, taste in the arts started to change during the northern Renaissance – from the end of the fifteenth century and notably during the sixteenth century – when realism in painting began to play a prominent role thanks to innovative painters like Pieter Bruegel the Elder. Indeed, Bruegel the Elder may be considered the initiator of a revolution in taste in the Low Countries since he remoulded subjects and themes represented in painting by giving underrated subjects unprecedented importance, his paintings featuring humble characters like peasants, artisans, workers, and merchants, engaged in everyday tasks. As Bove stresses, Bruegel's redefinition of subjects and themes was a radical act if put in relation with the dominating artistic movements of his time, namely Italian Renaissance, and with his contemporaries, such as Michelangelo. Bruegel, however, deliberately chose to distance himself from the depiction of ideal bodies and great subjects. As Max Dvorak affirms:

> L'important chez Bruegel c'est l'observation et la description des manifestations de la vie. C'est en elles qu'il cherche et qu'il trouve le grotesque et l'étrange. Il lui importe peu de montrer les hommes tels qu'ils devraient être. Au contraire il les dépeints, violemment et humoristiquement, tels qu'ils sont en réalité, avec leurs défauts, leurs passions et leurs travers, laissant au spectateur le soin d'en tirer la morale.[65]

Bruegel observed and described life. Differently from Italian painters, who, like Reynolds afterwards, would ignore reality to pursue ideals, Bruegel proceeded from the observation of society, nature, and man's life at one with nature, hence, from the real world and the real people who surrounded him. Bruegel abandoned any transcendental and theological aims and moved away from the restraints of the idealisation of reality. Instead, he decided to truthfully depict human beings as they really were, with their faults, passions, and flaws, and facts of ordinary life that took place in rural settings and featured humble characters, because these facts and events were common to and shared by every man.

---

[64] Cf. Bove, L., *Pieter Bruegel. Le tableau ou la sphère infinie. Pour une réforme théologico-politique de l'entendement*, Paris, Librairie Philosophique J. VRIN, 2019.
[65] Dvorak, M., quoted in Bove, L., *op. cit.*, p. 79.

Bruegel the Elder's works marked a momentous change in the artistic sensibility of Dutch and Flemish painters of the seventeenth century. And even if in *Modern Painters* Ruskin never mentions him among the Dutch ancient masters that should be regarded as examples of great art by his Victorian contemporaries, however certain aspects of Bruegel's works may be said to agree with Ruskin's teachings, such as Bruegel's refusal to idealise reality and his interest in the ordinary life of men, the equivalent of Ruskin's humble details. A new artistic tradition had thus developed whose focus had been moved from ideals of perfection to the genre of the familiar scenes of ordinary life, i.e., *tableaux de société* of the humble classes of society that depicted more personal, realistic fragments of ordinary life. Yet this realistic tradition did not descend solely from Bruegel the Elder. Hugh Witemeyer clarifies that many old masters had contributed to this revolution in taste, such as Adriaen Brouwer and David Teniers the Younger, both from Belgium, Gerrit Dou, from the Netherlands, and many others, such as Johannes Vermeer, Willem van Mieris, Gerard ter Borch, Adriaen and Isaack van Ostade, Pieter de Hooch, Gabriel Metsu, Nicolaes Maes, and Jan Steen.[66]

Interestingly, despite their pivotal role, in *Modern Painters* Ruskin objects to most Dutch painters of still-life and landscapes, opposing the cold manner of most Dutch painters to Turner's great style. There were exceptions, of course: Rubens, Vandyke, and Rembrandt were ranked by Ruskin among his favourite ancient masters. Rembrandt's and Rubens's achievements in landscape art were remarkable, in some of their paintings being respectively almost Titian- and Turner-like,[67] while Vandyke was considered by Ruskin a great portrait painter. The lower Dutch schools, however, did not escape Ruskin's censure and were identified by him as typical specimens of inferior art:

---

[66] Witemeyer, H., *George Eliot and the Visual Arts*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979, p. 107.

> Among the professed landscapists of the Dutch school, we find much dexterous imitation of certain kinds of nature, remarkable usually for its persevering rejection of whatever is great, valuable, or affecting in the object studied. […] the object of the great body of them is merely to display manual dexterities of one kind or another; […] I conceive the best patronage that any monarch could possibly bestow upon the arts, would be to collect the whole body of them into one gallery and burn it to the ground.[68]

Apart from this kind of scathing and provocative comments with which *Modern Painters* is interspersed, Ruskin gathered for his readers extensive evidence to support his dislike for most of Dutch art, his principal arguments being its slavish imitation, hence falsehood, and lack of sensibility, the most serious weaknesses of a painter from Ruskin's point of view. These shortcomings were mainly due to the tendency of most Dutch painters to accumulate details. Yet as Ruskin explains, *adding* details *to* the picture does not mean to *complete* the picture. Minor Dutch painters chiselled, refined, and smoothed their subjects as much as possible, but the resulting finish was not sufficient to make their paintings examples of great art, since they "[finished] for the finish' sake"[69]: delicacy and attention were not employed to render a truthful representation of the artist's impressions of subjects, but to simply display what they knew about the subjects and their artistic skills by means of an infinite accumulation of details. Surely there were exceptions among those minor Dutch painters who were not classified by Ruskin as great masters, like Aelbert Cuyp, a seventeenth-century painter able, every so often, to express “very sweet and genuine [feelings]”[70]. Yet the majority of them fell “into the error of painting what [existed], rather than what they [could] see.”[71] On the contrary, great artists like Turner would “finish for the impression’s sake”[72].

---

[67] Cf. Ruskin, J., *General Application of the Foregoing Principles*, in *Modern Painters Vol. I*, Pt. II, Sec. I, Ch. VII, in *The Works of John Ruskin*, cit., Vol. III, pp. 165-258, pp. 186-7.

[68] Ivi, pp. 188-9.

[69] Ruskin, J., *Of Finish*, in *Modern Painters Vol. III*, Pt. IV, Ch. IX, in *The Works of John Ruskin*, cit., Vol. V, pp. 149-168, p. 156.

The consequence of an excess of minutiae was falsehood, which, according to Ruskin, in the works of minor Dutch painters was particularly evident in two aspects: their lack of ‘truth of space’ and their defective depiction of light. In *Modern Painters*, Ruskin dedicates two chapters to the truth of space:

> it is to be noticed, that the eye, like any other lens, must have its focus altered, in order to convey a distinct image of objects at different distances; so that it is totally impossible to see distinctly, at the same moment, two objects, one of which is much farther off than another. […] the whole impression, either of one or the other, must necessarily be confused, indistinct, and inadequate. […] And therefore, if in a painting […] we represent our near and distant objects as giving both at once that distinct image to the eye, which we receive in nature from each when we look at them separately […] we violate one of the most essential principles of nature; we represent that as seen at once which can only be seen by two separate acts of seeing, and tell a falsehood as gross as if we had represented four sides of a cubic object visible together. Now, to this fact and principle, no landscape painter of the old school, as far as I remember, ever paid the slightest attention. Finishing their foregrounds clearly and sharply, […] they proceeded into the distance with equal attention to what they could see of its details—they gave all that the eye can perceive in a distance, when it is fully and entirely devoted to it; and therefore, […] they *never* succeeded in truly representing space.[73]

---

[70] Ruskin, J., *General Application of the Foregoing Principles*, cit., p. 188.

[71] Ruskin, J., *That Truth of Nature Is Not to Be Discerned by the Uneducated Senses*, in *Modern Painters Vol. I*, Pt. II, Sec. I, Ch. II, in *The Works of John Ruskin*, cit., Vol. III, pp. 140-148, p. 145.

[72] Ruskin, J., *Of Finish*, cit., p. 156.

[73] Ruskin, J., *Of Truth of Space:—First, As Dependent on the Focus of the Eye*, in *Modern Painters Vol. I*, Pt. II, Sec. II, Ch. IV, in *The Works of John Ruskin*, cit., Vol. III, pp. 319-326, pp. 320-22.

Ruskin's brilliant analysis of the workings of the eyes perfectly explains why accurate imitation, on which most Dutch painters based their works, could never truly represent our experience of reality. When looking at objects, it is impossible to distinguish all their elements at once; our eyes will inevitably focus on one of them at a time. As a consequence, the objects on which we have directed our attention will be seen with fair clearness, while the others will appear blurred and indistinct. Similarly, no matter how close an object is, there will always be something of it that we will not see distinctly, depending on which of its parts we decide to focus on. Hence, in landscape paintings, the public should not be able to see clearly both the foreground and the background or to discern perfectly all the elements of a given landscape, because this would not correspond with our experience of reality nor with the artist's impression of a given landscape. Details should be given but only of the subjects on which the artist has decided to focus. The rest of the painting should be rendered with vague and undefined strokes and left to the public's imagination:

> And thus arise that exquisite finish and fulness […] which no distance can render invisible, and no nearness comprehensible; […] And hence in art, every space or touch in which we can see everything, or in which we can see nothing, is false. Nothing can be true which is either complete or vacant; […].[74]

As for light, Ruskin was particularly concerned with the representation of sunbeams, recurrent in many Dutch paintings but treated incorrectly. One aspect seemed particularly problematic: such artists did not represent light itself, but the effect that light has on dazzled eyes. Ruskin argues that many minor Dutch artists did not seem to realise that the appearance of beams in a part of the sky is possible, and that sunbeams become visible to the human eye, provided that an obstacle, such as clouds, hills, or mountains, is present between the beholder and the orb.

---

[74] Ivi, pp. 329-330.

Surely, if beholders looked directly towards the sun, they would see glancing rays issue from the orb. Yet those rays would be "no more real existences than the red and blue circles which we see after having been so dazzled,"[75] so the depiction of such rays should be avoided because they are utterly false. Old masters, instead, used to represent these "spiky rays" issuing from the orb as they are symbolic of light, which was satisfying enough for these artists' "tardy imagination", who thus demonstrated their lack of observation and superficial knowledge of nature.

As a consequence of their many shortcomings, Ruskin's judgement of minor Dutch and Flemish painters could only be negative, as Ruskin could not excuse the complete lack of truth of space and the incorrect depiction of light in their paintings, both faults stemming from an excess of details and contributing to a general sense of falsehood. In Ruskin's opinion, these artists could not bear comparison with the greatest interpreter of nature, Turner, who was able to convey ideas of truth to the public and to make his paintings become vehicles of emotions and thought, and who provided excellent examples of the depiction of light and of truth of space. Indeed, in Turner's paintings details are not excessive but limited to the objects on which he decides to focus, leaving the rest of the painting vague and hazy. As for the depiction of light, Turner used to interpose a body between beholder and orb – a mass of clouds, a hill, a mountain, a tree – so that the rays resulted screened and did not appear to issue directly from the sun.

Yet despite Ruskin's disapproving of their work, the influence of Dutch painters on the visual arts and on literature was enormous and extended to such faithful disciples of Ruskin's teachings as George Eliot. Dutch and Flemish painters had been decisive in the formation of Eliot's conception of realism, as much as her reading of *Modern Painters*. Indeed, Eliot's aesthetics may be said to partly derive from her study of Dutch and Flemish paintings, with which she became better acquainted during her stays in Germany in 1854-55 and 1858, as well as from Ruskin's volumes. Eliot particularly appreciated the introduction of humble, ordinary people in paintings and the innovations in the traditional ways of representing light and shade in the natural world fostered by seventeenth- and eighteenth-century painters of the Netherlandish Golden Age, such as Vermeer, Rubens, Rembrandt, Teniers, but also the works of minor painters. From them she had drawn teachings that were to play a pivotal role in her fiction.

---

[75] Ruskin, J., *Of the Open Sky*, in *Modern Painters Vol. I*, Pt. II, Sec. III, Ch. I, in *The Works of John Ruskin*, Vol. III, pp. 343-357 p. 354.

The representation of light in painting is one of the aspects that most influenced Eliot's fiction, so much so that light became a recurrent element in her novels. Eliot knew how much pictures depend on light, because of her acquaintance with the works of Turner and of Dutch and Flemish painters, so she must have paid careful attention to their technique, grasping the enriching quality of light. A clever use of light can, indeed, give renewed value to the humblest subjects and landscapes and produce beauty where one would not expect to find it. As she had learnt from painting, to add beauty to a scene Eliot avoided blinding, harsh light, preferring instead light when it is softened because filtered through objects, e.g., clouds, glass or leaves. There are many instances in Eliot's novels of the enriching qualities of light, as well as of the different meanings that Eliot attributed to the use of light.

An example may be found at the beginning of *Middlemarch* when the reader meets the two Misses Brook for the first time. Celia, who is eager to divide the jewels of their beloved mother, hesitatingly asks Dorothea if she has time to dedicate to this task. Celia knows well, as the reader will be informed soon, Dorothea's Puritanic restrictions in terms of ornaments, thus resents Dorothea's "strong assumption of superiority" when she rejects not only to wear, but also to keep half of the jewels she has been bequeathed. Yet at a certain moment, a ray of sun enters the room and changes Dorothea's mind:

> She was opening some ring-boxes, which disclosed a fine emerald with diamonds, and just then the sun passing beyond a cloud sent a bright gleam over the table.

> “How very beautiful these gems are!” said Dorothea, under a new current of feeling, as sudden as the gleam. “It is strange how deeply colours seem to penetrate one, like scent. I suppose that is the reason why gems are used as spiritual emblems in the Revelation of St. John. They look like fragments of heaven. I think that emerald is more beautiful than any of them.”
>
> “And there is a bracelet to match it,” said Celia. “We did not notice this at first.”
>
> “They are lovely,” said Dorothea, slipping the ring and bracelet on her finely turned finger and wrist, and holding them towards the window on a level with her eyes. All the while her thought was trying to justify her delight in the colours by merging them in her mystic religious joy.[76]

A ray of sun filtered through a cloud endows the jewels with a new sense of beauty to the incredulous eyes of Dorothea. Eliot’s use of light is not a craze, not a pleasant detail whose aim is to add some colour to a scene or character, but can be considered as bearing symbolic meanings. In this case, Eliot’s use of light may be read symbolically as indicating the future evolution of Dorothea’s character: Dorothea’s choice to keep ring and bracelet may be a clue of the changes that she will undergo throughout the novel, since the reader will acknowledge a gradual movement from the Puritanic restrictions that Dorothea imposes to herself when the story begins to a more indulgent behaviour towards her desires and aspirations at the end of the novel. The underlying moral of this passage, however, may also refer to Eliot’s conviction that beauty can be found in every domain of ordinary life, even in those aspects that we consider dull and insignificant. Indeed, Eliot used to warn her readers not to undervalue what they considered commonplace, since it may disclose unexpected beauty. Certainly, readers might object that it is easy to find beauty in jewels, as they are commonly considered beautiful objects. Yet after spending some time with Dorothea and becoming more acquainted with her initial austerity, readers would realise that jewels are deemed by Dorothea too frivolous to stir in her any real admiration. Yet in this passage, she shows the ability to find beauty in what she considers commonplace, thanks to the enriching effect of the light on the gems.

---

[76] Eliot, G., *Middlemarch* (1871), ed. R. Ashton, London, Penguin, 2003, Book I, Ch. I, p. 13.

This use of light as a means of revelation and discovery is employed several times by George Eliot in order to open the readers' eyes to forms of beauty that would otherwise be unnoticed. Light plays a particularly important role in the description of humble characters and modest dwellings, as it is evident in *Adam Bede*. This novel, for instance, opens with a description of the workshop of Mr Jonathan Burge, a carpenter. The setting is dusty and busy, but the first impression we have of it is charming:

> The afternoon sun was warm on the five workmen there, busy upon doors and window-frames and wainscoting. A scent of pine-wood from a tent-like pile of planks outside the open door mingled itself with the scent of the elder-bushes which were spreading their summer snow close to the open window opposite; the slanting sunbeams shone through the transparent shavings that flew before the steady plane, and lit up the fine grain of the oak panelling which stood propped against the wall.[77]

A warm, natural light shines through the shavings dancing in the air, highlighting the beauty of the intricate patterns of fibres that make up the oak panelling. The setting, as well as the objects and characters, is modest, there is no display of richness in Mr Burge's workshop, yet "the slanting sunbeams" contribute, together with Adam's barytone voice and a concert of tools, to the pleasant but somewhat nostalgic atmosphere of this afternoon of work at Hayslope.

A few pages later, on the same day, the reader follows Seth Bede, Adam's brother, to an encounter of Methodists. There, the character of Dinah Morris is introduced, a young woman who preaches to the congregation:

---

[77] Eliot, G., *Adam Bede* (1859), cit., Book I, Ch. I, p. 9.

> [Dinah] stood with her left hand towards the descending sun, and leafy boughs screened her from its rays; but in this sober light the delicate colouring of her face seemed to gather a calm vividness, like flowers at evening.[78]

Dinah is no conventional beauty; her beauty is delicate and not immediately apparent to everyone, hence completely different from the extraordinary beauty of Hetty. Dinah is thin and short, has pale red hair, and her eyes have "no peculiar beauty"[79]. Yet when she mounts the cart to preach, the beauty of Dinah's traits seems to bloom like a flower thanks to the warm light of the late afternoon. Once again, it is screened rays that enhance Dinah's features, the warm light of the setting sun.

Eliot's novels offer many other examples of her description and use of light, which is not, however, the only aspect that her novels have in common with Dutch paintings. Hugh Witemeyer explains that many scenes and descriptions in Eliot's novels have probably been influenced by genre scenes and conversation pieces, which were typical of the Netherlandish tradition[80]. Indeed, the subjects of ordinary domestic life of the Dutch and Flemish tradition perfectly suited Eliot's artistic intents, even if references to seventeenth-century Netherlandish genre scenes occur more often, according to Witemeyer, in *Scenes of Clerical Life* and *Adam Bede*, Eliot's early works.[81] Witemeyer identifies at least one reference to the Dutch tradition in each of the *Scenes of Clerical Life*: at the beginning of *Amos Barton*, when Miss Gibbs and Mrs Patten are having tea with Mr Pilgrim (Ch. I); in the description of the kitchen at Cheverel Manor in *Mr Gilfil's Love-Story* (Ch. IV); and in another tea-preparation scene, at Mrs Jerome's, in *Janet's Repentance* (Ch. VIII).[82]

---

[78] Ivi, Book I, Ch. II, p. 27.

[79] Ivi, p. 28.

[80] Cf. Witemeyer, H., *George Eliot and the Visual Arts*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979.

[81] Cf. *Ibidem*, p. 108.

[82] *Ibidem*.

As for *Adam Bede*, this novel abounds with references to Netherlandish paintings, probably because in the summer of 1858, when she was writing it, Eliot had the chance to visit the galleries of Munich and Dresden and plunge in the works of Teniers, Dou, and their fellow Netherlandish painters.[83] Indeed, it will be Gerard Dou's *Betende Spinnerin* (1645), a genre scene, to inspire one of the most commented passages of Eliot's novels, where the image of an old woman that Eliot evokes seems to be the exact description of Gerard Dou's painting:[84]

> I turn, without shrinking, […] 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.[85]

There are many other scenes in *Adam Bede* that remind of recurrent themes of the Netherlandish tradition of painting. One of them is the old lady framed by the door, which we find in chapter one when Adam, on his way home, stops to give Dolly the keys of Mr Burge's workshop:

> It was a low house, with smooth grey thatch and buff walls, looking pleasant and mellow in the evening light. The leaded windows were bright and speckless, and the doorstone was as clean as a white boulder at ebb tide. On the door-stone stood a clean old woman, in a dark-striped linen gown, a red kerchief, and a linen cap, talking to some speckled fowls which appeared to have been drawn towards her by illusory expectation of cold potatoes or barley.[86]

Or when again in chapter one, the reader is introduced to Adam's mother, Lisbeth, who is waiting for her son to come back home:

---

[83] *Ibidem*.

[84] Cf. Witemeyer, H., *George Eliot and the Visual Arts*, cit., p. 108.

[85] Eliot, G., *Adam Bede* (1859), cit., Book II, Ch. XVII, p. 195.

[86] Ivi, Book I, Ch. II, p. 16.

> The door of the house is open, and an elderly woman is looking out; but she is not placidly contemplating the evening sunshine; […] Her grey hair is turned neatly back under a pure linen cap with a black band round it; her broad chest is covered with a buff neckerchief, and below this you see a sort of short bed-gown made of blue-checkered linen, tied round the waist and descending to the hips, from whence there is a considerable length of linsey-wolsey petticoat.[87]

Lastly, Eliot pleases her readers with a similar view of Dinah in the Epilogue. And the reader cannot fail to notice the constant reference to "mellow light":

> There is a figure we know well, just come out of the house, and shading her eyes with her hands as she looks for something in the distance; for the rays that fall on her white borderless cap and her pale auburn hair are very dazzling. But now she turns away from the sunlight and looks towards the door. We can see the sweet pale face quite well now: it is scarcely at all altered – only a little fuller, to correspond to her more matronly figure, which still seems light and active enough in the plain black dress.[88]

Witemeyer argues that Dutch and Flemish genre scenes also helped define Eliot's descriptions of interiors in *Adam Bede*, such as The Hall Farm's interiors (Ch. VI, XIV, XXII) and Bartle Massey's house (Ch. XXI)[89], because of the meticulous attention that both Eliot and Netherlandish painters paid to details: domestic objects, humble furniture, homely atmospheres, usually enhanced by the play of light and shade. Moreover, the image of Hetty making up butter in Mrs Poyser's dairy under the enchanted look of Captain Donnithorne (Ch. VII) finds a perfect illustration in *The Milkmaid* by J. Vermeer (ca. 1660), whose paintings Eliot may have seen during her stays in Germany. Lastly, Eliot might have looked for inspiration in Dutch paintings for two important moments of the narration in *Adam Bede*: Arthur Donnithorne's birthday feast (Ch. XXII) and the harvest supper (Ch. LIII). Such coral scenes are typical of the Netherlandish tradition; instances can be found in Pieter Bruegel the Elder's *The Wedding Dance* (1566) and *The Peasant Dance* (1568).

---

[87] Ivi, Book I, Ch. IV, p. 45.

[88] Ivi, *Epilogue*, p. 587.

[89] Cf. Witemeyer, H., *George Eliot and the Visual Arts*, cit., p. 109.

As far as conversation pieces are concerned, Witemeyer gathers ample evidence to suggest that scenes referring to the conversation piece are a constant presence throughout Eliot's novels. The conversation piece is a genre of the visual arts that resulted from the combination of genre painting and portrait and that depicts a group of friends or relatives in an informal setting – a room, a garden, a porch, a park – where subjects are engaged in recreational activities, such as sport, a game, a dance, a hobby.[90] As a result, the atmosphere of conversation pieces is relaxed, homely, and casual. From this genre, which appeared in Belgium and Holland in the seventeenth century, originated the English conversation piece, which established itself in England in the eighteenth century and became an important source of inspiration for George Eliot, since it offered interesting thematic possibilities, like the depiction of family harmony or its opposite, i.e., the emergence of family problems.[91] Witemeyer finds a perfect example of the conversation piece in *Middlemarch*, in a description of the Garth family, when the family members are reunited in the garden in an informal environment:

> [Fred Vincy] found the family group, dogs and cats included, under the great apple-tree in the orchard. […] [Christy] was lying on the ground now by his mother's chair, […] while Jim on the other side was reading aloud from that beloved author who has made a chief part in the happiness of many young lives. The volume was *Ivanhoe*, and Jim was in the great archery scene at the tournament, but suffered much interruption from Ben, who had fetched his own bow and arrows, and was making himself dreadfully disagreeable, Letty thought, by begging all present to observe his random shots, […]. Letty herself, […] was now seated on the grass, listening open-eyed to the reading.[92]

---

[90] Ivi pp. 110-111.

[91] *Ibidem*.

[92] Eliot, G., *Middlemarch* (1871), cit., Book VI, Ch. LVII, pp. 571-2.

Despite the numerous references to the Netherlandish painting tradition present in Eliot's novels, readers should not be misled into thinking that Eliot considered Dutch and Flemish paintings examples of great art. Surprisingly, indeed, since it would not seem so from Eliot's numerous references to such paintings. In fact, Mansell stresses that Eliot agreed with Ruskin's disapproval of most pictures of the Dutch school as far as their technique was concerned.[93] In 1854, while she was in Germany, Eliot wrote in her journal:

> We strolled into the Museum and looked at Flemish pictures. The beauty of detail and the marvellous painting of still life in some of the pictures which belong to a low development of art is very remarkable.[94]

We can deduce from this short note that Eliot appreciated the richness of details in Flemish paintings yet recognised that they belonged to "a low development of art." Eliot had probably in mind Ruskin's teachings: she knew that certain Flemish paintings could not be considered examples of great art since they showed no trace of the artist's imagination, of truth of space and of truth of light, communicating nothing to the beholder but superficial precision. Hence, after reading *Modern Painters*, Eliot must have been aware of Ruskin's distinction between high and low art and was probably able to agree with him that most Dutch and Flemish painters had not provided examples of high art.

Nonetheless, despite being aware of Ruskin's opinion and recognising Netherlandish painters' faults and limits, George Eliot found in those paintings a source of great inspiration and drew upon their work to form her conception of realism. The reason of Eliot's admiration for Dutch and Flemish paintings is explained by the author herself in *Adam Bede*:

---

[93] Mansell, D. JR, *Ruskin and George Eliot's "Realism"*, cit., p. 208.

[94] Eliot, G., *The Journals of George Eliot*, ed. M. Harris and J. Johnston, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 34.

> It is for this rare, precious quality of truthfulness that I delight in many Dutch paintings, which lofty-minded people despise. I find a source of delicious sympathy in these faithful pictures of a monotonous homely existence.[95]

Eliot and Ruskin agreed in their censure of falsehood in art, and both praised the quality of truthfulness in art, but they held different opinions concerning the qualities of Netherlandish paintings. If, according to Ruskin, most of Dutch and Flemish paintings were the epitome of falsity because of their excess of minutiae and lack of creativity, as well as of their complete lack of truth of space and truth of light, on the contrary to Eliot these faults were not enough to condemn Netherlandish paintings. Eliot did not deem such paintings less worth praising because of their inability to meet Ruskin's high standards. Instead, she appreciated them immensely because in them she could find the "quality of truthfulness" that she cherished and that was determined by the choice of Netherlandish painters to portray ordinary human beings engaged in everyday tasks, "which lofty-minded people despise."[96] Hence in their representation of ordinary characters, Netherlandish paintings were not that different from Riehl's study of the German peasantry, since they avoided idealised representations such as "the heroic artisan or the sentimental peasant"[97] and provided a faithful depiction of reality. The quality of truthfulness of Dutch and Flemish paintings allowed Eliot to identify with the subjects represented, identification being a crucial aspect in her fiction since, as we shall see in chapter two, it usually leads to sympathy. On the contrary, Eliot could not fully enjoy the works of those painters (and writers), such as contemporary English painters, who decided to depict only "picturesque lazzaroni or romantic criminals"[98]. As Eliot points out in *The Natural History of German Life*[99], such artists used to sacrifice truthfulness in favour of sensationalism and idealisation, preferring the destinies of extraordinary characters whose sensational life, however, was too rare and out of the ordinary to allow true and sympathetic identification. So, like the Netherlandish painters before her, in her early novels Eliot decided to portray ordinary human beings.

---

[95] Eliot, G., *Adam Bede*, cit., Book II, Ch. XVII, p. 195.
[96] Ivi, p. 195.
[97] Eliot, G., *The Natural History of German Life*, (1856), cit., p. 111.
[98] Eliot, G., *Adam Bede*, cit., Book II, Ch. XVII, p. 197.
[99] Eliot, G., *The Natural History of German Life*, (1856), cit., p. 108.

I.4. Sensationalism as Falsification: *Silly Novels by Lady Novelists*

George Eliot was aware that humble characters and ordinary lives were not considered the most appealing subjects in fiction, either by readers or by authors, the latter preferring not to deal with such subjects but rather with the representation of the middle and upper classes. Eliot tackled the problems of falsity in fiction and of omission of the lower classes from literature in particular in *Silly Novels by Lady Novelists*, an article published in the *Westminster Review* in September 1856. In this article, Eliot humorously provided an accurate analysis of the elements that, in her opinion, rendered certain novels written by women dreadful. Certainly, the fact of being written by women was not the reason of their weakness, as Eliot specifies. Eliot did not lump female writers together in her denunciation of 'silly novels', criticising any woman who had ever published a novel. Indeed, she celebrated the great talent of many female writers, like Harriet Martineau, Currer Bell (pseudonym of Charlotte Brontë), and Mrs Gaskell.[100] Eliot did not even include in her accusation those women who found themselves in the necessity of turning to writing in order to provide for themselves: even though their efforts were not rewarded by positive outcomes, she could excuse their "vacillating syntax and improbable [incidents]", since she would be moved to sympathy knowing that their "empty writing" was due to "an empty stomach."[101] As a matter of fact, the target of Eliot's criticism were those women novelists who belonged to the upper classes and decided to turn to novel writing either out of “busy idleness” or out of vanity:

---

[100] Cf. Eliot, G., *Silly Novels by Lady Novelists*, 1856, in Byatt, A. S., Warren, N., eds., *George Eliot. Selected Essays, Poems and Other Writings,* London, Penguin, 1990, pp. 140-163, p. 162.

[101] Ivi, pp. 141-142.

> The foolish vanity of wishing to appear in print, instead of being counterbalanced by any consciousness of the intellectual or moral derogation implied in futile authorship, seems to be encouraged by the extremely false impression that to write *at all* is a proof of superiority in a woman. On this ground, we believe that the average intellect of women is unfairly represented by the mass of feminine literature […].[102]

Such writers, who were responsible for “the most trashy and rotten kind of feminine literature” according to Eliot, certainly did not represent the average intellect of women, they were “very far below it.”[103] These Lady Novelists, as Eliot names them, would pass for educated women, and might have even received a good education, but proved that they had not benefited from it. What is worse, Eliot argues, with their embarrassing examples of bad literature, they tended to confirm prejudices against women and education:

> The epithet ‘silly’ may seem impertinent, […] but we use this epithet advisedly. […] When men see girls wasting their time in consultations about bonnets and ball dresses, and in giggling or sentimental love-confidences, […] they can hardly help saying, ‘For Heaven’s sake, let girls be better educated; let them have some better objects of thought […].’ But after a few hours’ conversations with an oracular literary woman, or a few hours’ reading of her books, they are likely enough to say, ‘After all, when a woman gets some knowledge, see what use she makes of it! […] No – the average nature of women is too shallow and feeble a soil to bear much tillage; it is only fit for the very lightest crops.’[104]

---

[102] Ivi, pp. 161-162.
[103] Ivi, p. 162.
[104] Ivi, pp. 154-155.

To the eyes of men, many of those women who had received an education and could be numbered among 'lady novelists' seemed to have completely wasted their education, since the products of their readings and studies were the most mischievous specimens of female literature. These novelists would thus confirm the popular prejudice that serious literature should be left to men, and frivolous topics to women. Hence, Eliot fought against the common conviction that women should not meddle with any topic more complex than party frocks and chitchat by trying to dissuade any woman intending to become a 'lady novelist'.

The major flaws of 'silly novels' written by 'lady novelists' were their complete, unabashed falsity and sensationalism, which affected characters, plot, and language. *Silly Novels by Lady Novelists* begins with the definition of the main features of these novels, which are "a genus with many species, determined by the particular quality of silliness that predominates in them", and then introduces their typical protagonist:

> The heroine is usually an heiress, probably a peeress in her own right, with perhaps a vicious baronet, an amiable duke, and an irresistible younger son of a marquis as lovers in the foreground, a clergyman and a poet sighing for her in the middle distance, and a crowd of undefined adorers dimly indicated beyond.[105]

The protagonist of silly novels is usually the most eligible young woman in society, since in most cases she is beautiful and comes from a wealthy family. Sometimes, it may happen that the protagonist is not an heiress but a destitute woman. After many vicissitudes, however, she finally manages to become part of high society by means of a profitable marriage, since "rank and wealth are the only things in which she is deficient."[106] The young protagonist is always surrounded by a wide circle of admirers who cannot but being attracted to her, because she evidently belongs to a superior order of beings:

---

[105] Ivi, p. 140.
[106] *Ibidem*.

> Her eyes and her wit are both dazzling; her nose and her morals are alike free from any tendency to irregularity; she has a superb *contralto* and a superb intellect; she is perfectly well-dressed and perfectly religious; she dances like a sylph, and reads the Bible in the original tongues. […] In her recorded conversations she is amazingly eloquent, and in her unrecorded conversations, amazingly witty. […] She is the ideal woman in feelings, faculties, and flounces.[107]

This beauty without equal, this hideously improbable model of devotion, wit, and morality, has to undergo trials and tribulations, for instance marrying the wrong, evil man, before being rewarded by the authoress with a happy ending. Yet in the end the heroine marries the love of her life, who happens to be an appropriately rich admirer of hers. Usually, the plots and intrigues that characterise these stories are either so predictable as to be divined from the very first pages, or so exaggerated as to become utterly implausible. The setting can be no other than "very lofty and fashionable society", and the language used by Lady Novelists is terribly grandiloquent and didactic, with philosophic and religious reflections everywhere in their novels. The most unpardonable shortcoming of these novels, resulting from the combination of their features, is, evidently, their *falsehood* in their depiction of reality:

> [We] are constantly struck with the want of verisimilitude in their representations of the high society in which they seem to live; but they [also] betray no closer acquaintance with any other form of life. If their peers and peeresses are improbable, their literary men, tradespeople, and cottagers are impossible […].[108]

---

[107] Ivi, pp. 140-141.

[108] Ivi, p. 142.

Surprisingly, not only did the unfaithfulness to reality of these novels regard the lower classes but also the members of high society. So Lady Novelists failed to provide a faithful account of members of both the higher classes, whom they should have known perfectly well, and of the lower classes, to whom Lady Novelists had "evidently never talked […] except from a carriage window; they [had] no notion of the working classes except as 'dependants.'"[109] As Eliot states, Lady Novelists were "inexperienced in every form of poverty except poverty of brains."[110] Hence, the reader is dismayed by the untruthful representation of their peers and peeresses, and what is worse, by the Lady Novelists' utter lack of interest in anyone who lived outside their habitual social environment. Lady Novelists were not keen observers of life, they did not wish to give a faithful account of society or of the reality with which they were better acquainted, they only aimed at sketchy portraits of models of beauty and morality, sacrificing faithfulness to nature in favour of improbable ideal character.

In *Silly Novels by Lady Novelists*, George Eliot illustrates her point with many examples drawn from different specimens of the "mind-and-millinery" types of novels that she reviews in her essay. Two examples are particularly significant because they find a direct correspondence, and reversal, in Eliot's novels and respectively concern the bombastic language and the improbable clergymen of 'silly novels'. The books from which these two examples are taken are *Compensation: A Story of Real Life Thirty Years Ago* (1856), by Lady Chatterton, and *The Enigma: A Leaf from the Archives of Wolchorley House* (1856), by an anonymous writer. In *Compensation*, one of the characters is a four-year-old baby, whose mother is "a genius, […] fortunate enough to have a lover who was also a genius, and a man of 'most original mind'"[111]. Growing up surrounded by these personalities, the child could not but be an *enfant prodige*, as proved by her excellent command of English at such an early age:

---

[109] *Ibidem*.
[110] *Ibidem*.
[111] Ivi, p. 143.

> 'Oh, I am so happy, dear gran'mamma; – I have seen, – I have seen such a delightful person: he is like everything beautiful, – like the smell of sweet flowers, and the view from Ben Lomond, – or no, *better than that* – he is like what I think of and see when I am very, very happy; and he is really like mamma, too, when she sings; and his forehead is like *that distant sea*', she continued, pointing to the blue Mediterranean; 'there seems no end – no end; or like the clusters of stars I like best to look at on a warm fire night'[112].

As Eliot points out, any person who has ever spent some time with a four-year-old would never expect to hear such a declamation from a child. It is evident that in her characterisation of this "infant phenomenon", Lady Chatterton has failed to grasp the most significant aspects of communication employed by children, even if the authoress seems intentioned to relate "a story of real life thirty years ago", as the subtitle of the novel reads. "[This] Ossianic fashion"[113] does not reproduce the babbling speech of a child who is learning to talk. Moreover, underlying that the child points to the Mediterranean when she mentions the sea is certainly not enough to render a faithful representation of children's composite ways of communicating, which, instead, Eliot had studied closely. Indeed, the baby of *Compensation* finds her counterpart in *Adam Bede*, where Eliot makes an accurate portrayal of children's language, pointing, and gestures in the characterisation of little Totty Poyser. Reading the previous passage from *Compensation*, the reader cannot but compare the prodigious eloquence of this child with the stammering expressions of sweet little Totty:

> 'Munny, my iron's twite told; pease put it down to warm.'

---

[112] Ivi, pp. 142-143.
[113] Ivi, p. 142.

> The small chirruping voice that uttered this request came from a little sunny-haired girl between three and four, who, seated on a high chair at the end of the ironing-table, was arduously clutching the handle of a miniature iron with her tiny fat fist, and ironing rags with an assiduity that required her to put her little red tongue out as far as anatomy would allow. […]
> ‘I tould ‘ike a bit o’ pum-take,’ rejoined Totty, who seemed to be provided with several relays of requests; at the same time, taking the opportunity of her momentary leisure, to put her fingers into a bowl of starch, and drag it down, so as to empty the contents with tolerable completeness on to the ironing-sheet.[114]

Differently from Lady Chatterton’s *enfant prodige*, who could easily pass for a teenager, Totty is unmistakably a little one. Totty’s elocution is not clear and correct; her syntax is not as complex, and her arguments are not as well developed as the child’s in *Compensation*. As any other four-year-old, Totty is a lovable little scamp with a sweet tooth, easily distracted by food or by anything that could be turned into a game. Thus, she could not care less about beautiful views and landscapes, of which the child in *Compensation* seems to be so fond, or of the “delightful” persons she sees around, unless they can offer her a gift, as Arthur does in chapter seven. The interests of the child in *Compensations* are more those of a young girl, instead of a toddler, while Totty’s main preoccupation throughout the novel – to lay her hands on cakes, fruit, and anything sweet – reflect those of a child of four.

Another character that appears in ‘silly novels’ and finds a counterpart in Eliot’s stories is the figure of the clergyman. An instance of a lady novelist’s young clergyman is provided by Ernest in *The Enigma*, a man “who sets every one right on all occasions.”[115] Yet more examples may be found in what Eliot defines “the *white neck-cloth* species” by Evangelical lady novelists, “which represent the tone of thought and feeling in the Evangelical party."[116] In such novels, the clergyman-hero is generally:

---

[114] Eliot, G., *Adam Bede* (1859), cit., Book I, Ch. VI, p. 83-84.
[115] Eliot, G., *Silly Novels by Lady Novelists*, cit., p. 150.

> a young curate, frowned upon, perhaps, by worldly mammas, but carrying captive the hearts of their daughters, who can 'never forget *that* sermon'; tender glances are seized from the pulpit stairs instead of the opera-box, *tête-à-têtes* are seasoned with quotations from the Scriptures, instead of quotations from the poets; […] The young curate always has a background of well-dressed and wealthy, if not fashionable society; – for Evangelical silliness is as snobbish as any other kind of silliness; […].[117]

This model of the lady novelist's perfect curate is overturned by Eliot in fiction already in *Scenes of Clerical Life*, for instance with the figure of Reverend Amos Barton, the protagonist of the first titular story of the collection. First of all, unlike the curate of Evangelical literature, Rev. Barton is not young and charming, but middle-aged and not fashionable or handsome in the least. When the reader catches sight of "his slim black figure" for the first time, the description that Eliot makes of Amos is anything but flattering:

> as Mr Burton hangs up his hat in the passage, you see that a narrow face of no particular complexion—even the small-pox that has attacked it seems to have been of a mongrel, indefinite kind—with features of no particular shape, and an eye of no particular expression, is surmounted by a slope of baldness gently rising from brow to crown. You judge him, rightly, to be about forty.[118]

Reverend Amos Barton is an ordinary man, someone we would pass on the street without noticing. He has a plain figure, no distinguishing features or attractive traits, and judging only by his unkempt appearance we could never infer that to his wife he is also “an affectionate husband”, nor that “in his way, [he] valued his wife as his best treasure”[119].

---

[116] Ivi, p. 156.
[117] Ivi, p. 157.
[118] Eliot, G. *Scenes of Clerical Life* (1858), ed. T. A. Noble, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015, p. 14.

Another notable difference between Amos and the typical clergyman of ‘silly novels’ lies in the congregation to whom they preach. While the clergyman portrayed by Evangelical lady novelists usually wins the admiration of young ladies, who cannot but fall in love with him, Rev. Barton, instead, preaches in the small village of Shepperton, which does not number among its members young, witty, and beautiful ladies madly in love with the curate, but humble people from the countryside, among whom the pauper living at the College, i.e., Shepperton’s workhouse for the poor. At the beginning of Amos’s story, the reader follows the Reverend to the College, where Amos’s audience is composed of very poor people who either do not listen to or do not care about his words. For instance, right in front of the Reverend is ‘Old Maxum’, “stone-deaf”:

> the weight of ninety-five years lay heavy on his tongue as well as in his ears, and he sat before the clergyman with protruded chin, and munching mouth, and eyes that seemed to look at emptiness. Next to him sat Poll Fodge […] a one-eyed woman, with a scarred and seamy face, the most notorious rebel in the workhouse […]. Beyond this member of the softer sex, […] sat ‘Silly Jim,’ a young man afflicted with hydrocephalus, who rolled his head from side to side, and gazed at the point of his nose. […] On his left sat Mr Fitchett, […] [who] had an irrepressible tendency to drowsiness under spiritual instruction, and in the recurrent regularity with which he dozed off until he nodded and awaked himself, he looked not unlike a piece of mechanism, ingeniously contrived for measuring the length of Mr Barton’s discourse.[120]

With such an audience, even the young curate of ‘silly novels’ would hardly manage to preach the gospel with satisfying results, and Rev. Barton is no rhetorician, thus doomed to fail:

---

[119] Ivi, p. 16.

[120] Ivi, pp. 21-22.

> to have any chance of success, short of miraculous intervention, [a clergyman] must bring his geographical, chronological, exegetical mind pretty nearly to the pauper point of view, or of no view; […] It is a flexible imagination that can take such a leap as that, and an adroit tongue that can adapt its speech to so unfamiliar a position. The Rev. Amos Barton had neither that flexible imagination, nor that adroit tongue.[121]

Rev. Amos's difficulties in preaching, however, are not ascribable solely to his audience, but especially to his lack of brilliancy, since his sermons are unappreciated by the dwellers of the College, but also by his other parishioners, as it emerges from a dialogue between Mr Pilgrim and Mr Hackit:

> 'Rather a low-bred fellow, I think, Barton,' said Mr Pilgrim […] 'Why, doesn't he preach extempore in that cottage up here, of a Sunday evening?'
>
> 'Tchaw!'—this was Mr Hackit's favourite interjection—'that preaching without book's no good, only when a man has a gift, and has the Bible at his fingers' ends. […] But our parson's no gift at all that way; he can preach as good a sermon as need be heard when he writes it down. But when he tries to preach wi'out book, he rambles out, and doesn't stick to's text; and every now and then he flounders about like a sheep as has cast itself, and can't get on'ts legs again. …'[122]

Mr Hackit and Mr Pilgrim, together with the dwellers of the College, are among the first characters Eliot introduces in her story, a telling choice on her part since she openly defies the norms of 'silly novels' and of the public who appreciated those novels. The audience Eliot addressed was certainly not the audience Lady Novelists had in mind when they pictured the refined and fashionable members of the congregations of their stories. Rev. Barton's story is, however, a perfect illustration of the villages and parishes that, according to Eliot, could be found in the countryside.

---

[121] Ivi, p. 23.
[122] Ivi, p. 9.

Another significant reversal of the idealised young curate is provided by Mr Irwine, the Rector of Broxton, Vicar of Hayslope, and Vicar of Blythe, in *Adam Bede*. Like the young curates created by Evangelical lady novelists, who are acquainted with wealthy members of society, Mr Irwine is well introduced in the upper-middle class of Hayslope, as his good friendship with Arthur Donnithorne, the young squire who will inherit the estate, lands, and fortune of his grandfather, confirms. Moreover, Mr Irwine was probably a handsome man in his youth. Nevertheless, even if Mr Irwine's good looks and family background draw him closer to the young curates portrayed by Evangelical lady novelists, Mr Irwine is definitely more similar to Rev. Barton in many respects. Like Amos, indeed, Mr Irwine struggles with poverty. As the description of his home reveals, Mr Irwine probably belongs to an impoverished family: the rooms of his house, recently built, are "large and lofty", "but the furniture, though originally of an expensive sort, is old and scanty"[123]. Mr Irwine's income is barely sufficient to support himself and his family, namely his mother and his "two hopelessly-maiden sisters"[124], so that his money problems have hindered him from taking a wife in his youth and have a family of his own. Certainly, Mr Irwine had the potentiality to succeed in life, being very similar indeed to the curates and clergymen described by Lady Novelists. Yet Eliot decides to be true to life and show her readers another, more realistic, finale, since life does not always hold in store success and wealth for handsome youths. Besides, unlike the idealised curate of Lady Novelists, Mr Irwine has many faults that Lady Novelists would never abide in their perfect characters. Like Amos Barton, for instance, Mr Irwine does not take his religious duties too dogmatically and strictly. As the narrator explains:

---

[123] Eliot, G., *Adam Bede* (1859), cit., Book I, Ch. V, cit., p. 61.

[124] Ivi, p. 74.

> [Mr Irwine was an] epicurean, if you will, with no enthusiasm, no self-scourging sense of duty; […]. He really had no very lofty aims, no theological enthusiasm: if I were closely questioned, I should be obliged to confess that he felt no serious alarms about the souls of his parishioners, […]. Clearly the Rector was not what is called in these days an 'earnest' man: he was fonder of church history than divinity, and had much more insight into men's characters than interest in their opinions; he was neither laborious, nor obviously self-denying, nor very copious in almsgiving, and his theology, you perceive, was lax.[125]

Moreover, unlike the curate in *The Enigma*, "who sets every one right on all occasions", Mr Irwine prefers not to interfere with the religious and personal life of his parishioners, being unwilling to think ill of his friends and acquaintances and more inclined to compassion and comprehension than any Lady Novelist would tolerate, "for his was one of those large-hearted, sweet-blooded natures that never know a narrow or a grudging thought"[126]. Thus, later on in the novel, even though he could have probably avoided tragic consequences, Mr Irwine decides not to interfere with Arthur's situation, thinking that there could be no danger in what he considers an innocent, passing infatuation for Hetty. Eliot, who could imagine the objections of 'Lady Readers' to Mr Irwine's choice of discretion, knew that such readers would have preferred – as it usually happened in 'silly novels' – an edifying lecture and "some truly spiritual advice"[127] on the part of Mr Irwine, a telling-off to warn readers against immoral behaviour. Therefore, Eliot decides to please her Lady Readers with Mr Ryde, who is the embodiment of their fictional curates. With a flash-forward in the future of Hayslope, the narrator explains to Lady Readers how the zealous clergyman that will take the place of Mr Irwine has actually affected his congregation:

---

[125] Ivi, pp. 75-76.
[126] Ivi, p. 75.
[127] Ivi, Book II, Ch., XVII, p. 194.

> Mr Ryde insisted strongly on the doctrines of the Reformation, visited his flock a great deal in their own homes, and was severe in rebuking the aberrations of the flesh […] But I gathered from Adam Bede […] that few clergymen could be less successful in winning the hearts of their parishioners than Mr Ryde.[128]

Mr Ryde embodies the exemplary clergyman promoted in 'silly novels', being very knowledgeable about the religious doctrines of the Reformation and severe in reprimanding his parishioners when they do wrong. Yet he seems to be utterly uncharitable towards them and for this reason fails to be respected and loved by his parishioners. On the contrary, despite his faults, Mr Irwine's sympathy, love, and respect for his flock, hence his humanity, were valued more important qualities than his knowledge of the Scriptures, because as Adam tells the narrator:

> religion's something else besides notions. It isn't notions sets people doing the right thing – it's feelings. […] [Mr Ryde] was very knowing about doctrines, […] but I've always mistrusted that sort o' learning as leaves folks foolish and unreasonable about business.[129]

Mr Irwine and Rev. Barton are not examples of ideal and perfect morality; they have faults like any other ordinary human being. Yet they perfectly represent those curates that are most likely to be found in the countryside: men endowed with intellect and moral standards, often not higher than the average, with many shortcomings and a few good qualities. Their immense value becomes evident if they are compared with the unreliable representations of clergymen by Lady Novelists, since Mr Irwine and Rev. Barton are not simply a reversal of the idealised curates that can be found in 'silly novels'. They are also Eliot's attempt to correct the excessive examples of falsity portrayed in literature, her attempt to reshape the public's conception of clergymen and, more generally, of the lower classes by providing truthful illustrations of the complexity of reality and of human nature.

---

[128] Ivi, pp. 197-8.
[129] Ivi, p. 198.

The complete lack of verisimilitude in 'silly novels by lady novelists', considered by Eliot the most disturbing aspect of these novels, was mainly due to their sensationalism and excesses in the representation of characters, who were utterly false because either exceptionally flawless or absolutely spiteful. The Lady Novelists' representation of life was too simplistic: it is impossible to unmistakably determine with "a glance whom we are to condemn, and whom we are to approve", since the world is not composed of "faulty characters always on the wrong side, and […] virtuous ones on the right." [130] Eliot could not tolerate such an overly simplified view of human nature, which finds no place in her novels:

> Certainly I could, if I held it the highest vocation of the novelist to represent things as they never have been and never will be […] refashion life and character entirely after my own liking; I might select the most unexceptionable type of clergyman, and put my own admirable opinions into his mouth on all occasions. But it happens, on the contrary, that my strongest effort is to avoid any such arbitrary picture, and to give a faithful account of men and things as they have mirrored themselves in my mind.[131]

Eliot knew that the characters of her novels were not the most exceptionable she could contrive and that some of them would not meet sympathy from all her readers, especially those of 'silly novels'. Yet she decided to accept the flawed nature of her characters and to depict it without improving it, thus deciding not to meet the preferences of her (lady) readers, since "the world is not just what we like."[132] Hence, in her novels Eliot does not offer false, ideal guides of conduct and exceptional examples of morality, but the true complexity of faulty human nature.

---

[130] Ivi, p. 194.
[131] Ivi, pp. 193-194.
[132] Ivi, p. 194.

Likewise, Eliot avoided stories of "a life of pomp or of absolute indigence, of tragic suffering or of world-stirring actions,"[133] which are simply other instances of sensationalism and excess, because these exceptional events have been the rare fate of a very small amount of people:

> There are few prophets in the world; few sublimely beautiful women; few heroes. I can't afford to give all my love and reverence to such rarities: I want a great deal of those feelings for my everyday fellow-men, especially for the few in the foreground of the great multitude, whose faces I know, whose hands I touch, for whom I have to make way with kindly courtesy.[134]

Eliot's conception of truthfulness, as inherited from Ruskin's theory of realism, could not but lead Eliot to choose as subjects of her novels the experience of normal people. As for paintings, in literature George Eliot preferred to devote her attention mainly to uneventful lives, ordinary human beings, and scenes of unremarkable destinies, which would not be recorded in historical accounts, but which "[have] been the fate of so many more among [our] fellow-mortals."[135] Indeed, Eliot's purpose in fiction was that of drawing her readers closer to the experience of their "everyday fellow-men", since she thought that the most important aim of art should be "the extension of our sympathies"[136], which could only be achieved through the representation of fellow-men with whom readers could identify.

---

[133] Ivi, p. 195.
[134] Ivi, p. 197.
[135] Ivi, p. 195.
[136] Eliot, G., *The Natural History of German Life*, cit., p. 110.

Chapter II. Sympathy

II.1. Sympathy as “the raw material of moral sentiment”

The term ‘sympathy’ appears frequently in George Eliot’s essays and novels, sometimes under different names, such as ‘fellow-feeling’ or ‘community of feeling’. Yet it is difficult to provide a precise definition of George Eliot’s notion of this multifaceted term without running the risk of being imprecise or simplistic. Indeed, it would be reductive to merely equal sympathy with benevolence, as well as it would be incorrect to consider it a synonym for selflessness. As Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth stresses, Eliot’s conception of sympathy “has little to do with selfless benevolence.”[137] Eliot herself would write in *Life and Opinions of Milton* that, “The Athenians […] distrusted all disinterested officiousness as much as we should distrust a man who set up shop purely for the goodness of the community.”[138] Eliot’s notion of sympathy, therefore, should not be confused with or equalled to complete selflessness to the benefit of other people’s needs. As Eliot explains, for her sympathy is:

> a delicate sense of our neighbour’s rights, an active participation in the joys and sorrows of our fellow-men, a magnanimous acceptance of privation or suffering for ourselves when it is the condition of good to others […].[139]

For George Eliot, sympathy was the precious ability, innate or acquired, to *feel for* others, hence, the ability to understand and care about other people’s needs and problems that stems from the awareness of the human lot that we share with our fellow men and women.

---

[137] Deeds Ermarth, E., *George Eliot’s Conception of Sympathy*, ‘Nineteenth-Century Fiction’, Jun., 1985, Vol. 40, No. 1, pp. 23-42, p. 23.

[138] Eliot, G., *Life and Opinions of Milton* (1855), in Thomas Pinney, ed., *Essays of George Eliot*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1963, pp. 154-157, p. 156.

[139] Eliot, G., *Worldliness and Other-Worldliness: The Poet Young*, (1857), in Byatt, A. S., Warren, N., eds., *George Eliot. Selected Essays, Poems and Other Writings,* London, Penguin, 1990, pp. 164-213, p. 203.

The ability to feel for our fellow mortals is a key concept that sheds new light on the essay we have already analysed, *Silly Novels by Lady Novelists*. Even if sympathy is not dealt with openly in that essay, it is clear however that the Lady Novelists' callousness and disregard are due to a complete lack of sympathy for those members of society Lady Novelists consider neither exceptionally beautiful and accomplished nor extraordinarily wealthy. In Eliot's view egotism and indifference are two characteristics that Lady Novelists share with another artist she did not hesitate to openly criticise and whom she was to describe as a "foolish youth and middle age"[140], that is the celebrated poet Edward Young, author of *Night Thoughts*. In *Worldliness and Other-Worldliness: The Poet Young*, an article published in the *Westminster Review* in 1857, Eliot provides an accurate account of Young's life and of his poetics, which could not be farther from Eliot's own. Having perused Young's writings – poetry, prose, odes, dramas, meditations, and satires – Eliot notices that throughout his production, a few characteristics seem to be recurrent, "we see everywhere […] the same narrow circle of thoughts, the same love of abstractions, the same telescopic view of human things"[141]. Like Lady Novelists, Young builds his writings around abstractions and generalisations, which are definitely incompatible with Eliot's poetics, as well as with her notion of sympathy. What Young did was to provide a "telescopic view" of human characters and things without taking into consideration the details, thus the uniqueness of each individual. The best Young could do was to "describe with neat and finished point, obvious *types*"[142], hence proving unable to scrutinise the complexities of human nature.

This deficiency on the part of Young to faithfully represent human nature mainly derives – Eliot argues – from the poet's indifference towards the real conditions of ordinary men and women. Exactly like the Lady Novelists, Young is completely disinterested in the fate of his fellow mortals, and utterly blind to the sublime worthiness of the lives of so many un-exceptional human beings. As Eliot points out in *Worldliness and Other-Worldliness*:

---

[140] Eliot, G., *Worldliness and Other-Worldliness: The Poet Young*, (1857), cit., p. 167.
[141] Ivi, pp. 185-186.
[142] Ivi, p. 189.

> […] we never find [Young] dwelling on virtue or religion as it really exists – in the emotions of a man dressed in an ordinary coat, and seated by his fire-side of an evening, with his hand resting on the head of his little daughter; in courageous effort for unselfish ends, in the internal triumph of justice and pity over personal resentment, in all the sublime self-renunciation and sweet charities which are found in the details of ordinary life. Now, emotion links itself with particulars, and only in a faint and secondary manner with abstractions.[143]

In his writings, Young never dwells on those moments of ordinary life that Eliot treasured and considered the sources of true sympathy, those commonplace episodes of an uneventful life that might stir in the readers a stream of genuine emotions because they are shared by them and hence allow identification with the subjects represented by the artist. There is no true understanding of "human things" in Young's poetry, and in its lofty imagery and grandiloquent vocabulary. Indeed, Young seems to contemplate the destinies of mortals with a pitying, moralising eye, elevating himself to the status of an ethereal being as if he did not belong to the same order of beings as his fellow human beings. In one of his poems, Young writes:

> Far beneath
> A soul immortal is a mortal joy.[144]

George Eliot comments these verses as follows:

---

[143] Ivi, pp. 198-199.

[144] Young, E., *Night Thoughts*, quoted in Eliot, G., *Worldliness and Other-Worldliness: The Poet Young*, (1857), cit., p. 195.

> Happily for human nature, we are sure no man really believes that. Which of us has the impiety not to feel that our souls are only too narrow for the joy of looking into the trusting eyes of our children, of reposing on the love of a husband or wife, – nay, of listening to the divine voice of music, or watching the calm brightness of autumn afternoons? But Young could utter this falsity without detecting it, because, when he spoke of 'mortal joys', he rarely had in his mind any object to which he could attach sacredness. He was thinking of bishoprics and benefices, of smiling monarchs, patronizing prime ministers, and a 'much indebted muse'.[145]

The only truth that Young's lofty poems are able to convey, Eliot argues, is a rather unpleasant one about the character of the celebrated poet, i.e., his inability to "attach sacredness" to any ordinary experience, which is a clear symptom of Young's "*want of genuine emotion*"[146] or, in other words, of his lack of sympathy. Young is clearly unable to appreciate the joys and hardships of his fellow mortals as well as the pleasures and beauties of earthly life. In Eliot's opinion instead a great artist is the one who in his or her work, be it poetry, prose or painting, manages to grasp and represent the incalculable value of "mortal joys" and toils. Value, instead, is only recognised by Young in those material things that generate a tangible profit, such as "bishoprics and benefices". Hence, not only does Young prove blind to the everyday life of his fellow human beings but also unable to *feel for* them.

Another serious problem Eliot detects in Young's cold, aloof poetry, and one that as we have already seen is typical of the clergyman featuring in 'silly novels', is his tendency to moralise. As Eliot writes:

> Another indication of Young's deficiency in moral, i.e., in sympathetic emotion, is his unintermitting habit of pedagogic moralizing.[147]

---

[145] Eliot, G., *Worldliness and Other-Worldliness: The Poet Young*, (1857), cit., pp. 195-196.
[146] Ivi, p. 198.
[147] Ivi, p. 206.

Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth stresses that for "George Eliot sympathy lies near the heart of moral life."[148] And indeed, it is interesting to notice how in Eliot's passage she uses the term morality as a synonym of sympathy. And yet, while she equals sympathy to morality, Eliot also underlines the crucial difference between morality and "moralizing":

> [Morality] will exhibit itself in direct sympathetic feeling and action, and not as the recognition of a rule. Love does not say, 'I ought to love' – it loves. Pity does not say, 'It is right to be pitiful' – it pities. Justice does not say, 'I am bound to be just' – it feels justly. It is only where moral emotion is comparatively weak that the contemplation of a rule or theory habitually mingles with its action; and in accordance with this, we think experience, both in literature and life, has shown that the minds which are pre-eminently didactic – which insist on a 'lesson', and despise everything that will not convey a moral, are deficient in sympathetic emotion.[149]

True morality has nothing to do with moralising or with the "obedience to a theory or rule"[150]. Indeed, moralising is often – and this is the case with Young – rather the very symptom of lack of morality. Hence pedagogic moralising and admonitions have usually a mild effect on the reader in comparison with the power of the communication of the true emotions felt by the artist, and are more often the result of a deficient moral character satisfied by preaching that it is "good for other men to be moral"[151]. Only when it is feeble morality needs the 'encouragement' of rules of conduct. Otherwise, sympathy and morality manifest themselves in spontaneous, genuine feelings and actions.

Sympathy and morality are inextricably linked to Eliot's understanding of art and life. George Eliot did not consider art as merely entertaining, but as a serious undertaking with a precise function. As we have seen in chapter one,

---

[148] Deeds Ermarth, E., *George Eliot's Conception of Sympathy*, cit., p. 23.

[149] Eliot, G., *Worldliness and Other-Worldliness: The Poet Young*, (1857), cit., pp. 206-207.

[150] Ivi, p. 206.

[151] Ivi, p. 207.

Eliot's aim in fiction was to provide a faithful representation of reality, of the complexity of human nature, and of human relations. Any false depiction of the life of men and women was strongly censured by her, as we have seen while discussing *Silly Novels by Lady Novelists* and *Worldliness and Other-Worldliness: The Poet Young*. The two issues are obviously related: the distant, magniloquent, and unrealistic life both Lady Novelists and poet Young, despite the differences of their contexts, depicted or suggested fostered no identification on the part of the reader, hence no sympathy, being the products of the indifference and unsympathetic feelings that both Lady Novelists and the poet Edward Young entertained towards their fellow human beings.

In order to fully understand Eliot's conception of sympathy, we should refer once again to *The Natural History of German Life*, where Eliot's notion of sympathy is explicitly related to the aim of art and the role of the artist. According to George Eliot:

> The greatest benefit we owe to the artist, whether painter, poet, or novelist, is the extension of our sympathies. Appeals founded on generalizations and statistics require a sympathy ready-made, a moral sentiment already in activity; but a picture of human life such as a great artist can give, surprises even the trivial and the selfish into that attention to what is apart from themselves, which may be called the raw material of moral sentiment. 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. 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. [152]

---

[152] Eliot, G., *The Natural History of German Life*, cit., pp. 110-111.

Art and life are tightly connected with one another because, in Eliot's words, "art is the nearest thing to life". Art is a most powerful medium of expression and communication whereby sensitive artists are able to draw us closer to the experiences of the life of our fellow mortals that are different and distant from our own. This heightened awareness that derives from a broader knowledge allows us to go beyond "our personal lot", our limited experience of life, and to share the joys and sorrows of our fellowmen. And so, in Eliot's conception, "the greatest benefit" that we derive from the work of the artist is "the extension of our sympathies", that is, the ability to expand our sympathies for others, to *feel for* others, that is "the raw material of moral sentiment". "Extending our contact with our fellow-men", going beyond individual concerns and becoming interested in the lives of others is the only way to fully realise the meaning of our belonging all to the same species, all sharing the same lot. Hence, Eliot early detected and fought against the dangers of excessive individuality and "the vulgarity of exclusiveness", which could only alienate human beings from each other and suppress any sympathetic feeling that might enlarge our understanding of the world we inhabit.

In *The Natural History of German Life*, Eliot points out that the task of the artist becomes "all the more sacred" when he or she decides to dedicate his or her work to the representation of the lower classes, because a distorted image of such subjects is by far more dangerous than a false representation of artificial or fashionable society:

> 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 very serious that we should have false ideas about evanescent fashions – about the manners and conversation of beaux and duchess; 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. […] 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.[153]

Such false images of "the heroic artisan or the sentimental peasant" are very similar to the exaggerated characters – criticized by Eliot the year before – that peopled the 'silly novels' by Lady Novelists. They are both nothing but false representations "bred by imagination on the mists of feeling, in place of definite, substantial reality"[154], influenced by something very similar in its dynamics to what Ruskin had defined in the third volume of *Modern Painters* as "pathetic fallacy, [i.e.] the transference to external objects of the spectator's own emotions"[155]. In her novels, Eliot does not tinge her characters with traits and virtues that do not belong to them as they appeared to her in order to portray them according to how she wished they were. Instead, she tries to represent life and people truthfully, remaining faithful to the distinctive, sometimes unpleasant and ruthless, qualities of her fellow human beings as they appeared in her impressions of them. In this way, in her novels Eliot tries to teach us to *feel* not *for* exceptional individuals or humble characters with qualities that render them extraordinary, like "the heroic artisan or the sentimental peasant", but *for* her ordinary characters, asking her readers to extend their sympathy to people whose existence has been widely different from their own.

And yet we may wonder about Eliot's insistence on simple and humble people: is it only the faithful representation of humble characters that allows the extension of our sympathies? Are humble characters the only ones who deserve our sympathy?

---

[153] Ivi, p. 111.

[154] Eliot, G., *John Ruskin's Modern Painters, Vol. III* (1856), cit., p. 368.

[155] Ivi, p. 375.

II.2. Widening Perspectives

In 1871, George Eliot published her masterpiece, *Middlemarch*. The novel is presented as "A Study of Provincial Life", as the subtitle reads, since the elaborate web of stories narrated in the novel follows the vicissitudes of the landed gentry and the rising middle classes living around and in the fictional town of Middlemarch. Hence, all of a sudden the humble lives of Rev. Amos Barton and Mrs Poyser, in whose fate Eliot's readers had grown interested as if they were family; the pastoral charm of Hayslope, which had invaded the mind of the public so much as to become the subject of two paintings commissioned by Queen Victoria; all of a sudden this successful rural world created by Eliot seemed to have been swept away by the author to make space for a more refined, fashionable, sometimes artificial, society, the same from which George Eliot had intended to keep away for years and whose representation in literature she had criticised repeatedly in her essays. Thus, as probably many of her affectionate Victorian readers did, we may as well wonder about the cause of this startling change, since it seems to be in contrast with Eliot's poetical intents as expressed in her essays and, as we have seen, in *Adam Bede*, especially with the principle of "the precious quality of truthfulness" that she had so valiantly defended.

Eliot's choice, however, is only apparently contradictory. It is not a radical change that we perceive in *Middlemarch* – and afterwards in *Daniel Deronda* – but rather a shift of focus. Indeed, while Eliot's first novels are mainly guided by the principle of truthfulness – a decision that she openly discusses and that is apparent in her choice of characters and setting – what emerges in *Middlemarch* is an unmistakably keener interest in sympathy. As already observed though, the two principles are strictly connected and sympathy and truthfulness may be considered the two *fils rouges* of Eliot's fiction, encompassing all her production.

In her early novels, Eliot's plead to *feel for* her ordinary characters is already recurrent. In *Adam Bede*, for instance, readers are asked to extend their sympathetic feelings to the miserable, almost disheartening lot of Hetty Sorrel and to the reprehensible conduct of Arthur Donnithorne. Throughout the novel, readers come to know Hetty as a beautiful but rather superficial young woman who will be, later in the novel, mother and murderer of her newborn baby. Despite knowing that she is deeply loved by Adam Bede, a poor carpenter, with a cynical mindset Hetty considers exploiting her outstanding beauty to win the heart of Arthur, the handsome son of the Squire, since Arthur seems to be offering her the possibility to enter the glamorous "world of brilliant costumes, shimmering gauze, soft satin, and velvet"[156] she has been daydreaming for so long in the secrecy of her bedroom. On the other hand, Arthur encourages Hetty's fantasies by luring her with gifts and spending time alone with her, thus making Hetty believe that he loves her even though he is actually only flirting with her. Eventually, Arthur manages to seduce Hetty. Surely, the narrator does not ask readers to absolve the two of them of all blame, yet invites us to identify with them, to imagine their pain, and to feel sympathy for 'poor Hetty' and Arthur instead of quickly judging and condemning them. And indeed, only when Dinah, the night before Hetty's trial, shows genuine compassion and sympathy to Hetty, does the hardened heart of the young woman melt: Hetty bursts into tears and finally confesses her infamous crime.

Symmetrically, the principle of truthfulness is still busy at work in later *Middlemarch* as well as in *Daniel Deronda*, since in Eliot's fiction truthfulness is not necessarily and exclusively linked to the representation of the lower classes. Hence, even if Eliot decides to gradually change her focus from ordinary characters to the members of the upper-middle class, nonetheless she remains faithful to her intent of representing truthfully the world as it has reflected itself in her mind. As Barbara Hardy stresses, in *Middlemarch*:

---

[156] Eliot, G., *Adam Bede*, cit., Book I, Chapter XXII.

> there is never any sacrifice of truthfulness to the achievement of aesthetic ends. The form is the means to the ends of good story, moral argument, and the imitation of life. It is much more naturally plotted than the novels of Dickens, less dependent on coincidence and less restricted to crisis, and it shapes its moral argument tentatively through character and action, instead of shaping character and action in accordance with dogma.[157]

And the shift of focus from truthfulness to sympathy that we notice in Eliot's later production is determined by Eliot's widened interest for fallible human beings. As we have seen, in her early novels, Eliot presented ordinary characters with commonplace occupations because she wanted artists and the public to understand that art and literature should faithfully depict the experience of the majority of the people, who mainly belonged to the lower classes, as opposed to the examples of sensationalism and falsification against which she had written in *Silly Novels by Lady Novelists*. As she states in *Adam Bede*, Eliot appreciated simple, humble characters as well as the subjects of Flemish paintings because she could "find a source of delicious sympathy in [those] faithful pictures of a monotonous homely existence."[158] Therefore, from her early novels readers gradually learned to appreciate the joys of everyday human existence, to cherish the precious moments of an apparently monotonous life, and to find beauty where they would not expect it, since, in Eliot's words, "bless us, things may be lovable that are not altogether handsome, I hope?"[159]. On the other hand, in her later novels Eliot decides to focus on those "mixed and erring"[160] characters that represent us all and encompass the totality of the human experience. Human fallibility is a trope that already emerges in Eliot's essays, for instance in *Silly Novels by Lady Novels*. Indeed, Eliot censures Lady Novelists' characters not only because their life does not represent the everyday experience of the majority of the people, but especially because such characters, depicted as extremely accomplished and moral, are utterly false. Hence, the opposition between unrealistic ideals of perfection and fallible, imperfect characters is already discussed by Eliot in her essays and finds an early representation in *Adam Bede* in the character of Mr Ryde. Yet, more explicitly than in her early production, through her later novels Eliot wants her readers to realise that we are all erring human beings, hence, to teach us to extend our sympathies to our fellow men and women, however fallible they might prove. Therefore, as she shifts her focus from truthfulness to sympathy, likewise Eliot diverts her attention from ordinary characters with humble occupations to fallible human beings, who are to be found not only among the members of the lower classes, but also in wealthier environments.

---

[157] Hardy, B., *Particularities. Readings in George Eliot*, London, P. Owen, 1982, p. 15.
[158] Eliot, G., *Adam Bede*, cit., Book II, Ch. XVII, p. 195.
[159] Ivi, p. 194.
[160] Eliot, G., *The Morality of Wilhelm Meister*, (1855), in Byatt, A. and Warren, N., eds., *George Eliot. Selected Essays, Poems and Other Writings,* cit., pp. 307- 310, p. 309.

One of the consequences of Eliot's decision to represent erring individuals is the absence in her novels of a single protagonist and an absolute villain, a striking feature of her fiction that could not pass unnoticed even to those readers who are not acquainted with her writings and poetical intents. As Fredric Jameson stresses, the role of heroes and villains has always been essential in storytelling, since these two figures typically provided the basic requirements on which stories were usually built: an initial moment of suspense and instability, in which the desires and aspirations of the hero or heroine are thwarted by the villain, and the final moment of regained balance[161]. Without the conflict provided by the dichotomy between hero and villain, there could be no story. According to Jameson, however, George Eliot breaks with this paradigm of hero and villain[162], following a tradition inaugurated by one of her favourite authors, Sir Walter Scott[163]. As far as heroes are concerned, we shall further analyse this issue in the following paragraph devoted to *Middlemarch*. As for villains, instead, we should notice how in Eliot's novels it becomes difficult to identify who the real villain is – and if there *is* (only) one – because there is not a clear opposition between entirely good and entirely evil characters in Eliot's novels. Indeed, Eliot's stories are usually peopled by many characters who are not evil *per se* but who, in different occasions, happen not to act morally and whose actions may contribute, all together, to a dramatic event. As we have seen, for instance, both Hetty and Arthur are guilty of despicable acts, yet they are not intrinsically bad people; their combined actions, however, determined principally by Hetty's unfeelingness and Arthur's levity, have dire consequences. Lady Novelists would surely blame the kind-hearted Mr Irwine as well for the tragic finale of Hetty's story since he was one of the people who could have acted to prevent the final tragedy but decided not to interfere. Hence, there is no clear distinction between good and evil characters in Eliot's novels – with the exception of a few ones, such as Dinah Morris in *Adam Bede*, who comes very close to being the perfect embodiment of Eliot's sympathy.

---

[161] Cf. Jameson, F., *The Antinomies of Realism*, London, New York, Verso, 2015, p. 114.
[162] Ivi, p. 122.

According to Jameson, in her novels Eliot compensates for the lack of an actual evil character with what Jean-Paul Sartre was to define, a century later, as "*mauvaise foi*" or "bad faith"[164]. As Jameson points out, *mauvaise foi* is a mechanism of self-deception whereby individuals hide the truth from themselves: individuals confront themselves in internal debates in which they alternatively play the part both of the judge – thus producing accusations against their despicable behaviour – and the accused – thus producing a series of self-justifications for their blameful actions[165]. According to Sartre, in order to be effective these internal debates need to be quick, so that individuals manage to confuse and trick themselves into believing that their behaviour is morally acceptable and that they would not be blamed by their fellow men and women; moreover, *mauvaise foi* usually entails the character's conviction that in the future he or she will be able to act better[166]. In Eliot's conception of evil, therefore, self-deception is a crucial element. Moreover, evil is never made for evil's sake but always with the conviction on the part of the character that he or she is acting in the best possible way.

---

[163] Cf. Levine, G., *The Realistic Imagination,* Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1981, p. 121.
[164] Cf. Jameson, F., *The Antinomies of Realism*, cit., p. 129.
[165] Cf. Ivi, pp. 129-133.

In her novels, George Eliot stages these inner debates, thus providing a detailed description of the thoughts, feelings, and motives of her characters. This continuous and intense investigation of her characters' psychology is the reason why Eliot's readers come to understand even the most despicable actions committed by her characters and, in the end, to extend their sympathies towards them. As Suzanne Keen argues, indeed, the reader's identification with fictional characters is a crucial element to elicit an empathic response[167]. And when sympathy – or empathy, as it is called now – is not possible because the crimes committed by the character are too despicable to allow a complete identification and hence sympathy (as in Hetty's murder), what happens in Eliot's fiction is that, thanks to the description of the character's thoughts, feelings, and motives, the reader is able to understand the origins of the evil acted by the character and to feel *negative empathy*, which is "a form of high-level empathy, […] a cathartic identification with negative characters"[168].

George Eliot's novels offer many examples of *mauvaise foi*, such as Arthur Donnithorne in *Adam Bede*, Tito in *Romola*, and Mr Casaubon and Mr Bulstrode in *Middlemarch*. As readers, however, we are able to sympathise (or to feel negative empathy) with such characters because Eliot allows us to fully understand their inner struggles, thoughts, and emotions. This knowledge allows the extension of our sympathies towards characters who do not act morally but whose actions we can understand. It is important to stress, however, that Eliot does not ask her readers to justify evil or immoral actions. On the contrary, what Eliot does is to encourage her readers to avoid quick judgements and try to understand her faulty characters, to *feel for* them, because in real life there are no righteous people and despicable individuals: we tend to be a combination of the two. Moreover, just like her fallible characters, one day we could make a mistake and find ourselves in need of the understanding and sympathy of our fellow men and women.

---

[166] Cf. Ivi, p. 132.

[167] Cf. Keen, S., *Empathy and the Novel*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007, p. xii.

[168] Cf. Ercolino, S., *Negative empathy*, 'Orbis Litterarum', June 2018, Vol. 73, Issue 3, pp. 243–262, p. 252.

Eliot's plead to identify and sympathise with others, to try to understand instead of condemning other people's actions, already emerges in *Antigone and Its Moral*, an essay published in the *Leader* in 1856 in which Eliot proposes an interpretation, alternative to a possible superficial criticism, of Sophocles' tragedy:

> Here lies the dramatic collision: the impulse of sisterly piety which allies itself with reverence for the Gods, clashes with the duties of citizenship; two principles, both having their validity, are at war with each [other]. […]
> It is a very superficial criticism which interprets the character of Creon as that of a hypocritical tyrant, and regards Antigone as a blameless victim. Coarse contrasts like this are not the materials handled by great dramatists. The exquisite art of Sophocles is shown in the touches by which he makes us feel that Creon, as well as Antigone, is contending for what he believes to be right, while both are also conscious that, in following out one principle, they are laying themselves open to just blame for transgressing another; and it is this consciousness which secretly heightens the exasperation of Creon and the defiant hardness of Antigone.[169]

---

[169] Eliot, G., *The Antigone and Its Moral,* "Leader", 29 March 1856, in Byatt, A. and Warren, N., eds., *George Eliot. Selected Essays, Poems and Other Writings,* cit., pp. 363 – 366, pp. 365-366.

As Eliot explains, it would be reductive to merely consider Creon as "a hypocritical tyrant" and Antigone "as a blameless victim". Indeed, both of them have valid motivations to defend their positions, yet at the same time both of them are equally wrong in transgressing the principle in which the other believes. Their behaviour, therefore, is neither entirely virtuous nor completely vicious, but clashes with the valid claims of the other. It would be infinitely easier – and this was the case in 'silly novels' – to portray a complete villain or a spotless hero than rendering the complexity of human nature and of the human condition since, as Eliot explains in chapter seventeen of *Adam Bede*, "[the] world is not just what we like", in real life there are not "most faulty characters always […] on the wrong side, and […] virtuous ones on the right."[170]

Similarly, in *The Morality of Wilhelm Meister*, an essay published in the *Leader* the year before, George Eliot stresses the importance of tolerance and sympathy for our fellow human beings:

> We all begin our life by associating our passions with our moral prepossessions, by mistaking indignation for virtue, and many go through life without awaking from this illusion. These are the 'insupportables justes, qui du haut de leurs chaises d'or narguent les misères et les souffrances de l'humanité'. But a few are taught by their own falls and their own struggles, by their experience of sympathy, and help and goodness in the 'publicans and sinners' of these modern days, that the line between the virtuous and vicious, so far from being a necessary safeguard to morality, is itself an immoral fiction.[171]

Eliot rejects the recurrent objection that, on account of the absence of characters who should work as ideal patterns of behaviour, Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* is "immoral". She instead praises Goethe's "large tolerance" for his "mixed and erring, and self-deluding" characters, which proves that his novel is endowed with a "moral superiority"[172]. Like Goethe, Eliot shows great tolerance towards her weak, erring, selfish characters and invites her readers to do the same.

---

[170] Eliot, G., *Adam Bede*, cit., p. 193.

[171] Eliot, G., *The Morality of Wilhelm Meister*, (1855), cit., pp. 309-310.

The centrality of the other and the attention everyone should pay to the other's claims are two crucial aspects of George Eliot's novels. Her reading and translation of a philosophical work should be numbered among the influences that helped shape her awareness of the importance of the other as well as her notion of sympathy, two aspects that, as we have said, were to become central especially in her later production. That work is Ludwig Feuerbach's *Essence of Christianity*, which Eliot translated from the German as early as 1854. Eliot drew on Feuerbach's idea of fellow feeling and his concern for the other in the development of her notion of sympathy. As Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth stresses, Eliot's conception of "sympathy depends absolutely upon a division in the psyche, a split in consciousness that permits two conflicting views to exist simultaneously"[173], the view of the self and the view of the other. And indeed, in Eliot's conception, the path towards sympathy is rather tortuous and involves a long, painful process of negotiation between the self and the other. This duality between the individual and the other is also central in Feuerbach's theory of religion, which is significantly built around the centrality of man:

> [The] secret of theology is nothing else than anthropology—the knowledge of God nothing else than a knowledge of man![174]

According to Feuerbach, theology is anthropology. Thus, in Feuerbach's conception of religion, the object of religion is not God, but man. Feuerbach considered religion as a requisite for men's understanding of the world, hence in his theory of Christianity God anthropologically stays for man, for another man in the perspective of the individual ego. Indeed, at the heart of Feuerbach's conception of religion is *man*, not God, since as Feuerbach himself would state, "*Homo homini Deus est*"[175]:

---

[172] Ivi, p. 309.

[173] Deeds Ermarth, E., *George Eliot's Conception of Sympathy*, cit., p. 23.

[174] Feuerbach, L., *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. George Eliot (1854), New York, Harper, 1957, p. 207.

> The *ego* […] attains to consciousness of the world through consciousness of the *thou*. Thus man is the God of man. That he is, he has to thank Nature; that he is man, he has to thank man; spiritually as well as physically, he can achieve nothing without his fellow-man.[176]

By gaining conscience of the other, the self is able to gain conscience of the world.

Likewise, the duality between the self and the other becomes particularly relevant in the process of self-discovery and self-knowledge:

> Between me and another human being – and this is the representative of the species, even though he is only one, […] – between me and another human being there is an essential, qualitative distinction. The other is my *thou*, – the relation being reciprocal, – my *alter ego*, man objective to me, the revelation of my own nature, the eye seeing itself. In another I first have the consciousness of humanity; through him I first learn, I first feel, that I am a man.[177]

Thanks to his relationship with the other, the individual gains conscience of his own nature; this relationship helps him define who he is as a human being as well as to understand that he is part of the wider system of humanity.

The comparison with the other is crucial because it allows the individual to discover not only his own nature but also his own limits and faults. Feuerbach contests the assumption that "the individual by himself is a perfect being", that one single individual can represent by himself the perfection of his species. According to Feuerbach, only the totality of men can provide a satisfying representation of human perfection, because together human beings are able to compensate for each other's faults. Hence, in Feuerbach's theory of religion, the object of men's worship becomes the perfection of humanity as a whole: man finds an echo of the Divine not in an abstract entity but in his fellow mortals:

---

[175] Ivi, p. 159.
[176] Ivi, p. 83.
[177] Ivi, p. 158.

> […] sins and failings of individuals vanish in the species itself, which has its adequate existence only in the sum total of mankind […] Hence the lamentation over sin is found only where the human individual regards himself in his individuality as a perfect, complete being, not needing others for the realization of the species, of the perfect man; where instead of the consciousness of the species has been substituted the exclusive self-consciousness of the individual; where the individual does not recognize himself as a part of mankind, but identifies himself with the species, and for this reason makes his own sins, limits and weaknesses, the sins, limits and weaknesses of mankind in general.[178]

The sins and failings of the individual are 'absorbed' by mankind. Men can aspire to perfection only if they consider themselves as part of the wider humanity. If they look for perfection in themselves as individuals, instead, they will never be satisfied with themselves and their fellow mortals. In his comparison with his fellow men, who represent the totality of humanity, the individual finds a moral conscience that works as a corrective to his misbehaviour. The relationship, however, is reciprocal: the individual who looks at his own failures through the eyes of the other, will be in the same way the "objective conscience" of his fellow man. As we have said, according to Feuerbach there is no perfection in the single individual: each and every one of us makes mistakes in certain circumstances and acts morally in others. Where one individual fails, his fellow men and women will be able to do better:

---

[178] Ivi, p. 157.

> […] morally, also, there is a qualitative, critical distinction between the *I* and *thou*. My fellow-man is my objective conscience; he makes my failings a reproach to me, even when he does not expressly mention them, he is my personified feeling of shame. The consciousness of the moral law, of right, of propriety, of truth itself, is indissolubly united with my consciousness of another than myself.[179]

As a result, Feuerbach celebrates the differences between men as an immensely valuable resource. Not only does humanity as a whole reveal the personal limitations and sins of the individual; humanity also helps the individual come to terms with his deficiencies and limits the individual's failures, thus helping him or her go beyond them, by unfolding the infinite possibilities of redemption and atonement provided by humanity. For this reason, Feuerbach criticises Christianity's disregard of individual differences:

> Christianity […] knows nothing of the species, in which alone lies the redemption, the justification, the reconciliation and cure of the sins and deficiencies of the individual […] If we are all perfectly alike, if my sins are not neutralized by the opposite qualities of other men: then assuredly my sin is a blot of shame which cries up to heaven; a revolting horror which can be exterminated only by extraordinary, superhuman, miraculous means. Happily, however, there *is* a natural reconciliation. My fellow-man is *per se*, the mediator between me and the sacred idea of the species. […] My sin is made to shrink within its limits, is thrust back into its nothingness, by the fact that it is only mine, and not that of my fellows.[180]

The centrality of the other in the individual's process of self-knowledge and self-realisation is crucial to Feuerbach, as well as the importance of the individual's active life in his community of fellow men. If it were not for his fellow human beings, man could not exist. According to Feuerbach, man can only exist in relation with others:

---

[179] Ivi, p. 158.
[180] Ivi, p. 159.

> My fellow-man is the bond between me and the world. I am, and I feel myself, dependent on the world, because I first feel myself dependent on other men. If I did not need man, I should not need the world. I reconcile myself with the world only through my fellow-man. Without other men, the world would be for me not only dead and empty, but meaningless. 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.[181]

In Feuerbach's religion of humanity, moral relationships between human beings based on love and duty become for men a means of knowledge to learn about the world and about themselves. Feuerbach condemns individuality when disinterested in alterity, because without the other, the *thou*, there could be no humanity and no individual. Everything man has achieved in history, from scientific progress to social advancement, is not the result of the genius of one single man, but the sum of infinite "acts of mankind", of the cooperation of men throughout the centuries. While the knowledge of one man is limited, humanity offers infinite possibilities. In Feuerbach's words, "wit, acumen, imagination, feeling […], reason […], all these so-called powers of the soul, are powers of humanity, not of man as individual"[182]. Moral relationships between human beings are so important to Feuerbach as to become themselves religious:

> The relations of child and parent, of husband and wife, of brother and friend, – in general, of man to man, – in short, all the moral relations are *per se* religious. Life as a whole is, in its essential, substantial relations, throughout of a divine nature. Its religious consecration is not first conferred by the blessing of the priest.[183]

---

[181] Ivi, p. 82.
[182] Ivi, p. 83.
[183] Ivi, p. 271.

George Eliot was deeply influenced by Feuerbach’s religion of humanity, especially as far as her conception of sympathy is concerned. Alterity, as well, is central to Eliot’s sympathy, which, as we have said, entails a compromise between the self and the other. In Eliot’s novels, indeed, characters are often asked to go beyond their personal experience to acknowledge the needs, desires, and motivations of their fellow human beings, which differ from, and often conflict with, their own, as we shall see in the following analysis of sympathy as related to *Middlemarch* and especially to the character of Dorothea Brooke.

II.3. *Middlemarch*

As we have mentioned before, *Middlemarch* follows the lives of the upper- and middle-class dwellers of Middlemarch, a fictional town in the Midlands. The heroine of the novel is Dorothea Brooke, a young woman who, from the very beginning, stands out for her austerity, her determination in strictly following her religious principles, and especially her unexpected aspirations, which are greater than those expected of a young woman of her age and class: at the beginning of the novel Dorothea dreams of greatness, hoping to witness or to take part in the realisation of a great work. As John Hagan stresses, Dorothea is “quixotic, romantically idealistic, the possessor of a childlike simplicity of trust and generosity”[184]. Much of Dorothea’s ardent, ambitious character, however, will have to be “purged”[185] and disciplined throughout the novel. Yet her errors and failings will not be judged and condemned by George Eliot, but accepted and pitied as errors typical of youth. And indeed, *Middlemarch* may be considered as a coming-of-age novel. According to Hagan, Dorothea’s story is “in the tradition of the *Bildungsroman*: it traces a process of initiation, education, growth, whereby the heroine makes decisive discoveries about her own nature and the reality around her."[186] Dorothea's idealistic aspirations will make her lose sight of the importance of the people around her and of the value of everyday events, leading her to commit to what will turn out to be an unhappy marriage to Mr Casaubon. Only through pain will she be able to grow and emerge from the "moral stupidity" in which "we are all born […], taking the world as an udder to feed our supreme selves."[187] Dorothea will have to come to terms with the needs and desires of the people surrounding her, especially Mr Casaubon's, which are different from her own. This will represent a crucial step for her since, despite her commitment to ameliorate the lives of others, such as by building new cottages for the peasants, at the beginning of the novel Dorothea has a very selfish and limited vision of the world, failing to realise that she values her own claims more than other people's.

---

[184] Hagan, J., *Middlemarch. Narrative Unity in the story of Dorothea Brooke,* “Nineteenth-Century Fiction”, Vol. 16, No. 1, June 1961, pp. 17-31, p. 18.

[185] *Ibidem*.

At the beginning of the novel, Dorothea demands and expects the world to satisfy her aspirations and expectations. The conflict between the claims of the ambitious individual and the complexity of the modern world is a theme that already emerges in the *Prelude*, where Eliot recounts the story of Saint Theresa from Avila, a Spanish woman whose "passionate, ideal nature demanded an epic life" – a description that perfectly agrees with Dorothea's character as well – and who "found her epos in the reform of a religious order."[188] In the *Prelude*, Eliot points out that many, like Saint Theresa, had nurtured similar ambitions of greatness, which, however, had been thwarted by circumstances:

> That Spanish woman who lived three hundred years ago was certainly not the last of her kind. Many Theresas have been born who found for themselves no epic life wherein there was a constant unfolding of far-resonant action; perhaps only a life of mistakes,

---

[186] *Ibidem*.

[187] Eliot, G., *Middlemarch*, cit., Book II, Chapter XXI, p. 211.

[188] Ivi, *Prelude*, p. 3.

> the offspring of a certain spiritual grandeur ill-matched with the meanness of opportunity; perhaps a tragic failure which found no sacred poet and sank unwept into oblivion.
>
> […] Here and there is born a Saint Theresa, foundress of nothing, whose loving heart-beats and sobs after an unattained goodness tremble off and are dispersed among hindrances, instead of centring in some long-recognizable deed.[189]

Evidently, among these modern Saint Theresas that are born with "a certain spiritual grandeur ill-matched with the meanness of opportunity" we could number Dorothea Brooke. Hence, already from the *Prologue* readers can rightly guess that Dorothea's great aspirations are probably doomed not to be fulfilled.

The parallel that George Eliot draws in the *Prelude* between the heroine of *Middlemarch* and Saint Theresa becomes a structural element in the development of the novel, which is interspersed with religious references that accompany the character of Dorothea. As Harriet Farwell Adams points out, this parallel "remains the organizing principle for the story of *Miss Brooke* and a source of imagery for developing Dorothea's character"[190]. As a matter of fact, the very first description of Miss Brooke evokes the *Prelude*:

> Miss Brooke had that kind of beauty which seems to be thrown into relief by poor dress. Her hand and wrist were so finely formed that she could wear sleeves not less bare of style than those in which the Blessed Virgin appeared to Italian painters; and her profile as well as her stature and bearing seemed to gain the more dignity from her plain garments, which by the side of provincial fashion gave her the impressiveness of a fine quotation from the Bible, – or from one of our elder poets, – in a paragraph of to-day's newspaper. She was usually spoken of as being remarkably clever, but with the addition that her sister Celia had more common-sense.[191]

---

[189] Ivi, pp. 3-4.

[190] Adams, H. F., *Dorothea and Miss Brooke in Middlemarch*, 'Nineteenth-Century Fiction', Vol. 39, No. 1, June 1984, pp. 69-90, p. 74.

[191] Eliot, G., *Middlemarch*, cit., Book I, Chapter I, p. 7.

Through the description of Dorothea's beauty other fundamental traits of her character emerge: simplicity, a sense of purity, and integrity. Yet the reader is also able to rightly guess, from these very few lines, Dorothea's excessive austerity and privation of anything that she perceives as too worldly[192], such as horse riding, "guimp and artificial protrusions of drapery"[193] – as we have seen in chapter one by analysing the scene in which she reluctantly accepts the jewels she has been bequeathed.

Dorothea's ambitions are probably the reason why she is thought to have less "common-sense" than her sister Celia: she goes against custom, takes no interest in garments and jewels, and has no intention to get married. In this way, from the very beginning of the novel, the narrator presents the heroine of *Middlemarch* as an outsider: Dorothea does not seem to truly belong to the community of Middlemarch, notwithstanding her beauty and wealthy family. As David Daiches points out, Dorothea's status as an outsider is perfectly summed up in the opening lines of the novel:

> The opening description of Dorothea Brooke is a brilliant set piece. Her birth, her environment, her way of life, her relations with her sister Celia, are all presented in a sequence of sharply defined sentences, and the imagery from the outset ('Blessed Virgin', 'Italian painters', 'quotation from the Bible' 'paragraph of today's newspapers') suggest that disparity between character and environment which is to play such an important part in Dorothea's story and at the same time sets going suggestions that are to be fruitfully utilised later.[194]

This "disparity between character and environment" may lead readers to think of Dorothea as a character better fitted for an ancient epos or for a religious painting, rather than as the inhabitant of the commonplace town of Middlemarch. Yet

---

[192] Cf. Villari, E., *Duty. Middlemarch*, 'New Left Review', Nov.-Dec., 2014, pp. 89-98, p. 93.
[193] Ivi, p. 8.
[194] Daiches, D., *George Eliot. Middlemarch*, London, Edward Arnold, 1963, p. 9.

Dorothea's status as an outsider is not determined solely by her strict religious beliefs and her eccentric views. These aspects of her character certainly contribute to her alienation from the people who surround her, including her family, but there is something deeper at the origin of her alienation. In Chapter I, Eliot explains that:

> Dorothea knew many passages of Pascal's *Pensées* and of Jeremy Taylor by heart; and to her the destinies of mankind, seen by the light of Christianity, made the solicitudes of feminine fashion appear an occupation for Bedlam. She could not reconcile the anxieties of a spiritual life involving eternal consequences, with a keen interest in guimp and artificial protrusions of drapery. Her mind was theoretic, and yearned by its nature after some lofty conception of the world which might frankly include the parish of Tipton and her own rule of conduct there; she was enamoured of intensity and greatness, and rash in embracing whatever seemed to her to have those aspects; likely to seek martyrdom, to make retractions, and then to incur martyrdom after all in a quarter where she had not sought it.[195]

This passage provides a revealing insight into Dorothea's character, who has a "theoretic" mind and "yearned by its nature after some lofty conception of the world". As Daiches points out, "theoretic" and "rush" are crucial adjectives to a full understanding of Dorothea's nature.[196] By stating that Dorothea's mind is entirely "theoretic", Eliot suggests that Dorothea has a rather limited knowledge of the world she lives in – and, as Daiches underlines, rather unrealistic ideas about her own possibilities in the world[197]. Her aspirations and "lofty conception of the world", therefore, stem from her lack of experience, from general, *abstract* ideas that disconnect her from reality and lead her to pursue dreams of greatness[198]. Indeed, to Dorothea's eyes, such achievements as martyrdoms become not only feasible and desirable, but indispensable to a life worth living. This lack of concrete knowledge combines with Dorothea's "rash", ardent character, whereby she could devote herself passionately to any (lost) cause if she caught a glimpse of greatness in it. And this is exactly what happens to her, when she starts fantasising about helping Mr Casaubon in his intellectual undertaking.

---

[195] Eliot, G., *Middlemarch*, cit., Book I, Chapter I, p. 8.

[196] Cf. Daiches, D., *George Eliot. Middlemarch*, cit., p. 10.

[197] Cf. *Ibidem*.

[198] Cf. Villari, E., *Duty. Middlemarch*, cit., p. 93.

As a result, at the beginning of the novel, in Dorothea's conception of the world there is no room for anything less than extraordinary: she would only devote herself to great causes and she accepts earthly pleasures only if they are imbued with a religious meaning (for instance, she accepts the jewels she has inherited from her mother only because "gems are used as spiritual emblems in the Revelation of Saint John"[199]). Anything far from greatness and intensity is not taken into consideration by her because it does not comply with the yearnings of her "theoretic mind" and her lofty aspirations.

Yet Dorothea's theoretic knowledge of the world betrays not only her naiveté and inexperience, but also her actual indifference towards the needs and desires of the people surrounding her. As Eliot points out:

> Dorothea, with all her eagerness to know the truths of life, retained very childlike ideas about marriage. She felt sure that she would have accepted the judicious Hooker, if she had been born in time to save him from that wretched mistake he made in matrimony; or John Milton when his blindness had come on; or any of the other great men whose odd habits it would have been glorious piety to endure; but an amiable handsome baronet, who said 'Exactly' to her remarks even when she expressed uncertainty, – how could he affect her as a lover? The really delightful marriage must be that where your husband was a sort of father, and could teach you even Hebrew, if you wished.[200]

Dorothea's theoretic mind, avoiding any earthly pleasures and any actions that are less than grand, could only aspire to a theoretic conception of duty[201]. Indeed, despite repeatedly professing her intention of devoting herself to duty, she fails at grasping the concrete aspects of it, and this is revealed by the way in which she thinks of matrimonial relationships. In the aforementioned passage, for instance, with an evident touch of irony, the narrator recounts Dorothea's fantasies about being the wife of such a great man as Milton or Hooker. Yet Dorothea probably ignores that the two men almost certainly had had unhappy marriages[202]. More than just being ironical, the narrator thus confirms Dorothea's love for the *abstract idea* of marriage, to which she attributes greatness because in her opinion such learned men as Milton and Hooker could lead her to the discovery of greater truths. Irony is also increased by the use of the term "lover": not only does this word jar with the readers' idea of a suitable lover for a young, beautiful woman like Dorothea, but once again confirms the heroine's naiveté and inexperience.

---

[199] Eliot, G., *Middlemarch*, cit., Book I, Chapter I, p. 13.

[200] Ivi, p. 10.

[201] Cf. Villari, E., *Duty. Middlemarch*, cit., p. 93.

With such premises, it seems inevitable that Dorothea should fall for Reverend Edward Casaubon:

> Sir James Chettam was going to dine at the Grange to-day with another gentleman whom the girls had never seen, and about whom Dorothea felt some venerating expectation. This was Reverend Edward Casaubon, noted in the county as a man of profound learning, understood for many years to be engaged on a great work concerning religious history; also as a man of wealth enough to give lustre to his piety, and having views of his own which were to be more clearly ascertained on the publication of his book. His very name carried an impressiveness hardly to be measured without a precise chronology of scholarship.[203]

Mr Casaubon stirs in Dorothea genuine admiration, a "venerating expectation", even before she has even met him. Mr Casaubon, indeed, is the embodiment of those learned men, like Milton or Hooker, who could be more than just husbands in Dorothea's opinion: a teacher, a father. And indeed, Mr Casaubon is well-known as “a man of profound learning” devoted to a long-standing study on the key to all mythologies, a subject as impressive as impalpable, which to Dorothea’s eyes only adds greatness to Casaubon’s intellectual enterprise. So far, however, the reader could not find a valid reason to consider Mr Casaubon a mismatch for Dorothea. It is Celia, with her distinctive straightforwardness, and accidentally Dorothea, that provide one:

---

[202] Cf. Ashton, R., Note 5 to the Penguin Edition of *Middlemarch*, p. 839.

[203] Eliot, G., *Middlemarch*, cit., Book I, Chapter I, pp. 10-11.

> ‘How very ugly Mr Casaubon is!’
> ‘Celia! He is one of the most distinguished-looking men I ever saw. He is remarkably like the portrait of Locke. He has the same deep eye-sockets.’
> ‘Had Locke those two white moles with hairs on them?’
> […]
> ‘It is so painful in you, Celia, that you will look at human beings as if they were merely animals with a toilette, and never see the great soul in a man’s face.’
> ‘Has Mr Casaubon a great soul?’ Celia was not without a touch of naïve malice.[204]

Seen through the critical eyes of Celia, Mr Casaubon could not represent a good match for Dorothea because the man is too old, “ugly”, and ‘dusty’. Yet as Daiches points out, Dorothea “sees [Mr Casaubon] in terms of a portrait of Locke, and thus surrounds him at once with an aura of philosophical greatness.”[205] It is evident why Mr Casaubon elicits such a strong attraction in Dorothea: for her, he is “a guide who would take her along the grandest path”[206] towards complete knowledge, he represents the possibility to devote herself to a great cause. Marrying him would mean to dedicate her life to a mysterious, incomprehensible, but certainly noteworthy study, thus, to fulfil her lofty ambitions:

> It would be my duty to study that I might help him the better in his great works. There would be nothing trivial about our lives. Everyday-things with us would mean the

---

[204] Ivi, Book I, Chapter II, p. 20.
[205] Daiches, D., *George Eliot. Middlemarch*, cit., p. 16.
[206] Eliot, G., *Middlemarch*, cit., Book I, Chapter III, p. 29.

> greatest things. It would be like marrying Pascal. I should learn to see the truth by the same light as great men have seen it by. And then I should know what to do, when I got older: I should see how it was possible to lead a grand life here – now – in England.[207]

Hence, shortly after they have met, Mr Casaubon unexpectedly becomes Dorothea's most suitable suitor, in Dorothea's opinion, quickly winning her heart. With his notoriety as a learned man and his impressive research, Mr Casaubon outshines Sir James Chettam, whose readiness to help and good looks are dismissed by Dorothea respectively as a weakness and as no more than "the complexion of a *cochon de lait*."[208]

Unfortunately, Dorothea's illusions about her married life with Mr Casaubon, and consequently her dreams of greatness, will be shattered shortly after the beginning of their honeymoon. One morning, the reader finds Dorothea "sobbing bitterly" on her own in a room in Rome:

> I am sorry to add that she was sobbing bitterly, with such abandonment to this relief of an oppressed heart as a woman habitually controlled by pride on her own account and thoughtfulness for others will sometimes allow herself when she feels securely alone. […]
>
> Yet Dorothea had no distinctly shapen grievance that she could state even to herself; and in the midst of her confused thought and passion, the mental act that was struggling forth into clearness was a self-accusing cry that her feeling of desolation was the fault of her own spiritual poverty. She had married the man of her choice, and with the advantage over most girls that she had contemplated her marriage chiefly as the beginning of new duties […].[209]

Instead of being a period of happiness and discovery of her new life as a married woman, Dorothea's honeymoon becomes a period of "desolation" and *self-*

---

[207] *Ibidem*.
[208] Ivi, Book I, Chapter II, p. 20.
[209] Eliot, G., *Middlemarch*, cit., Book II, Chapter XX, p. 192.

discovery. Early in the novel, Dorothea had been impressed by Casaubon as a studious, reflective man and by his own admission that he tended to "live too much with the dead", so much so that "she said to herself that Mr Casaubon was the most interesting man she had ever seen" and that she would be happy "to assist [him] in [his work], though only as a lamp-holder!"[210] During their short courtship, Dorothea had shaped Mr Casaubon according to her own hopes and desires, expecting him to teach her "to see the truth by the same light as great men have seen it by."[211] Yet her certainties and hopes start crumbling during her honeymoon, and the absurdity of her fantasies becomes clearer to the reader. As Hagan points out:

> Casaubon has turned out to be not the man of broad knowledge and wisdom who can conduct her to the altar of the higher life for which she yearns, but rather the embodiment of the very things she married to escape: narrowness of mind, selfishness, and injustice.[212]

At this point, however, the narrator invites readers to reflect about Dorothea's epiphany, "But was not Mr Casaubon just as learned as before? Had his forms of expression changed, or his sentiments become less laudable?"[213] The answer is as simple as unpleasant to poor Dorothea, and it is provided by the narrator in the following lines, "[Mr Casaubon] was as genuine a character as any ruminant animal, and he had not actively assisted in creating any illusions about himself."[214] In the few weeks preceding their marriage, Dorothea's theoretic mind had been blind to Casaubon's real nature, overlooking his faults and cherishing her dreams and hopes instead of drawing on experience. Slowly but inexorably, however, during their honeymoon Dorothea becomes aware of the extent of her illusions about Mr Casaubon and about living a life of greatness by his side. Hence, as Daiches observes, it was not Mr Casaubon who had changed, it was "Dorothea's view of [him that] was changing", since she "had not really known him before"[215]. Hence, Dorothea's stay in Rome marks the beginning of a "crisis of disenchantment"[216], as Barbara Hardy defines it: from this moment, Dorothea has to come to terms with the fact that the ideas she has entertained about Mr Casaubon do not actually correspond to reality, and her dreams of greatness are probably doomed to fail. As Eliot anticipates in the verses of the epigraph to Chapter XX, Dorothea is "waking suddenly"[217] from her dreams. As this process of disillusionment takes place and Dorothea's perception of Casaubon changes, the expressions used by the narrator to describe the old man change as well. As Daiches notices, Eliot adopts a language that conveys "a vivid sense of Casaubon's deficiencies", such as "'stifling depression', … 'forlorn weariness', … 'blank absence of interest or sympathy' … to suggest the disparity between Dorothea's expectations and the reality"[218].

---

[210] Ivi, Book I, Chapter II, p. 18.
[211] Ivi, Book I, Chapter III, p. 29.
[212] Hagan, J., *Middlemarch. Narrative Unity in the story of Dorothea Brooke*, cit., p. 22.
[213] Eliot, G., *Middlemarch*, cit., Book, II, Chapter XX, p. 195.
[214] *Ibidem*.

This process of disillusionment is even more painful to Dorothea when she realises that she needs Mr Casaubon to be more than just a guide for her, more than just a modern Pascal from whom she could "even [learn] Hebrew, if [she] wished it"[219]: Dorothea is looking for something that she "cannot see [in Casaubon, i.e.], The meeting eyes of love."[220] Not only does her husband keep her distant from his studies, thus hindering her from helping him with his intellectual enterprise, but also from himself. Indeed, Dorothea's tender attempts to reach out to him and to show affection are met with coldness:

---

[215] Daiches, D., *George Eliot. Middlemarch*, cit., p. 40.

[216] Hardy, B., *The Moment of Disenchantment in George Eliot's Novels*, 'The Review of English Studies', Jul. 1954, Vol. 5, No. 19, pp. 256-264, p. 256.

[217] Eliot, G., *Middlemarch*, cit., Book, II, Chapter XX, p. 192.

[218] Daiches, D., *George Eliot. Middlemarch*, cit., p. 40.

[219] Eliot, G., *Middlemarch*, cit., Book I, Chapter I, p. 10.

[220] Ivi, Book, II, Chapter XX, p. 192.

> With all her yearning to know what was afar from her and to be widely benignant, she had ardour enough for what was near, to have kissed Mr Casaubon's coat-sleeve, or to have caressed his shoe-latchet, if he would have made any other sign of acceptance than pronouncing her, with his unfailing propriety, to be of a most affectionate and truly feminine nature, indicating at the same time by politely reaching a chair for her that he regarded these manifestations as rather crude and startling.
> […] [Dorothea] was humiliated to find herself a mere victim of feeling, as if she could know nothing except through that medium: all her strength was scattered in fits of agitation, of struggle, of despondency, and then again in visions of more complete renunciation, transforming all hard conditions into duty.[221]

Even when they are alone, Casaubon is not capable of real intimacy: he remains strikingly polite and formal, so much so as to become painfully cold to Dorothea, and speaks "in a measured official tone, as of a clergyman reading according to the rubric"[222].

Casaubon's apparent lifelessness and coldness, however, are not due to the presence of Dorothea *per se*, but betray a profound lack of self-confidence, which becomes apparent when Mr Casaubon, after praising Raphael's frescoes in the Farnesina – "which most persons think it worth while to visit" – is directly asked by Dorothea whether *he* likes them, and he answers:

> They are, I believe, highly esteemed. Some of them represent the fable of Cupid and Psyche, which is probably the romantic invention of a literary period, and cannot, I think, be reckoned as a genuine mythical product. But if you like these wall-paintings we can easily drive thither; and you will then, I think, have seen the chief works of Raphael, any of which it were a pity to omit in a visit to Rome. He is the painter who has been held to combine the most complete grace of form with sublimity of expression. Such at least I have gathered to be the opinion of cognoscenti.[223]

---

[221] Ivi, Book II, Chapter XX, p. 198.

[222] Ivi, p. 197.

[223] *Ibidem*.

The repetition of such phrases as “I think”, “I reckon”, “most persons think”, more than simply adding irony to his characterization, reveals that behind his façade of a learned man, Mr Casaubon is probably a weak, self-conscious man struggling with a painful lack of confidence in his own powers of perception and understanding. As David Daiches underlines:

> the tiny scared self remains concealed. The irony is the greater when we realise that this pedantic shuffling out of any responsibility to understand comes from a man whose life-work is supposed to be the provision of a full and final understanding of all mythology.[224]

Slowly, the most problematic aspects of Casaubon’s character are disclosed by the continuity of married life: the man whom Dorothea had glorified and venerated at the beginning of the novel disappears under her eyes and becomes an apparently never-ending source of pain and frustration for the young woman.

Nonetheless, the cause of Dorothea’s suffering does not lie solely in Casaubon’s coldness and insensitivity. The origin of her pain is deeper and more complex, and at the beginning Dorothea struggles against its full consciousness:

> […] Dorothea was crying, and if she had been required to state the cause, she could only have done so in some such general words as I have already used: to have been driven to be more particular would have been like trying to give a history of the lights and shadows; for that new real future which was replacing the imaginary drew its material from the endless minutiae by which her view of Mr Casaubon and her wifely relation, now that she was married to him, was gradually changing with the secret motion of a watch-hand from what it had been in her maiden dream. It was too early yet for her fully to recognize or at least admit the change, still more for her to have readjusted that devotedness which was so necessary a part of her mental life that she was almost sure sooner or later to recover it.[225]

---

[224] Daiches, D., *George Eliot. Middlemarch*, cit. p. 41.
[225] Eliot, G., *Middlemarch*, Book II, Chapter XX, p. 194.

Dorothea is suffering, yet she cannot immediately understand the origin of her pain. She is in a state of emotional confusion, but manages to understand that something has changed, or is changing, in herself. Dorothea is gradually understanding that her brilliant future of greatness is being replaced by the commonplaceness of everyday life, and the glorious self which she had attributed to her husband is being debunked by reality, reducing Mr Casaubon to a common man with unexpected deficiencies and weaknesses. Dorothea is thus starting to realise that she is about to renounce her dreams of greatness and ambitions and instead find a way to deal with her ordinary life and husband.

When Dorothea Brooke starts to turn away from her dreams of greatness and come to terms with her prosaic existence, she begins to emerge from what the narrator calls our "moral stupidity" and, consequently, she also starts her rather tortuous and difficult path towards sympathy. This long process begins when she finally opens her eyes to the fact that Mr Casaubon has "an equivalent centre of self":

> We are all of us born in moral stupidity, taking the world as an udder to feed our supreme selves: Dorothea had early begun to emerge from that stupidity, but yet it had been easier to her to imagine how she would devote herself to Mr Casaubon, and become wise and strong in his strength and wisdom, than to conceive with that distinctness which is no longer reflection but feeling – an idea wrought back to the directness of sense, like the solidity of objects – that he had an equivalent centre of self, whence the lights and shadows must always fall with a certain difference.[226]

This emergence from moral stupidity entails a painful negotiation between the valid claims of the self and the equally valid claims of the other. After her illusions are dispelled and her dreams of greatness vanished, Dorothea wavers between sympathy and repulsiveness, but in the end, as Hagan points out, "Dorothea's disillusionment in Casaubon will give way to tender pity; compassion founded on genuine knowledge of a concrete object will replace vague hero-worship founded on illusion"[227]. After a long, meditative night, Dorothea conquers her resentment and finally opens her eyes and heart to the real struggles, wounds, and sorrows of her husband[228]. Similarly, the narrator invites readers to identify with the sorrows of the old man, instead of limiting themselves to only feel for young, beautiful characters, with whom it is certainly easier and more pleasant to sympathise:

---

[226] Eliot, G., *Middlemarch*, cit., Book II, Chapter XXI, p. 211.

> One morning, after some weeks after her arrival at Lowick, Dorothea – but why always Dorothea? Was her point of view the only one possible with regard to this marriage? I protest against all our interest, all our effort at understanding being given to the young skins that look blooming in spite of trouble; for these too will get faded, and will know the older and more eating griefs which we are helping to neglect. In spite of the blinking eyes and white mole objectionable to Celia, and the want of muscular curve which was painful to Sir James, Mr Casaubon had an intense consciousness within him, and was spiritually a-hungered like the rest of us.[229]

Indeed, not only has Mr Casaubon been diagnosed with a heart disease, but he has also discovered that his long-standing research has already been surpassed by a group of German academics, thus nullifying his intellectual enterprise. More than that, Casaubon has to face the disillusioned expectations of a happy marriage to Dorothea, as well as the excruciating pain of knowing that his life is quickly coming to an end, which is reminded to him daily by the presence of his beautiful, young wife. Hence, throughout Chapter XXIX, Eliot follows Casaubon's inner struggles and describes his tormented self, inviting readers to feel for poor Mr Casaubon the way Dorothea does.

---

[227] Hagan, J., *Middlemarch. Narrative Unity in the story of Dorothea Brooke*, cit., p. 24.
[228] Cf. Villari, E., *Duty. Middlemarch*, cit., p. 95.
[229] Eliot, G., *Middlemarch*, cit., Book III, Chapter XXIX, p. 278.

Dorothea manages to emerge from her state of “moral stupidity” by abandoning her selfish concerns and starting to pay attention to the valid claims of the people who surround her. As Enrica Villari stresses, a crucial step of Dorothea’s growth and emergence from moral stupidity is the transformation of her conception of duty: if, at the beginning of the novel, Dorothea nurtures *abstract, lofty ideas*, throughout the novel she learns that it is *practical* duty that can have a meaningful impact on the lives of others[230]. And this practical duty, has much in common with the long painful process of negotiation between the self and the other George Eliot had first learned from Feuerbach and then developed in her energetic notion of sympathy.

The first, momentous instance of this practical duty is provided by Dorothea when she decides, after a long night of meditation about her own unhappy situation, to wait for her equally unhappy husband to come upstairs:

> Dorothea sat almost motionless in her meditative struggle, while the evening slowly deepened into night. But the struggle changed continually, as that of a man who begins with a movement towards striking and ends with conquering his desire to strike. The energy that would animate a crime is not more than is wanted to inspire a resolved submission, when the noble habit of the soul reasserts itself. That thought with which Dorothea had gone out to meet her husband – her conviction that he had been asking about the possible arrest of all his work and that the answer must have wrung his heart, could not be long without rising beside the image of him, like a shadowy monitor looking at her anger with sad remonstrance. It cost her a litany of pictured sorrows and of silent cries that she might be the mercy for these sorrows – but the resolved submission did come; and when the house was still, and she knew that it was near the time when Mr Casaubon habitually went to rest, she opened her door gently and stood outside in the darkness waiting for his coming upstairs with a light in his hand.[231]

---

[230] Cf. Villari, E., *Duty. Middlemarch*, cit., p. 95.

[231] Eliot, G., *Middlemarch*, cit., Book IV, Chapter XLII, p. 427.

It is the simple gesture of kindness of a wife towards her husband, yet it is the most meaningful because it marks the moment in which Dorothea chooses the "noble habit of the soul": she wins her selfishness and narrow-mindedness and finally becomes fully aware of the needs and desires of others. A small gesture, yet the result of a long, painful process of self-negotiation that entails self-knowledge and self-discipline, and that becomes crucial in the path towards sympathy and fellow feeling.

A similar dynamics, and a similar struggle, is to be found in the episode, at the end of the novel, in which Dorothea decides to help Rosamond understand Lydgate's difficult situation in order to save their marriage. The task is made extremely arduous when Dorothea is led by circumstances to believe that there is a love affair between Rosamond and Will Ladislaw, the man Dorothea deeply loves. Before making her decision to act, Dorothea lives an endless, painful night in which jealousy and anger almost prevent her from reaching out to her needful friends. Eventually, however, her sympathetic feelings conquer her egoistic impulses, opening her eyes to the fact that she is not the only person to suffer in the situation, and the impulse to help Rosamond prevails in the end on her resentment against her:

> Was she alone in that scene? Was it her event only? She forced herself to think of it as bound up with another woman's life – a woman towards whom she had set out with a longing to carry some clearness and comfort into her beclouded youth. In her first outleap of jealous indignation and disgust, when quitting the hateful room, she had flung away all the mercy with which she had undertaken that visit. She had enveloped both Will and Rosamond in her burning scorn, and it seemed to her as if Rosamond were burned out of her sight for ever. But that base prompting which makes a woman more cruel to a rival than a faithless lover, could have no strength of recurrence in Dorothea when the dominant spirit of justice within her had once overcome the tumult and had once shown her the truer measure of things. All the active thought with which she had before been representing to herself the trials of Lydgate's lot, and this young

> marriage union which, like her own, seemed to have its hidden as well as evident troubles – all this vivid sympathetic experience returned to her now as a power: it asserted itself as acquired knowledge asserts itself and will not let us see as we saw in the day of our ignorance. She said to her own irremediable grief, that it should make her more helpful, instead of driving her back from effort.[232]

The day after this long, painful night, Dorothea meets Rosamond and tells her how sorry she feels for their difficult situation. The dialogue between Dorothea and Rosamond suggests an interesting parallel with the scene of Hetty's confession to Dinah at the end of *Adam Bede*. By offering their compassion and sympathy, Dinah and Dorothea lead the two insensitive girls, Hetty and Rosamond, to open their hearts. Indeed, after her conversation with Dorothea, for the first time in the novel Rosamond acts unselfishly and reassures Dorothea that Will Ladislaw has never betrayed the love he felt for her, thus contributing to their reunion and marriage.

As Karen Chase stresses, "in extending the current of feeling until it reaches the characters least capable of feeling sympathy, [such as Rosamond], Dorothea becomes George Eliot's most perfect example of the moral life."[233] Certainly, Dorothea's name will not be remembered in history, and her life will not be as glorious and eventful as that of Saint Theresa,

> But the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive: for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs.[234]

---

[232] Eliot, G., *Middlemarch*, cit., Book VIII, Chapter LXXX, pp. 787-788.

[233] Chase, K., *George Eliot. Middlemarch*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991, p. 44.

[234] Eliot, G., *Middlemarch*, cit., *Finale*, p. 838.

Conclusions

> Seriously, I wish you would not set false rumours, or any other rumours afloat about me. They are injurious. Several people, who seem to derive their notions from Ivy Cottage, have spoken to me of a supposed novel I was going to bring out.[235]

It was with a rather nervous tone that, in March 1858, George Eliot answered to a letter of her friend Charles Bray, who had been speculating about the possibility that she was writing a novel. The nervous tone was due to the fact that she had started writing novels anonymously. Yet the anxiety about starting a new novel was never to abandon her. The success of *Scenes of Clerical Life*, which had reassured her for a few months, had already vanished when she decided to embark on a new literary project, the writing of her first long novel, *Adam Bede*, which would be published in 1859 and consecrate her as one of the most loved writers of the Victorian age, able to conquer the hearts of a wide, multifaceted public, from general readers to the royal members of European courts[236]. Doubts would grasp Eliot once again while writing her second novel, *The Mill on the Floss*, making her wonder if she would "ever write another book as true as 'Adam Bede'"[237], as she wonders in her journal. And yet all her novels were to be immensely loved by the public. It appears that Eliot had found the key to success.

Before being a writer, however, George Eliot was an intellectual. As I have tried to argue in this dissertation, Eliot's reviews, translations, essays, and articles were crucial to her following activity as a novelist, since many of her ideas that we find perfectly incarnate in her characters were first and foremost expressed by Eliot in her essays. Therefore, the preliminary reading of Eliot's critical work becomes an extremely valuable resource to a better understanding of her novels.

---

[235] Eliot, G., *Letter* to Charles Bray, 29th March 1858, quoted in Ashton, R., *George Eliot. A Life*, London, Penguin, 1997, p. 192.

[236] Cf. Ashton, R., *George Eliot. A Life*, cit., p. 213.

[237] Ivi, p. 217.

Of her essays, *The Natural History of German Life* is crucial to understand Eliot's poetics because in it we find Eliot's explanation of the two principles that are recurrent in her novels: truthfulness and sympathy. All Eliot's novels, indeed, despite keeping in storage different destinies for her characters, seem to be linked by these two underlying principles.

As we have seen in Chapter I, Eliot inherited her notion truthfulness from John Ruskin. A great artist was the one, according to Ruskin, able to reconcile the details and the whole, the humble and the great, which together contribute to the attainment of truth in art, providing a complex but truthful unity. As Ruskin states in *Modern Painters*, "The more we know, and the more we feel, the more we separate; we separate to obtain a more perfect unit"[238]: the more we know, the more we feel, the more we need to see the differences between the various elements of reality; we notice differences in order to gain a broad understanding of nature. Likewise, George Eliot believed that all members of society were worth representing, from the member of the aristocracy to the humble carpenter, as they were all part of a wider system to which each and every one of them contributed. Hence, in her early novels Eliot decides to focus on the representation of the lower classes, giving space to those ordinary characters that were usually left aside by artists and writers.

In Chapter II, however, we have seen that in Eliot's novels truthfulness is strictly connected to sympathy, because, as she states in *The Natural History of German Life*, "the great benefit we owe to the artist, whether painter, poet, or novelist, is the extension of our sympathies."[239] Hence, in her later production Eliot does not limit herself to the representation of ordinary characters belonging to the lower classes, but decides to focus on "mixed and erring, and self-deluding"[240] individuals. Indeed, the truth of infinite value that George Eliot wishes to pass by means of her novels and faulty characters to her readers, is *sympathy*: lofty characters, tragic destinies, perfect models of beauty and morality, are useless because they do not draw readers closer to their fellow men and women, but on the contrary alienate them from their reality.

---

[238] Ruskin, J., *Preface to the Second Edition [1844]*, cit., p. 37.

[239] Eliot, G., *The Natural History of German Life*, cit., p. 110.

[240] Eliot, G., *The Morality of Wilhelm Meister*, (1855), cit., p. 309.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

George Eliot

Feuerbach, L., *The Essence of Christianity* (1841), trans. George Eliot (1854), New York, Harper, 1957.

Eliot, G., *Life and Opinions of Milton* (1855), in Thomas Pinney, ed., *Essays of George Eliot*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1963, pp. 154-157.

Eliot, G., *The Morality of Wilhelm Meister*, (1855), in Byatt, A. and Warren, N., eds., *George Eliot. Selected Essays, Poems and Other Writings,* London, Penguin, 1990, pp. 307- 310.

Eliot, G., *The Antigone and Its Moral*, (1856), in Byatt, A. and Warren, N., eds., *George Eliot. Selected Essays, Poems and Other Writings,* London, Penguin, 1990, pp. 363-366.

Eliot, G., *John Ruskin's Modern Painters, Vol. III* (1856), in Byatt, A. S., Warren, N., eds., *George Eliot. Selected Essays, Poems and Other Writings,* London, Penguin, 1990, pp. 367-378.

Eliot, G., *The Natural History of German Life*, (1856), in Byatt, A. S., Warren, N., eds., *George Eliot. Selected Essays, Poems and Other Writings,* London, Penguin, 1990, pp. 107-140.

Eliot, G., *Silly Novels by Lady Novelists*, (1856), in Byatt, A. S., Warren, N., eds., *George Eliot. Selected Essays, Poems and Other Writings,* London, Penguin, 1990, pp. 140-163.

Eliot, G., *Worldliness and Other-Worldliness: The Poet Young*, (1857), in Byatt, A. S., Warren, N., eds., *George Eliot. Selected Essays, Poems and Other Writings,* London, Penguin, 1990, pp. 164-213.

Eliot, G., *Notes on Form in Art*, (1868), in Byatt, A. S., Warren, N., eds., *George Eliot. Selected Essays, Poems and Other Writings,* London, Penguin Books, 1990, pp. 231-236.

Eliot, G. *Scenes of Clerical Life* (1858), ed. T. A. Noble, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015.

Eliot, G., *Adam Bede* (1859), ed. M. Reynolds, London, Penguin, 2008.

Eliot, G., *Middlemarch* (1871), ed. R. Ashton, London, Penguin, 2003.

Haight, G. S., ed., *Selections from George Eliot's Letters*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1985.

Harris, M, and Johnston, J., eds., *The Journals of George Eliot*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998.

Unsigned Reviews

Fine Arts. Royal Academy, 'The Athenaeum', 16 May 1840, No. 655, pp. 400-402.

The Exhibitions, 'Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine', October 1836, Vol. xl., No. 252, pp. 543-556.

John Ruskin

Cook, E. T., Wedderburn, A., (eds.), *The Works of John Ruskin*, 39 vols., London, 1903-1912, Library Edition.

Ruskin, J., *General Application of the Foregoing Principles*, in *Modern Painters Vol. I*, Pt. II, Sect. I, Ch. VII, in *The Works of John Ruskin*, cit., Vol. III, pp. 165-258.

Ruskin, J., *Of Finish*, in *Modern Painters Vol. III*, Pt. IV, Ch. IX, in *The Works of John Ruskin*, cit., Vol. V, pp. 149-168.

Ruskin, J., *Of Ideas of Truth*, in Ruskin, J., *Modern Painters Vol. I*, Pt. I, Sect. I, Ch. V, in *The Works of John Ruskin*, cit., Vol. III, pp. 104-108.

Ruskin, J., *Of Ideas of Truth in their Connection with those of Beauty and Relation*, in Ruskin, J., *Modern Painters Vol. I*, Pt. II, Sect. I, Ch. I, in *The Works of John Ruskin*, cit., Vol. III, pp.133-139.

Ruskin, J., *Of the Open Sky*, in *Modern Painters Vol. I*, Pt. II, Sect. III, Ch. I, in *The Works of John Ruskin*, cit., Vol. III, pp. 343-357.

Ruskin, J., *Of the Real Nature of Greatness of Style*, in Ruskin, J., *Modern Painters Vol. III*, Pt. IV, Ch. III, in *The Works of John Ruskin*, cit., Vol. V, pp. 44-69.

Ruskin, J., *Preface to the First Edition [1843]* of *Modern Painters Vol. I*, in *The Works of John Ruskin*, cit., Vol. III, pp. 3-6.

Ruskin, J., *Preface to the Second Edition [1844]* of *Modern Painters Vol. I*, in *The Works of John Ruskin*, cit., Vol. III, pp. 7-52.

Ruskin, J., *A Reply to "Blackwood's" Criticism of Turner*, in *The Works of John Ruskin*, cit., Vol. III, *Appendix*, pp. 635-640.

Ruskin, J., *That Truth of Nature Is Not to Be Discerned by the Uneducated Senses*, in *Modern Painters Vol. I*, Pt. II, Sect. I, Ch. II, in *The Works of John Ruskin*, cit. Vol. III, pp. 140-148.

Secondary Sources

Books

Ashton, R., *George Eliot. A Life*, London, Penguin, 1997.

Ashton, R., *142 Strand. A Radical Address in Victorian London,* London, Vintage, 2008.

Byatt, A., *Passions of the Mind*, London, Chatto & Windus, 1991.

Bove, L., *Pieter Bruegel. Le tableau ou la sphère infinie. Pour une réforme théologico-politique de l'entendement*, Paris, Librairie Philosophique J. VRIN, 2019.

Chase, K., *George Eliot. Middlemarch,* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991.

Daiches, D., *George Eliot. Middlemarch*, London, Edward Arnold, 1963.

Hardy, B., *Particularities. Readings in George Eliot*, London, P. Owen, 1982.

Jameson, F., *The Antinomies of Realism*, London, New York, Verso, 2015.

Keen, S., *Empathy and the Novel*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007.

Knoepflmacher, U. C., *George Eliot's Early Novels. The Limits of Realism*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1968.

Leavis, F. R., *The Great Tradition. George Eliot, Henry James, Joseph Conrad,* London, Chatto & Windus, 1948.

Levine, G., *The Realistic Imagination,* Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1981.

Rosenberg, J. D., *The Darkening Glass: A Portrait of Ruskin's Genius*, New York and London, Columbia University Press, 1961.

Smiles, S., *The Turner Book*, London, Tate, 2006.

Witemeyer, H., *George Eliot and the Visual Arts*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1979.

Wyllie, W.L., *J.M.W. Turner*, London, George Bell and Sons, 1905.

Essays and Articles

Adams, H. F., *Dorothea and Miss Brooke in Middlemarch*, 'Nineteenth-Century Fiction', Vol. 39, No. 1, June 1984, pp. 69-90.

Baljon, C.T., *Interpreting Ruskin: The Argument of the Seven Lamps of Architecture and the Stones of Venice*, "The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism", Autumn, 1997, Vol. 55, No. 4, pp. 401-414.

Brand, D., *A Womb with a View: The 'Reading' Consciousness in Ruskin and Proust*, 'Comparative Literature Studies', Dec. 1981, Vol. 18, No. 4, pp. 487-502.

Carlson, M., *Famished Tigress: Sympathy and the Other in George Eliot's Fiction*, 'George Eliot – George Henry Lewes Studies', Sept. 2010, No. 58/59, published by Penn State University Press, pp. 61-76.

Cook, E.T., and Wedderburn, A., *Introduction to Vol. III*, in Cook, E. T., and Wedderburn, A., eds., *The Woks of John Ruskin*, cit., Vol. III, pp. xvii-lvi.

Deeds Ermarth, E., *George Eliot's Conception of Sympathy*, 'Nineteenth-Century Fiction', Jun., 1985, Vol. 40, No. 1, pp. 23-42.

Dolk, L., *The Reception of Modern Painters*, 'Modern Language Notes', Dec., 1942, Vol. 57, No.8, pp. 621-626.

Ercolino, S., *Negative empathy*, 'Orbis Litterarum', June 2018, Vol. 73, Issue 3, pp. 243–262.

Garrigan, K. O., *"The Splendidest May Number of the Graphic": John Ruskin and the Royal Academy Exhibition of 1875*, 'Victorian Periodicals Review', Spring, 1991, Vol. 24, No. 1, pp. 22-33.

Gunn, D. P., *Dutch Painting and the Simple Truth in "Adam Bede"*, 'Studies in the Novel', Winter 1992, Vol. 24, No.4, pp. 366-380.

Hagan, J., *Middlemarch. Narrative Unity in the story of Dorothea Brooke, "*Nineteenth-Century Fiction"*,* Vol. 16, No. 1, June 1961, pp. 17-31.

Hardy, B., *The Moment of Disenchantment in George Eliot's Novels*, 'The Review of English Studies', Jul. 1954, Vol. 5, No. 19, pp. 256-264.

Leonelli, G., *Il profeta della modernità*, Introduzione a J. Ruskin, *Pittori Moderni*, a cura di G. Leoni, con la collaborazione di A. Guazzi, Torino, Einaudi, 1998, pp. XIII-LIV.

Mansell, D. JR, *Ruskin and George Eliot's "Realism"*, 'Criticism', Summer 1965, Vol. 7, No. 3, pp. 203-216.

McGowan, J. P., *The Turn of George Eliot's Realism*, 'Nineteenth-Century Fiction', Sep. 1980, Vol. 35, No. 2, pp. 171-192.

Munsterberg, M., *Ruskin's Turner: The Making of a Romantic Hero*, 'The British Art Journal', 2009, Vol. V, No. 1, pp. 61-71.

Ruskin, J., *Pittori moderni*, a cura di Leoni, G., Guazzi, A., Torino, Einaudi, 1998.

Sargent, W., *Ruskin as a Critic of Art*, 'The American Magazine of Art', August 1919, Vol. 10, No. 10, pp. 387-393.

Villari, E., *Duty. Middlemarch*, trans. Allesandra Asteriti, 'New Left Review', Nov.-Dec., 2014, pp. 89-98.

Villari, E., *'Falsehood is so easy, truth so difficult'. Adam Bede e il Realismo di George Eliot*, in Fornasiero, S., Tamiozzo, S., eds., *Studi sul Sette-Ottocento offerti a Marinella Colummi,* Venezia, Edizioni Ca' Foscari Digital Publishing, 2015, pp. 253-264.

Wright, W. C., *Hazlitt, Ruskin, and Nineteenth-Century Art Criticism*, 'The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism', Summer, 1974, Vol. 32, No. 4, pp. 509-523.