

Abstraction and the Subject of Novel Reading: Drifting through Romola

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Two compelling recent accounts of fictional characterization, perhaps unsurprisingly, take George Eliot as their exemplary case. In fact, in the work by Audrey Jaffe and Catherine Gallagher I'm referring to, Eliot's method of making characters is all about exemplarity itself. To be sure, Jaffe's *The Affective Life of the Average Man* and Gallagher's "George Eliot: Immanent Victorian" differ in many particulars, most profoundly about the issue of how Eliot asks us to feel about the typicality of her characters: Gallagher describes Eliot's project as "making us want . . . the quotidian" (73), while Jaffe argues that in *Middlemarch* "likeness anxiety takes on tragic proportions." But whether we conceive of typicality as a condition the novels recommend to us or as a nightmarish vision of undifferentiation the novels make us fear, it seems clear that Eliot's protagonists take their characteristic shape—their shape as characters—by oscillating between the conditions of radical individuality and radical generality.

Jaffe and Gallagher both concentrate on *Middlemarch*, and it is worth noting that in that novel modern character measures itself not only against a vision of the general or the quotidian but also against a gold standard of epic plenitude. I'm referring to the presentation in the novel's prelude of Dorothea Brooke as a modern—and thus cruelly diminished and averaged out—version of Saint Theresa. This dynamic, whereby we come to know characters by the epic precedents they fail adequately to revive, is given its most overt delineation in *Middlemarch*, but it features elsewhere in Eliot's work. We might think of how *Adam Bede*'s Dinah Morris is presented as "St. Catherine in a quaker dress" (64), of the Meyrick girls' fanciful likening of Daniel Deronda to Prince Camaralzaman (579), or of the comparison, offered by *The Mill on the Floss*'s narrator, of Maggie Tulliver to Sappho (320). If to be a character in Eliot is to be a unit of measurement of a falling off from a recognized standard, these examples make clear that the relation of character to standard is often figured across a historical chasm. Character is not only a deviation from a norm but a distinctively modern derivation from a distant past.

What is most striking to me is that these characters' relation to their precedents also comes to figure *our* relationship as readers to the characters. To be a character in Eliot—intelligently, exhaustively attended to—has its own grandeur, and one way to describe the work of the novels is as making these characters as thoroughly known, their lives as fully distinctive, as their historical or mythic models. If *Middlemarch*'s prelude suggests that the heroine we will shortly meet is but one of a host of "many Therasas" (3), by the novel's closing sentences this famously anonymous young woman seems no longer a derivative but a new standard, so that we know exactly what our narrator means when she refers to the idea that contemporary reality is replete with "many Dorotheas" (838). Here, too, *Middlemarch* is exemplary of a much wider pattern in Eliot: we meet Maggie Tulliver, Daniel

Deronda, and Dinah Morris as modern epigones of more historically resonant originals. But by the end of their stories they have become larger than life, glamorized by the meaning their lives have been made to bear. We are invited to measure our implicitly massified readerly selves against the achieved individualities of this gallery of modern secular saints.

Jaffe, too, argues that the reader of Eliot is a “mass character,” and goes on to claim that if Eliot offers any imaginary compensation for this experience of punishing standardization, it is by constructing us as a “knowing member of the mass.” I agree with this characterization, and I want to add to it that the vehicle of this knowledge in Eliot is erotic passivity.¹ If this claim seems improbable, it is perhaps because we have relatively few theoretical tools for thinking about how eroticism and knowledge coincide, and even fewer for thinking about how insight may be detached from agency. Current critical portraits of novel reading tend to hesitate between viewing this activity either as given over to mystification or as inherently critical. In this we are more closely allied than we want to believe with nineteenth-century commentators, who hoped novel reading could be made the tool of improvement but feared it was an exercise in sensual daydreaming. Although conducted in a different theoretical vocabulary, today’s critical discourse in many ways resonates with nineteenth-century arguments over whether the novel reader was (erotically) entranced or (intellectually) edified. My claim is that the reader of Eliot is always both, and that implicit in Eliot’s method of making characters is the idea that novel reading offers access to a kind of insight through submission.

I want to get to this improbable point by starting from what may seem an even more improbable premise: that Eliot’s historical novel *Romola* represents the zero degree of her processes of characterization and thus also a particularly self-conscious portrait of what it means to be a reader of George Eliot. If, as we have seen, Eliot habitually conceives characters against a virtual backdrop of historical figures, frequently drawn from the Renaissance and often from among the ranks of the Catholic saints, it seems significant that *Romola*, a fifteenth-century Florentine, rubs more than figurative shoulders with Savonarola, Machiavelli, and Piero di Cosimo and at a key moment in the novel finds herself hailed as a living saint by a plague-stricken village. In this novel, in other words, the figurative conditions of Eliot’s character ontology become the subject of diegetic elaboration. *Romola* is thus not only a kind of patron saint of Eliot’s character population but, as it were, her own chief officiant: she seems to inhabit simultaneously both poles—precedent and instance, reader and read—that I began with. As such I think she offers us not only a striking image of Eliot’s practices of character making but also of her conception of the reader. The essay to follow examines *Romola*’s readerliness before suggesting that this portrait of the reader as a young Renaissance saint points up some contradictions in current critical portraits of the novel consumer.

¹ Gallagher’s essay also turns on the issue of eroticism, and ends by claiming that desire is the force that makes Dorothea want to inhabit the quotidian. My claim here is first that this desire characterizes reader as well as protagonist, and second that this eroticism pushes that reader less into a longing for the everyday than toward an uncanny detachment.

One has only to read *Romola* to realize that *Romola* is all about reading—George Eliot’s reading, first and foremost. This novel of Renaissance Italy is perhaps the most laboriously researched of all Victorian historical fictions; even with a considerable quotient of melodrama, the novel breathes an atmosphere of bookishness. A consciousness of the library from which the novel so evidently emerged plays an inescapable part in the phenomenology of its consumption: one’s reading of the text feels continually haunted by the prior reading that has produced it. And while Eliot’s extensive reading forms a constant imaginary backdrop to the unfolding story, the text is also filled with more concrete readers. Three of the major characters (Bardi, Tito, and Baldassare) are serious scholars of antiquity, for example, and *Romola* is particularly tied to that activity: we first meet her reading aloud to her blind father, and in virtually our last glimpse of her she is poring over a printed version of Savonarola’s confession. In addition, her love plot literally emerges from the pages of a book; she and Tito improbably confess their feelings for each other as they search together for a volume of Thucydides, and the crisis of their marriage occurs in an argument about the final disposition of her father’s library.

In addition to these literally bookish moments, *Romola* stages endless scenes of what Garrett Stewart has defined as “parables” of readerly extrapolation, and these are even more revealing of the way the text thinks the activity of reading. Stewart defines his sense of extrapolation this way: “Reading along, you enter upon an episode from which you are signaled to extrapolate some adjusted orientation toward the continuing event of reading. . . . The impulse of classic fiction is to . . . narrate your place in its discourse even when no one (else)—no character—is made to read” (18–20). *Romola* is dense both with actual scenes of reading and with such parabolic scenes of readerly extrapolation. This is clear from the very first pages of the novel, the proem in which Eliot addresses the difficulty for the nineteenth-century reader of imagining four hundred years back in time by creating a figure with precisely the opposite problem: Eliot conjures a revenant spirit, a Renaissance “Shade” who finds himself confronted with the spectacle of modern Florence. The proem thus resembles the prologue to Eliot’s next novel, *Felix Holt*, where a hypothetical coach ride allows the narrator to introduce us to the geography and culture of her provincial, early nineteenth-century setting. What is distinctive about the opening of *Romola*, though, is that the goal of carrying the reader *back* in time is achieved by the narrated project of carrying a Renaissance character *forward* to us. While recounting the Florentine spirit’s questions about what has changed in his city over the centuries, Eliot is prompting a similar, obverse set of questions in her contemporary reader. The manifest drama of this shade’s reincarnation is thus also, slightly less obviously, a drama of *our* incarnation as responsible readers, sensitive to markers of cultural and historical difference. The proem thereby accustoms us to *Romola*’s peculiar hyper-reflexivity, a state of radical interchangeability between reader and text in which the challenges any one character faces within the diegesis are isomorphic with those we confront as consumers of the novel. Moreover, in figuring her reader as a visitant shade, Eliot casts the process of reading as a state of oscillation between carnality and its transcendence—a pulsation in which abstraction is dogged by the desire for embodiment and where embodiment seems inherently ghostly.

As I have suggested, this contradiction is most clearly figured by Romola herself, a character whose passionate abstraction—whose readerliness—is made to seem a feature of her particular affective disposition. Put simply, Romola's is presented as a life not so much lived as one (intensely) read. This is most evident in her tendency to evade the minimal requirements of verisimilar participation in her own plot. Where the novel's male characters are subjected to luridly punitive fates—death by drowning, an auto-da-fé, torture-induced confession—Eliot's heroine wanders through this turbulent Renaissance Florence with a Sweet-Pea-ish immunity to the narrative's crashing iron girders. Indeed, Eliot's punishing embodiment of the novel's men is counterbalanced by the nowhere-ness of Romola herself. Her abstraction as a character is in part the result of the narrative mode in which her plot is largely given to us. While much of the novel relies on dialogue and debate, Romola's social isolation means that a disproportionate amount of her plot transpires in what Dorrit Cohn has termed "psycho-narration" or "the narrator's discourse about a character's consciousness" (14). What marks this mode of narration is the distance it takes from the idiom of the character under description—indeed, from that of any character at all. As a sample sentence, illustrating the abstraction of Eliot's prose even when describing a scene of acute emotion, take the following: "That heart-cutting comparison of the present with the past urged itself upon Romola till it even transformed itself into wretched sensation: she seemed benumbed to everything but inward throbbings, and began to feel the need of some hard contact" (321). We are manifestly not hearing the idiom of any character here—even one as well read as Romola. Cohn presents psycho-narration as the "deepest" way to narrate consciousness, but also the one that operates at the furthest remove from the character's own potential account of her experience. It is, in other words, the most clearly *written* of narrative modes for representing thought—we might say the one that thinks consciousness not on the model of the voice (as do in their different ways interior monologue and free indirect style) but as if the stuff of consciousness consisted of a book one reads.

Equally important to Romola's abstracted readerliness is the fact that the content as well as the narrative mode of her consciousness seems primally, unnervingly, detached. Eliot's heroine experiences virtually every turning point in her narrated life in a kind of fugue state. When she first hears Savonarola's fiery preaching in the Duomo, for example, she breaks down sobbing. But Eliot characterizes Romola's emotion as "a sympathy with something apart from all the definable interests of her life. It was not altogether unlike the thrill which had accompanied certain rare heroic touches in history and poetry. This transient emotion . . . seemed to lie quite outside the inner chamber and sanctuary of her life" (247). Indeed, throughout the novel Romola resonates most powerfully to things that have nothing to do with her. She reports to Tito at one point that she has enjoyed the clang of Florence's church bells because "I liked being shaken and deafened by them: I fancied I was something like a Bacchante possessed by a divine rage" (280). The considerable eroticism of Romola's feeling here does not seem lessened by—indeed it seems properly constituted by—the fact that this feeling has no characterological object.

Over the course of the novel, the references to Romola's weirdly intense detachment multiply: we hear so much about her "dreamy disbelief" (315), her

“benumbed” condition (321), that we begin to understand that a drifting lassitude, an absence from her own unfolding story, is her ideal state: it is Romola’s essential flakiness regarding the demands of her plot and her own characterological plausibility that most definitively characterizes her. This is clearest in her repeated attempt to flee the scene of the novel—first when she disguises herself as a nun and leaves the city on foot (only to be turned back by Savonarola) and later, in the startling chapter titled “Drifting Away,” when she floats off in a boat and is adopted as a divine visitant by a plague-decimated fishing village. Romola of course has her reasons for wanting to leave Florence, but Eliot describes both attempted escapes as if they were prompted by a desire to leave behind not only her marriage but the obligations of socialization and characterization themselves: describing the motives for Romola’s boat ride, Eliot writes, “Why should she care about wearing one badge more than another, or about being called by her own name? She despaired of finding any consistent duty belonging to that name. She longed for . . . repose in mere sensation” (502). This is a literally ecstatic voyage, a journey whose only determined goal is an evacuation of self. So total is Romola’s translation to some other plane of being that she seems to continue floating even after she touches dry ground. Eliot tells us that a village boy sees Romola “with her gaze fixed intently on the distant slope” and “the long lines of her thick gray garment giving a gliding character to her rapid walk” (554). The episode, in forcing Romola to minister to a suffering population, is clearly meant to signal a return to the demands of the social. But Romola moves through the village as if on castors or roller skates, as immune to the plague around her as she is to the comprehension of the simple-minded villagers.

From these heights of abstraction it is difficult to return, and Romola’s reintegration into Florentine society at the novel’s close feels notional at best. While she chooses to make a home with Tito’s mistress and his illegitimate children, she does so with her characteristic sense of not being all there. “Romola sat nearly opposite Lillo,” Eliot tells us in the epilogue, “but she was not observing him. Her hands were crossed on her lap and her eyes were fixed absently on the distant mountains: she was evidently unconscious of anything around her” (581). Her abstraction is underlined by her refusal to tell any of the members of her new family precisely who she is, and by her readiness on the novel’s final page to translate her life story into an instructive fable: “There was a man to whom I was very near, so that I could see a great deal of his life,” she tells Lillo, and it is in keeping with her characterization that she seems to be describing a book she’s read more than a man she’s been married to. As always, she maintains an oddly external or supplementary relationship to what is after all her own life, as if she inhabited a distanced but invested position slightly outside the fictional space.

In this, Eliot’s heroine challenges most of the prevalent models for conceiving of novel reading: allergic to socialization, she couldn’t be further from the disciplined reader familiar in some strains of novel theory. And in refusing to (so to speak) show up for her own most rebellious actions, she also fails to resemble the idealized “tactical” or “subversive” reader we may be tempted to put in the policed reader’s place. It is not only a conception of the disciplined Foucauldian or the tactical Certeauian reader that *Romola* challenges; it is also that of the ethically improved

reader Eliot herself presumably imagined, as well as the self-actualizing reader familiar to various kinds of political criticism. If there is one body of recent work that Eliot's desubjectified portrait of the reader does call up, it is the work of Nicholas Dames and Karin Littau, who have both stressed the Victorian conception of novel reading as a quasi-automatic practice, a matter of distraction and inattention as much as purposeful deliberation. *Romola* does indeed seem hooked up to her own plotline in much the same way that one frog's legs were linked to another's nervous system in the physiological experiments Dames has shown provided one model for how the Victorians thought of the relation of reader to text: connected but not identical, at once compellingly responsive and uncannily detached.

In this intense detachment, *Romola* calls to mind another important body of recent critical work on the nineteenth century, the recuperations of the much-abused values of impartiality and detachment undertaken by critics like Amanda Anderson and David Wayne Thomas. Taking a distanced view even of what most closely touches her, *Romola* seems a perfect embodiment of the detachment prized by these writers. Anderson and Thomas are not concerned with reading per se, but it seems to me that the phenomenon of novel reading offers access to much of the terrain they seek to reclaim. Anderson stresses the aspirational nature of detachment, its status as a practice to be worked at rather than a position to rest in; her characterization of detachment is thus usefully resonant both with the serial nature of modern (which is to say novelistic) reading and with *Romola*'s own signature restlessness. Thomas is interested in Victorian conceptions of liberal detachment as a regulative rather than a constitutive ideal, a matter less of subscribing to a specific set of postulates than of submitting to certain modes of apprehension. Here, too, I think we find ourselves in the vicinity of a *Romola*-like reading in which the content of what happens matters less than the position of resolute detachment one cultivates vis-à-vis those happenings.

If the connection I am proposing between these recent measured affirmations of liberal detachment and Eliot's heroine seems bizarre, it is certainly because in the work of Anderson and Thomas detachment appears as a purposively sought, hard-won goal—Thomas explicitly invoking the idea of a "liberal heroics" (46). This detachment thus would seem to have little to do with the eroticism and passivity that characterize *Romola*. But I want to close by suggesting that it is this coincidence of detachment and lassitude that is most intriguing about Eliot's novel, and is what makes it most suggestive for the task of thinking the ethical and political coordinates of reading itself. It bears noting in this context that *Romola* is Eliot's only novel to be set entirely in an urban world, and thus that despite its distant historical setting it might be described as Eliot's most sustained fictional exploration of the affective features of modernity. What that exploration suggests is that the eroticism and passivity that have always been noted as elements of novel reading deserve recognition as themselves practices of detachment, submissions to the compulsions of modernity that precisely through that submission may be a mode of gaining a detached perspective on its exigencies.

The studies by Gallagher and Jaffe that I began with posit fictional characters as units of unconscious measurement of how modernity feels. If, as I have argued, we understand the reader on the same model, we arrive at the vision of a reader

whose very acquiescence to a generalized experience affords a detached perspective of the contours of that generality. This conception would force us to abandon the image of novel reading as a necessarily improving or heroic endeavor. But it would help account for what I think is implicit and unspoken for many of us—that even on the far side of the various theoretical and political demotions it has suffered, novel reading remains a tool of insight. I hope to have suggested some of the ways Eliot's novel prompts us to think past a set of unresolved incoherencies in many current critical accounts, where novel reading appears as at once compulsively involving and definitively abstract, and the novel reader now as a canny, dubious hermeneut and now as an overwhelmed fantasy addict. *Romola* urges us not to throw up our hands at these uncanny conjunctions. In particular, in forcing us to uncouple the ideal of detachment from the heroics of agency, Eliot's novel demands that we account for the combination of insight and immersion, avidity and passivity definitive of novel reading itself.

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