A COMPANION TO

GEORGE ELIOT

EDITED BY

AMANDA ANDERSON
A Companion to
George Eliot
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On the eve of her novelistic career, George Eliot wrote an essay for the *Westminster Review*, “The Natural History of German Life” (1856), that ranged widely across discussions of literature, art, science, and social science (or what Eliot classed as “natural history”). In the essay, Eliot famously insists on the importance of fiction in cultivating the sympathies of its readers and in bringing them to a better understanding of those with whom they share their worlds. She argues against idealizing tendencies in the literary and visual arts, especially in portrayals of peasant and rural life, and makes the case for realistic portrayals of ordinary and common people. The German sociologist Wilhelm von Riehl, whose works are under review in the essay, is for Eliot exemplary in his careful, experience-based observations of rural life in his native land. But as important as this essay is for its artistic statement on the cusp of what was to be an impressive literary debut, it is equally important in indicating Eliot’s intellectual range and ambition. Indeed, Eliot saw her own literary efforts as actively in dialogue with a broad range of contemporary developments—not only in the social sciences as practiced by people like Riehl, but in philosophy, religion, and science as well. It is for this reason that her work remains responsive to such a broad range of scholarly and critical questions, particularly at a time when scholars in the humanities are exploring interdisciplinary approaches and newly considering the domain of ethics, questions of religion, and a number of issues pertaining to transnational perspectives.

In assembling this Companion, we have therefore tried not only to bring together exciting new work on Eliot by important scholars working in the field, but also to
give as full a sense as we can of the ways in which Eliot’s work speaks to contemporary intellectual questions. This approach is evident not only in the topical essays gathered under the third and largest section of the Companion, “Eliot in Her Time and Ours: Intellectual and Cultural Contexts,” but also in the chapters specifically addressing questions of literary history and form (“Imaginative Form and Literary Context”), individual writings (“Works”), and life and reception (“Life and Reception”). It is often impossible to keep life and art entirely distinct when seeking to make interpretive sense of Eliot’s body of work: many of the topical essays thus appeal to the life and especially to the cultural and intellectual milieu Eliot inhabited. As several of our contributors show, Eliot’s views on a range of matters, including money, travel, internationalism, and gender, were notably informed by her experience, and many of the essays here help to illuminate this fact, as well as the significant ways in which cultural contexts and norms conditioned her art and thinking. To read these essays is to rediscover the reach of Eliot’s artistic, intellectual, and moral achievement, and to recognize her relevance to contemporary concerns in the humanities, including questions of ethics, politics, religion, gender, aesthetics, and the relation between literature and science.

Imaginative Form and Literary Context

When Henry James announced that Middlemarch “sets a limit . . . to the development of the old-fashioned English novel,” part of his purpose was to pronounce an epitaph that would make room for novels written on different lines from those of Eliot, including his own.1 The comments made by one great novelist about another have a particular value, even if in the end we cannot agree with them. Today, no writer seems more central to the institution of the British novel than does Eliot. In “The Reception of George Eliot,” James Eli Adams explains the progression by which Eliot dropped from the company of major British novelists in the earlier part of the twentieth century, only to be reinstated after World War II. Adams traces in Eliot’s own day a growing recognition that she was the premier novelist of her time, but also a growing discomfort about the way in which she increasingly seemed to be using her fiction to convey intellectual and especially ethical doctrine. In the period between Eliot’s death and World War II, distrust of the allegedly doctrinal bent of her fiction remained, but a belief in her preeminence did not. This changed in the 1940s. According to Adams, the post-war revival of respect for Eliot rested on two pillars. First, the rich intellectual texture of her novels came to be seen, not as an imposition of alien content on fictional form, but as an integral part of that form. Critics of many persuasions have found Eliot’s works useful in exploring society and religion, philosophy and gender. Second, literary critics in the period after World War II learned to read novels in ways that revealed in Eliot an unexpected artistry. This countered the doubts about Eliot’s craftsmanship expressed by James, who found in Middlemarch excellent parts but an “indifferent whole” (958), a view that recalls the celebrated question he
elsewhere asked about novels by Thackeray, Dumas, and Tolstoy: “what do such large loose baggy monsters, with their queer elements of the accidental and arbitrary, artistically mean?” In the last half-century, a number of answers to this question have emerged. As we have seen, a standard criticism of Eliot, during her life and beyond, involved Eliot’s inclusion of what was seen as “doctrine,” and particularly ethical doctrine. Why wouldn’t Eliot stick to her story and her characters? Why did the novels have to be so “difficult”? Viewed in the context of form, this became an objection to the way Eliot’s narrators “intruded” into her narratives, delivering ideas and sentiments to readers directly, in an attempt to engage the reader in a dialogue about the work instead of using the world of the fiction to enact its meaning. Today, Eliot’s narrators are no longer routinely accused of being “intrusive”: instead, their contribution to a given novel is more likely to be explored. The essays in this section reflect a broadening of interest in Eliot’s narrative craftsmanship: they range from a discussion of Eliot’s narrative technique taken as a whole to the examination of her use of a single trope, metaphor.

In “Eliot and Narrative,” Monika Fludernik shows how narratology, the formal study of narrative strategies and effects, can powerfully assist us in coming to grips with the form of Eliot’s novels. For Fludernik, Eliot’s realism depends upon involving the reader. She creates narrators who invite us to share their perceptions and values, their mixture of judgment and sympathy. We become the narrator’s accomplices in evaluating the fictional world before us and the characters within it. The narrator sometimes presents external pictures of the characters, forcing us to make sense of hints and clues—one more way of inducing us to share the moral and practical view that characterizes the narrator. A striking example of this technique involves the way in which Hetty Sorrel is presented in Adam Bede: as Fludernik shows, her external depiction contrasts strongly with the internal depiction of such characters as Adam. Our involvement in the process of making sense of a character like Hetty is what makes us accept Eliot’s narrative world as “real”: we come to share the narrator’s moral evaluations of characters and incidents, as well as the narrator’s depiction of how and why things occur in her world. We take those aspects of the narration to be telling the truth about the fictional world and our world as well—that is, to be “realistic.”

In exploring Eliot’s artistry, commentators have often attended to her use of metaphor. Fludernik is no exception. She believes that Eliot’s metaphors provide yet another way in which we are brought to share a work’s complex vision, as we collaborate with the narrator in making sense of the text’s metaphors. Michael Wood’s “Metaphor and Masque” is wholly devoted to the issue of metaphor in Eliot, which he approaches from a different angle. He is interested less in what happens when we find ourselves as readers sharing the narrator’s often ironic metaphors than in how metaphors help Eliot’s characters (and us as readers) to understand, and also at times to misunderstand, the world. How do metaphors help Eliot’s characters to grasp the reality around them? And how can they (and we) avoid being led by metaphors into misunderstanding? Casaubon in Middlemarch entangles himself in error and self-deception when he imagines passion as something that works like a bank account,
constantly accruing interest, not as a spring that may in time dry up. How can we avoid such misprision? Wood suggests that Eliot’s critics have tended to take one of two views on the place of metaphor in Eliot’s fiction, some charting her masterful deployment of metaphorical webs, others concentrating on moments when her control of metaphor seems ready to slip. He believes that neither view should wholly be ignored. Metaphors can illuminate but also distract. Metaphor is useful but potentially dangerous.

In “It is of Little Use for Me to Tell You: George Eliot’s Narrative Refusals,” Robyn Warhol provides another narratological view of Eliot’s realism, exploring moments that are “unnarratable” either because they are so mundane that they fall beneath the dignity of deserving narration (and are thus “subnarratable”) or because they rise so far above the mundane that they become ineffable (“supranarratable”). These varieties of the unnarratable, Warhol argues, allow Eliot to screen out of her fiction narrative clichés, which too often lead in the direction of stereotypical romance, not concrete realism. Eliot’s realism also famously demands that we refuse to apply the label of subnarratable to parts of life that not only can be but ought to be narrated: by refusing to deal with such things, romances ignore the conditions of mundane life that permeate the real experience of our fellow human beings. A prime example is again provided by Casaubon in *Middlemarch*. Eliot’s narrator insists that we turn our attention to him (“But why always Dorothea?”) and also employs disnarration (the narrating of things that do not in fact occur in the text) to present the better self Casaubon might have been were it not for his “egocentric fear” (56). When Eliot’s narrator insists that it is easy to depart from reality and difficult to face it, she is urging her readers to focus on the mundane conditions fiction too often neglects. With Warhol’s chapter, then, we have moved from James’s notion that Eliot’s fiction lacks artistic management to the view that even the mundane material Eliot presents is part of her creation of a rich narrative realism.

Does realism require passing beyond the self and its distortions? The accepted view has been that Eliot’s realism shows such a dynamic at work among her characters, prompting readers to share it. For Caroline Levine, however, selfishness needs to be directed, not excluded, if realism is to be achieved. In “Surprising Realism” she agrees that we project our imaginings and desires onto the world. She adds, however, that this projection can take radically different forms and sometimes can provide the force we draw on to imagine the situation of others. Levine is particularly interested in Eliot’s creation of narrative surprises that move the minds of characters and readers beyond the limits of the self, as happens when, in the closing pages of *Daniel Deronda*, Daniel’s explanation of his plan to journey to Israel shocks Gwendolen into the realization of how much larger the world actually is than she had supposed it to be. Though different in focus, Levine’s notion of realism seems compatible with those of Fludernik and Warhol. The surprises that propel the reader beyond the self can be seen as leading to the sharing of viewpoints between narrator and reader that Fludernik finds at the heart of realism. And Levine’s realist surprises could also lead to the shift in viewpoint about what is narratable that Warhol discusses.
 Henry James, it would seem, underestimated the force and subtlety of Eliot’s art. In “Two Flowers: George Eliot’s Diagrams and the Modern Novel,” John Plotz raises doubts about the adequacy of James’s pronouncement that *Middlemarch* “sets the limit” to the “old-fashioned English novel.” Some have argued that *Daniel Deronda* was a necessary precursor to James’s own *Portrait of a Lady*. Plotz goes further, arguing that Eliot’s fiction serves, not as the end-point of Victorian social realism, but as a hinge between Victorian and modern fiction. Eliot, like other nineteenth-century realists, uses her characters to provide the multiple perspectives that make a realist hold on reality seem robust and persuasive. She also delves into individual interiority, in a way that anticipates more recent fiction, but when she does so, the force of the external world always lurks in the background, ready to inform our view of the characters and their sense of themselves. Eliot depends on a “semi-detachment” of characters from fictional worlds which allows her to avoid neglecting either self or society.

**Works**

One remarkable aspect of the post World War II revitalization of interest in Eliot has been its growth to encompass all of her writings. To be sure, her novels have maintained pride of place, but significant discussions have emerged of her essays (along with her essayistic final work, *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*) as well as of her poetry (probably the side of her literary output that has as yet gained the least attention). This Companion offers a variety of approaches to Eliot’s works; the essays in this section not only provide new insight into individual works and genres within Eliot’s oeuvre, but also together represent an impressive diversity of methodological and thematic interests.

In *Scenes of Clerical Life*, Eliot’s earliest work of prose fiction, we see the beginnings of her realism, as she strives to depict mundane reality in a way that will promote our sympathetic understanding. One might suppose that this would mean a rejection of melodrama and romance, but Stefanie Markovits suggests in “*Scenes of Clerical Life* and *Silas Marner*: Moral Fables” that this is not entirely the case. Eliot means to move her readers in *Scenes of Clerical Life*, at times making them part of a “fellowship in suffering” (qtd. on 99), and for this melodrama can prove useful. And in *Silas Marner*, Eliot achieves a remarkable blend of a realistic portraiture of lives on the one hand, and a fairy tale texture on the other. When Eppie appears on the hearth in Silas’s cabin and Silas begins to care for her and love her, we find ourselves in the familiar territory of Eliot’s country realism. But not entirely. The events (and particularly the way in which Eppie takes the place of Silas’s gold) have the ring of a fairy tale as well. These two strands combine in *Silas Marner*, in which “the ideal can serve as that which escapes ‘real’ embodiment yet still facilitates literature’s power to stimulate sympathy, a sympathy not so much of understanding, but one based on our sense of shared incomprehensibility, of shared otherness” (103).
Rae Greiner’s “Adam Bede: History’s Maggots” discovers in Adam Bede a similar stress on the incomprehensible, which in this case involves how ideas and the forces of history can be borne into the present by minds and lives that are oblivious of them. In Adam Bede, a trope that centrally reflects these unconscious but powerful historical forces is, surprisingly, the maggot, a figure which Greiner traces back to the eighteenth century. A number of the characters in Adam Bede are said to be afflicted by maggots. Even Dinah, that most blameless of female characters, has her fervent Methodistical beliefs ascribed to maggots by Mrs. Poyser. But the chief example is Hetty, who evokes in others genuine responses to qualities which they impute to her but which are no part of her own consciousness. Hetty stands as the prime example of a character who acts as the bearer of historical and cultural meaning to which she herself has no access—a surprising development for an author who regularly evokes moments whereby, through the action of a newly roused sympathetic imagination, unconscious views are revealed and if need be corrected.

In Eliot’s own day, some readers wished that she had never strayed from the pastoral realism of Scenes of Clerical Life, Adam Bede, and Silas Marner. Even if they accepted the innovations in the novels that followed, they regretted that Eliot had not rested content with the pastoral mode of the earlier works. Modern critics take a different view, with Middlemarch as the work that draws most discussion and is considered the summit of her achievement. This Companion is no exception, as our authors turn regularly to Middlemarch for examples of the thematic and formal qualities of her fiction.

In “Middlemarch: January in Lowick,” Andrew H. Miller seeks to illuminate both that novel and Eliot’s fiction in general. He suggests that the texture of Middlemarch invites us to project ourselves into the fiction and to follow up on its potentialities to the limits, thus experiencing “the promise and peril of entering into states of absorption that offer to make one’s actions and world meaningful” (155). As we read, tracing the unfolding of (say) Dorothea’s mind, we experience this absorption, which Miller associates with “the difficult discovery or creation of meaningfulness” (163). When absorption is broken off, the threat is that meaningfulness too will be lost. But if we allow ourselves to be too deeply buried, we can also lose track of meaning. Eliot’s fiction elicits and weighs our quest for meaning, and Miller reveals how demanding and rewarding responding to her works can be.

How could an author write a novel to follow Middlemarch? Alex Woloch’s Daniel Deronda: Late Form, or After Middlemarch describes how Eliot faced this challenge in writing Daniel Deronda. He is particularly interested in what happens to Daniel Deronda’s system of characters and its exploration of psychology. Gwendolen’s egotism lies at the center of much of this, serving as source and figure for the novel’s fascination with inner consciousness. We see a kind of division of labor emerge, with Gwendolen attracting to herself moral opprobrium and undergoing hysterical suffering for her selfishness, while the novel’s plot acts as a “supreme udder” for Deronda, bringing him things he isn’t conscious of desiring. Daniel Deronda has often been said to fall into two distinct parts with very different qualities—the love plot involving
Gwendolen, and the “Jewish” plot centered on Deronda himself. (No one would make the same criticism of Middlemarch, even though that novel in fact arose from two distinct stories Eliot had been working on.) Woloch is interested, not in championing either “half” of the novel but in understanding, in a systematic way, how its excesses result from internal pressures far stronger than anything we find in Middlemarch.

Daniel Deronda is not the only Eliot work with the reputation of being a “problem” novel. For different reasons and to different extents, three other Eliot novels have been considered problem works: Felix Holt, Romola, and The Mill on the Floss. Complaints about Felix Holt have taken a similar form to those about Daniel Deronda. Felix Holt is said to be divided between a love plot and a political plot, which in turn are split between legalism and abstraction on the one hand, and deep human feeling (and suffering) on the other. The way in which the political interests of the novel are treated has also been considered highly problematic, with the novel’s political force losing itself in the sound of wedding bells at novel’s end. David Kurnik’s “Felix Holt: Love in the Time of Politics” recognizes what is at stake here and does not wholly disagree with the novel’s detractors. In the end, however, Kurnik is not content simply to explain how its political energy is negated by Felix’s abstract beliefs as well as his marriage. He reminds us that there are forces in the novel which elude such negation, and in particular that the suffering and anger of Mrs. Transome escape their local source in her disappointment in love, becoming instead “legible as a diagnosis of the inadequation of the interpersonal and the political” (151).

Romola has posed problems for readers ever since its publication. To many, Eliot’s careful and detailed depiction of fifteenth-century Florence has seemed too detailed, presenting them with a massive foreign territory lacking a living connection to their present-day interests. In “Romola: Historical Narration and the Communicative Dynamics of Modernity,” David Wayne Thomas approaches this problem by suggesting that Romola is set at the hinge-point between traditional society and modernity. Thomas views modernity through the lens of Jürgen Habermas, who has suggested that for moderns, no longer able to draw their values from tradition, values must be discovered through communicative reason. In Thomas’s eyes, Romola is designed to test the efficacy of this sort of communication, and other kinds as well. Though at times the novel may suggest that speech cannot register the more profound aspects of our experience, on the whole it views Habermassian communication as our best hope by weighing the strengths and weaknesses of how the novel’s characters communicate. In doing so, Romola enriches our understanding of our own predicament in the modern world.

We turn now to another novel some readers have found problematic, The Mill on the Floss. Eliot interrupted work on that novel shortly after she had begun it, to write “The Lifted Veil,” and critics have tended to think that writing the latter somehow made it possible for her to pass beyond the opening of the former. In “The Mill on the Floss and ‘The Lifted Veil’: Prediction, Prevention, Protection,” Adela Pinch suggests that we think not of beginnings but instead of endings in addressing both works. What does attending to “the pull of the future in [Eliot’s] narrative art” (119) allow
us to recognize in *The Mill on the Floss?* For one thing, we become sensitive to patterns in which the novel anticipates its own ending. An example of this is a kind of magical thinking in which caregivers express fears for future events, with the hope that doing so will ward them off: on a number of occasions, for example, Mrs. Tulliver predicts that Maggie will drown—a prophesy which does not succeed in disarming the threat of the future, since drowning still turns out to be Maggie’s fate. The grim conclusiveness of the flood that puts a sudden stop to the course of the novel and to Maggie’s life has always disturbed readers, seeming to many unexpected (though Eliot had it in mind from the beginning) and impossible to understand. Yet the most important future for any novel, Pinch argues, lies (quite literally) in the hands of its readers. Experiencing the ending of *The Mill on the Floss* can help to prepare us for our own endings and those of the people who matter to us, teaching us to “tolerate the pain of reading tragic endings that seem scripted from the beginning” as well as to live with our responsibility for ourselves and others, accepting “the painful limits of that responsibility.”

Critics sometime speak of the poetical resonance of moments evoked by Eliot’s novels. Herbert F. Tucker’s “Poetry: The Unappreciated Eliot” agrees that there are ties between Eliot’s poetry and the novels, but his principal concern is to lead us to take a keener look at the texture and dynamics of Eliot’s verse. Her careful craftsmanship is there to be seen for those who take the trouble. Tucker is not suggesting that Eliot is a great poet who has gone unrecognized, but instead a great writer who, in whatever medium she chooses to work, is worth attending to. Tucker’s meticulous reading of Eliot’s verse reveals a side of her achievement many of us have skipped over.

Eliot’s works also include a significant amount of non-fictional prose, in the form of essays she published early in her career as well as the last volume she authored, *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*. These works alone might have provided the foundation for a lesser writer’s claim to be remembered, but given the magnitude of Eliot’s fictional achievement, it is hardly surprising that both of the critics who write here about them view them in the context of the novels. Jeff Nunokawa’s “Essays: Essay v. Novel (Eliot, Aloof)” draws on Eliot’s novelistic practice, especially in *Middlemarch*, to remind us of what the essays are not, of how the intelligence behind them fails to mirror the generosity of the narrators of Eliot’s fiction. The tone of the essays is characteristically harsh; their voice seems eager to move up and away from their topics, be they “silly” female novelists or fulminating clerics. In the novels, by contrast, the quality of the narrator’s presence helps us to view with a sympathetic understanding unappealing characters whom we would otherwise pass over quickly. In illuminating Eliot’s final work, James Buzard’s “*Impressions of Theophrastus Such: ‘Not a Story’*” also discerns problems, but for him these arise from Eliot’s own questioning of her fictional methods—a questioning Buzard believes to have made its mark felt in her final novels as well. Eliot becomes uncomfortably aware of the unearned advantage possessed by her narrators, whose omniscience supports sympathy for repellent characters in a way that our limited knowledge can never match. A suspicion of narrative finds its fruition in *Theophrastus Such*, where the first-person narrator is anything but omniscient and the depicted figures are dropped quickly, before they can achieve a status comparable
to that of the major characters in the novels, a status that elicits the full sympathy we associate with the narrators of Eliot’s fiction.

Life and Reception

The lives of famous authors hold a certain fascination. Eliot’s life has always been of interest to her readers, the more so because it ran counter to the conventions of Victorian England. During the early part of her career, when her male nom de plume of George Eliot was the only information about her available, her readers naturally wanted to know more about this male author, indulging in the usual pastimes of conjecture and false attribution. When she subsequently decided to breach her anonymity, the focus shifted to how a woman could have created such fiction. Worries also arose about this particular woman, who had translated texts of “godless” German philosophy and was currently living with a man to whom she was not married. (For all of this, see Adams.) In our own time, concerns arising from Eliot’s gender have shifted, but not disappeared. We now find in her a fascinating example of the predicament of female intellectuals during the Victorian period (and our own), while what is taken to be her political conservatism raises the question of whether this powerful woman writer was herself a feminist.

Living with George Henry Lewes placed Eliot in a position of social ostracism. Men would call on her and Lewes; women would not. In time, her celebrity overcame this boundary, but it was real enough when it existed and tended to put Eliot in an awkward position, cut off from the mainstream of society. In “George Eliot Among Her Contemporaries: A Life Apart,” Lynn Voskuil shows, however, that a “life apart” was a state she inhabited and to some degree fashioned long before she met Lewes. In her younger years, she broke with her father’s religion, causing a rift that never fully healed. Even after she had become recognized as a Victorian sage and her Sunday afternoon salons attracted literati from home and abroad, she continued to set herself apart, particularly from those who viewed her with worshipful eyes. She did this by creating a persona that was at one moment on intimate terms with followers but was at others wrapped in an intimidating mantle of greatness.

Some of those who visited Eliot’s Sunday afternoons salon were American, but her influence on the American novel and its influence on her were not limited to personal contacts. In “Feminist George Eliot Comes From the United States,” Alison Booth views Eliot in the context of feminism and reform, both in her own day and in ours, chronicling her influence on American women writers including twentieth-century feminist literary critics in the United States. She reveals, on the part of Eliot’s American contemporaries, respect and affection mixed with disappointment that Eliot did not embrace feminist ideals more thoroughly and openly. A similar pattern can be discerned with American feminism in our own time: Eliot is admired as an author no one could condescend to, but her gradualist politics are distrusted. Daniel Hack’s “Transatlantic Eliot: African American Connections” explores another set of
transatlantic bonds, one involving issues of race, in which Eliot drew on Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Dred*, a novel centered on slavery, and a number of Black writers in America drew on Eliot’s work. In reviewing *Dred*, Eliot praised that work’s depiction of a “conflict of races” and of a people who viewed their scriptures as a living force that could shape present-day action. We can see the same elements in the “Jewish half” of *Daniel Deronda*. Interestingly, when African American writers turned to Eliot, they were most responsive not to *Daniel Deronda* but to Eliot’s long poem *The Spanish Gypsy*, with its emphasis on how a heroic champion can help to create a racial tradition. With *Daniel Deronda*, the possession of a rich heritage promises to act as the base from which a currently dispersed people can regain their racial identity; with *The Spanish Gypsy*, such a heritage is what heroic individuals (like the African Americans who drew on that poem) would need to create as part of the task of fostering racial solidarity and rising above race-based deprivation.

**Eliot in Her Time and Ours: Intellectual and Cultural Contexts**

As we mentioned at the outset of the introduction, Eliot’s writings engage a wealth of intellectual, historical, and broadly humanistic concerns. She is interested in science and religion, philosophy and art, ethics and politics, psychology and sociology, finance and law, and the broad cultural and economic developments that attend modernization. As a polymath and a reader of extraordinary range and insight, Eliot brought a great deal of learning to her art, which nonetheless always remained centrally trained on human moral and psychological experience. Indeed, responses to Eliot’s preoccupation with the moral life often play an orienting role in commentaries on her art. While she has always had her admirers, there are also those who fault her for didacticism or an unpersuasive idealism. In the past several decades in particular, many critics have sought to show how Eliot’s most valued moral practice, sympathetic response to others, is complicated by factors such as egotism, power, or the difficulties attending communication. Much of this work is fundamentally skeptical of Eliotic sympathy and aims to show that despite Eliot’s best intentions her novels, in part because of the reach of their psychological and sociological realism, cannot avoid registering skepticism too. Thus while earlier critics found her moralizing to be intrusive and thus aesthetically distasteful, later critics have tended to stress the ideological or mystifying features of Eliot’s ethics.

Many of the essays collected here re-situate Eliot’s ethics in a way that acknowledges the complexity of her art as well as the philosophical, psychological, and sociological reach of her thinking about the moral life. Without neglecting either the internal tensions of Eliot’s thought or the larger cultural forces conditioning her own frameworks, these essays credit Eliot with a more intricate and realistic conception of ethical experience than some of her critics have allowed, often revealing her understanding of the importance of ethics to multiple domains of individual, social, and institutional life. In a ground-clearing philosophical discussion, T. H. Irwin’s “Sympathy and the
Basis of Morality” asks whether sympathy, as opposed to general principles, is indeed the basis for morality in Eliot, and if so, precisely what sort of sympathy is advocated or in play. Irwin usefully distinguishes among different types of sympathy (cognitive, affective, and practical), showing that the most important type in Eliot is practical, insofar as it involves moral evaluation of particular situations (realist fiction is of course uniquely suited to this orienting interest in particularity). Irwin suggests, however, that Eliot does not appear to secure practical sympathy as a basis for morality, given characters such as Tito who use affective sympathy manipulatively and who remain firmly within a selfish outlook. By Irwin’s account, Eliot herself demonstrates that sympathy may not be enough; we may need general principles and the form of moral judgment associated with them (Caleb Garth’s response to Bulstrode is his main example here).

Isobel Armstrong’s “George Eliot, Spinoza, and the Emotions” argues for the formative influence of Spinoza’s Ethices on Eliot’s understanding of the passions and the dynamics affecting social emotions more generally. Eliot worked extensively on her translation of the Ethices in the mid-1850s, directly prior to her turn to fiction-writing. As Armstrong shows, Spinoza’s emphasis on the intense social dynamics of love and hate, compassion and envy, desire and suffering, are revelatory for an understanding of Eliot and help to dislodge the more traditional form of fundamentally rational sympathy that has typically been employed in the analysis of her art. Spinoza’s elaboration of the triangulated nature of the passions, the tense mutual imbrications of what we tend to class as positive and negative affects, and the political economies of love and hate (particularly with respect to class and race) provide profound insight into the more challenging and unsettling aspects of Eliot’s work. Armstrong’s examples include Dorothea’s experience of Will’s interactions with Rosamond in Middlemarch and certain continuities between the two plots in Daniel Deronda, both of which exhibit forms of envy, status-anxiety, and anxious projection. Armstrong shows that Eliot’s idealism is inseparable from her insight into the ineluctability of powerful passions.

Essays in the volume that situate Eliot in relation to law and to economics further establish the sophistication of Eliot’s moral thought, its ongoing engagement with larger social and institutional contexts. Jan-Melissa Schramm’s “George Eliot and the Law” demonstrates that Eliot’s thinking about the law intersects in productive ways with her abiding interests in justice, fairness, redemption, sacrifice, and mercy. While Eliot possessed considerable knowledge of legal history and doctrine, and respected the law’s universalistic aims, her admiration for the law was tempered by an acknowledgment of the limits of legal frameworks. Given the reach and substance of her moral vision, she was especially interested in showing the complexity of motive and action in human drama, something which legal understandings of responsibility and guilt are ill-equipped to capture. Such an insight is certainly present in the presentation of legal assessments of fateful action in both Adam Bede and Felix Holt. Beyond this, Eliot valued forms of moral response, such as hope and mercy, which exceed strict notions of legal accountability (Schramm notes that such responses are often associated
with women and with more private or informal spheres of activity, as in Dorothea’s championing of Lydgate after the affair of Raffles’s death). With Eliot, fiction becomes a type of advocacy that can extend beyond the field of vision of the law.

In “George Eliot and Finance,” Nancy Henry establishes that Eliot’s works reflect not only a wide-ranging understanding of financial affairs, but also a particular interest in broad transitions underway in economic life during the nineteenth century. Financial elements and events are central to many of the narratives (wills, debts, inheritances, investments, gambling, speculations), demonstrating Eliot’s realistic understanding of the way in which finances shape and affect human relations, both personal and impersonal. Eliot gives special attention to how financial transactions or interests can degrade human relations, from the tendency to put money interests above the affections, to forms of slavery and bondage based on financial dependence. In several instances, valued characters refuse the lure of money (Silas Marner would be the prime example here, but of course Esther Lyon and Dorothea also engage in such refusals). Henry shows the ways in which Eliot balances pragmatic and ethical considerations of money and economic relations, and notes as well that Eliot became increasingly aware of financial dealings as her wealth increased due to her success as an author.

The emphasis on ethics in Eliot has often tended to involve the assumption that larger contexts recede in importance as she hones in on the moral energies of individual lives and interpersonal relations. Many readings of Eliot have charged that politics in her novels are relinquished in favor of ethics; such readings typically class her as a conservative, or at best a conservative liberal. Contributions to this volume usefully reframe these longstanding characterizations of Eliot. In “George Eliot and Politics,” Carolyn Lesjak argues that Eliot’s emphasis on the interrelated aspects of social life expresses a deeply political conception of the world. For Lesjak, this political view is best understood as a politics of the common(s) and of the commonplace, and it is grounded on a materialist conception of character and of social life. Refusing limited conceptions of Eliot as conservative or liberal, Lesjak points instead toward the radical potential of Eliot’s art. Through a close consideration of Eliot’s representation of character (and in particular her interest in typicality, commonness, and the unheroic), as well as her interest in forms of indebtedness to others and to the world, Lesjak illuminates Eliot’s view of social interdependence.

A similar reconsideration of what have been viewed as politically limiting or conservative features of Eliot’s work also animates the contributions by Josephine McDonagh and Daniel Malachuk. In “Imagining Locality and Affiliation: George Eliot’s Villages,” McDonagh revisits the portrayal of rural and village life in Eliot, arguing against those readings, inaugurated in John W. Cross’s *George Eliot’s Life as Related in her Letters and Journals*, that see Eliot as nostalgically committed to England’s past. McDonagh establishes manifold ways in which Eliot’s representation of rural and village life registers historical change and promotes ideals of social cohesion and moral response. Insisting on the influence of two disparate sources on Eliot’s thinking about
villages—Mary Russell Mitford’s serial tales about village life (*Our Village*) and Sir Henry Maine’s legal and historical work on the transition from status to contract—McDonagh shows that Eliot’s searching understanding of social and moral life is evident in her representational strategies (which typically combine situated and observer perspectives), in her sophisticated treatment of affiliation and inheritance, and in her adaptation of the village concept to the pressures and networks of an increasingly wide and changing world. McDonagh’s treatment of Eliot captures at once her strong investment in rootedness and affiliation, especially as they bear upon the moral life, as well as her ongoing encounter, from the early to the late work, with the conditions of modernity.

Daniel Malachuk’s “George Eliot’s Liberalism” also addresses elements of Eliot’s thought that have characteristically been associated with traditionalism or pastoralism. Placing Eliot in relation to republican theory, Malachuk argues that Eliot’s sense of the ethico-political life is oriented toward practices and sites that might be comprehended by an enlarged conception of *oikos* (household, family) rather than by the traditional *polis* associated with state-based forms of citizenship. Focusing on the significance Eliot accords to domestic life, marriage, labor, and place, Malachuk reconstructs a powerful conception of civic virtue in Eliot, one that has been lost to view in accounts that impose a narrow conception of liberalism, and of politics generally, on her work. Concentrating on *Felix Holt* and *Middlemarch*, and drawing on disparate influences and thinkers from the liberal tradition, Malachuk helps us to see anew the implications of the narrator’s closing assertion that the “effect of [Dorothea’s] being on those around her was incalculably diffusive” (qtd. on 381). Similarly, he casts in a new and more politically consequential light Caleb Garth’s mode of work, and reconceives the transformative understanding of marriage that is at play in both novels. The theoretical influences underlying Malachuk’s understanding of *oikos* in Eliot range from political philosophy to recent ecocriticism.

Laura Green asks us to reconsider the political implications of Eliot’s presentation of women, gender, and sexuality. In “George Eliot: Gender and Sexuality,” Green begins by noting the oft-remarked gap between Eliot’s own life and her lack of commitment to feminist positions. Green insists that this gap is partially closed by the fact that a conception of women’s suffering, linked specifically to crises of desire and vocation, grounds Eliot’s realism. While men’s vocational struggles are also anatomized in the novels, their experiences lack what Green refers to as “the conclusive significance of women’s suffering and loss” (394). Moreover, while many critics have found the lack of fulfillment among Eliot’s heroines disappointing, the rendition of the bleak conditions facing aspiring and unconventional women itself bespeaks a feminist consciousness. Beyond this, we can see explorations of sexuality and desire in some of Eliot’s work, particularly in relation to the noble heroines. Invoking Katherine Bond Stockton’s work on Eliot, Green concludes that Eliot’s works invite queer critical analysis, especially given their important departures from traditional heterosexual norms.
In “The Cosmopolitan Eliot,” Bruce Robbins establishes the context for a deeper understanding of Eliot’s divided attitude toward cosmopolitanism. On the one hand, there is clear evidence that Eliot’s scale of aspiration tends not to extend beyond the nation, and that she is committed to the importance of local affiliations and loyalties as the ground upon which moral development rests (for Eliot, indeed, certain forms of cosmopolitanism are simply unlivable, from a moral point of view). On the other hand, Eliot recognizes at key moments the importance of a critical cosmopolitanism able to register the moral problems of imperialism and colonialism. Often such moments of critique are oblique, as in the case of Mr. Brooke’s speech on the hustings in *Middlemarch*. We can also find evidence of Eliot’s ambivalence in her character system, most notably in *Daniel Deronda*, where the eponymous hero is at once an ideal and a pathology, and Gwendolen Harleth represents cosmopolitanism as malaise.

While previous work on Eliot’s cosmopolitanism has tended to favor *Daniel Deronda*, Robbins redirects our attention to *Middlemarch*, in which Dorothea’s consciousness becomes something of a filter for the pressures of cosmopolitanism, in both its threatening and critical forms (the former is evident in her experiences in Rome, the latter in the novel’s opening discussion of the jewels and those who make and sell them). Robbins concludes by suggesting that Eliot’s own investments in India opened her thinking to non-stereotypical understandings of foreign labor.

Hina Nazar’s “The Continental Eliot” revisits the international dimensions of Eliot’s art and thinking from the perspective of intellectual history, exploring the continuities between the continental philosophical tradition, especially in its Hegelian formations, and recent and influential theoretical trends in the humanities which have stressed the situated nature of action and the limited powers of individual agency. Nazar argues that while Eliot is certainly interested in the importance of situated agency and embedded existence, as are the Hegelian critics of Kant, she is also committed to maintaining the importance of individual experience and particularly the capacity of the individual for reflective agency. Nazar sees this emphasis as in large part producing her favoring of fiction as a mode of representation, insofar as it allows for the portrayal of concrete individuals within larger communities and social formations. Indeed, Eliot’s novels contain several examples of individuals who move beyond an excessive dependence on others and toward a higher degree of self-scrutiny. For Nazar, Eliot’s work serves as an important counterweight to a line of thinking that develops from Hegel up through the critics of Enlightenment including pragmatists, communitarians, and certain post-structuralists. Throughout she shows the centrality of Eliot’s critique of religion to her understanding of the importance of autonomy and self-actualization.

While Nazar’s essay stresses the critical function of Eliot’s relation to religion, Simon During’s “George Eliot and Secularism” presents an Eliot who was at once secular and spiritual, dedicated to immanent life or conditions of finitude, but with a profound interest in acknowledging forces that we associate with the religious life. Interestingly, while much of Eliot’s thinking led her away from an emphasis on formal religion, her political commitment to community prompted an appreciation of the