

## Symposium: George Eliot, Philosopher

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### ADAM BEDE'S DUTCH REALISM AND THE NOVELIST'S POINT OF VIEW

**Abstract.** In her first novel, *Adam Bede* (1859), George Eliot offered the first systematic defense of her literary aesthetic. Eliot turned to early modern Dutch painting to justify her choice to render the quotidian life of the non-elite, and thereby provocatively extended philosophical and literary approaches to representation. Whereas Hegel's wariness toward the Dutch painterly aesthetic participates in modern philosophy's quest to transcend the mundane, Eliot's celebration of the mundane reveals the sublimity of everyday experience, and helps us overcome the "philosophy-as-epistemology" that, in Richard Rorty's argument, characterizes and limits modern thought.

#### I

HEGEL WAS AMBIVALENT ABOUT Dutch genre painting's uncanny ability to find beauty in daily life. The philosopher regarded the Dutch painterly aesthetic as Romanticism *avant la lettre*, and classifies it as such in his *Lectures on Aesthetics*, under the section entitled "Die romantischen Künste [The Romantic arts]."<sup>1</sup> Dutch art, in Hegel's reading, is marred by many shortcomings. The most prominent among

these are the “subjective stubbornness [*subjective Beschlossenheit*]” that prevents this art from attaining to the “free and ideal forms of expression” that marked the productions of Italian artists such as Raphael (VA, p. 124). In contradistinction to their Italian counterparts, Dutch artists in Hegel’s view are apt to penetrate deeply to the core of individual identity. Doubting that this penetration is a good thing, Hegel declares his preference for the Italian school over the German-Dutch aesthetic. According to the German philosopher, “the Dutch masters could not attain to the same beauty of form and freedom of soul [*Schönheit der Form und Freiheit der Seele*]” in their pictures as did the Italians (VA, p. 125). Particularly notable for Hegel is the Dutch school’s depiction of the Christ child and the detail with which they dwell on Jesus’s crucified body. These details do not eviscerate all aesthetic value from the Dutch aesthetic, but they do diminish its significance when compared to the Italian school in Hegel’s history of aesthetic perception.

In his homage to the Dutch school of painting, Bulgarian literary theorist Tzvetan Todorov contests Hegel’s implication that the Dutch style of representation is inferior to the “objective” mode of representation privileged by the Hegelian dialectic. “When Steen, Ter Borch, De Hooch, Vermeer, Rembrandt, and Hals enable us to discover the beauty of things in things [*la beauté des choses, dans les choses*],” writes Todorov, “they do not act as alchemists transforming just any kind of mud. Rather, they understand that the woman who traverses our courtyard or the mother who peels an apple rivals in beauty the Olympian goddesses, and they incite us to partake of this conviction.”<sup>2</sup> Appropriating Hegel’s teleology for non-Hegelian aesthetic ends, Todorov notes that art in the Dutch tradition does not “replace a segment of existence, conventionally regarded as traditionally beautiful, by another, which has now taken its place.” Rather than substituting Italian transcendence with Teutonic banality, the Dutch aesthetic at its best teaches us how beauty can “impregnate the totality of existence” (EQ, p. 180). Commonplace divisions between body and mind, flesh and spirit, content and form, and the world and its representation, are hereby collapsed.

Given recent attempts to align seventeenth-century Dutch painting with the realist novel’s aesthetic of the quotidian, it is not surprising to see one of this genre’s most philosophically ambitious practitioners, George Eliot, associate her literary aesthetic with the Dutch school.<sup>3</sup> Eliot embraced this aesthetic early in her career, most famously in the polemical interlude that appears midway through the novel *Adam Bede* (1859). Here Eliot declares emphatically that, notwithstanding the

contempt of “lofty-minded people,” she prefers to consecrate her art to “faithful pictures of a monotonous homely existence.”<sup>4</sup> Only two years prior, Eliot had written in protest to her editor John Blackwood, who had urged her to accommodate then-current standards of taste, that “any one who detests the Dutch school in general will hardly appreciate fairly the merits of a particular painting.”<sup>5</sup> Now, in her first full-length novel, Eliot embraces a literary gaze that turns

without shrinking, from cloud-borne angels, from prophets, sibyls, and heroic warriors, 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 necessities of life to her. (*AB*, p. 176)

Since 1972, Eliot scholars have identified the ekphrastic image conjured in these words with Gerrit Dou’s *Das Tischgebet der Spinnerin* (The Spinner’s Prayer; fig. 1), a painting Eliot first saw in Munich’s Alte Pinakothek during her travels to Germany in the company of her second husband, George Henry Lewes.<sup>6</sup> Scholarly accounts have not always registered the philosophical significance of Eliot’s aesthetic turn, informed as it was by a decision to “exhibit nothing as it should be . . . only . . . to *exhibit some things as they have been or are*” (*L*, vol. 2, p. 362; emphasis added). One aspect of Eliot’s aesthetic turn was political, as evidenced by John Ruskin’s damning comment, penned long after the authoress’s death, that he could see in Eliot’s novels merely the consummation of “the English Cockney School.” In Ruskin’s estimation, Eliot’s characters were “picked up from behind the counter and out of the gutter,” and thus unworthy of the attention of a proper novelist.<sup>7</sup> As with the Dutch school, this political transformation in the understanding of what sorts of subjects merited representation was tied to an equally profound shift in the formal techniques that were used to bring such representations to fulfillment. In seventeenth-century Dutch painting, as in the mid-nineteenth-century European novel, the very craft of art was made to accommodate the new ideological conditions of its production.

As Eliot knew well, representation in art negates all pretensions to transparency. The question of who is to be represented is as ideologically fraught as are the techniques employed in the act of representation. As late as 1979, philosopher Richard Rorty could maintain that the entire history of post-seventeenth-century European philosophy was based on a



Fig. 1. Gerrit Dou, *Das Tischgebet der Spinnerin* (The Spinner's Prayer)

misguided attempt “to work through the consequences of a conception of knowledge as *accurate representation*, a concept rooted in the metaphor of the mind as the mirror of nature.”<sup>8</sup> Eliot’s aesthetic polemic in *Adam Bede* responds to the problem Rorty identified a century later, and which he labeled “philosophy-as-epistemology,” while aiming to replace it with his own more contingent view of the relation between representation and the represented world (*PMN*, pp. 136–39, 163). Anticipating Rorty, the ironist philosopher of contingent modernity, Eliot’s poetics resist the construction of philosophy as an epistemological mirror in favor of what, in the text of *Adam Bede*, emerges as a symbology of the window. Whereas modern philosophy has traditionally aspired to reflect reality with mirrorlike accuracy, the modern novel as envisioned by Eliot and Rorty aims at extending the viewer’s gaze, on analogy with the more opaque optics of windows. In this essay, I examine how Eliot’s aesthetics contrasts the novelist’s window to the philosopher’s mirror, diegetically,

through her narration, and mimetically, through the visual associations her protagonists bear.<sup>9</sup>

Throughout her oeuvre, Eliot systematically straddled the boundary between literature and philosophy. The novels of her second creative phase, *Romola* (1863), *Felix Holt* (1866), *Middlemarch* (1871–72), and *Daniel Deronda* (1876), have most frequently been studied as contributions to nineteenth-century intellectual history.<sup>10</sup> By contrast, the early novels *Adam Bede* (1859), *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), and *Silas Marner* (1861) are often consigned to the dustbin of idyllic romance.<sup>11</sup> Against the tide of this critical prejudice, I consider how *Adam Bede* engages in a centuries-old conversation between literature and philosophy about the limits and possibilities of representation. The dichotomy between literature and philosophy assumed in the received narrative of Eliot's movement across genres and discourses collapses upon closer scrutiny.<sup>12</sup> Further, Eliot's engagement with Dutch realism helps us to understand how literature does the work of philosophy, in part by calling philosophy's parameters into question. Before the novelist-philosopher's explication of the relation between philosophy and literature can be clearly understood, it is first necessary to trace the rise of utilitarian thought, a movement that ran parallel to Eliot's intellectual development.

## II

In 1851, Eliot accepted a position as subeditor of the influential radical British journal *Westminster Review*, to which the utilitarian philosopher John Stuart Mill was a leading contributor. She continued to serve on this journal's editorial board, and was soon promoted to editor-in-chief. Eliot held this position until 1854, when she decided to devote herself full time to writing fiction. Many of the essays Mill published during the years while Eliot was on the staff of the *Westminster Review* would have introduced her to the ideas that animate her fiction.

In an essay written only one year prior to *Adam Bede*, Mill anticipated many of the core ideas concerning theodicy and divinity in Eliot's novels generally and in *Adam Bede* specifically. As the title "The Utility of Religion," indicates, Mill's philosophical system instrumentalized religion to utilitarian morality. While we cannot be certain that Eliot had read this posthumously published essay, a comparison of the two texts reveals a convergence between the views of the novelist and philosopher.<sup>13</sup> Given their agreement on basic metaphysical and moral issues, the divergences between the philosopher and the novelist offer an interesting case study

in the differences between two distinct if related discourses, literature and philosophy.

Mill's utilitarianism arose in a time and place when the old truths were corroding from within. Theism could no longer uphold the moral framework of Victorian society. Morality had to be justified—and in many respects created—again by reality's new legislators. Mill responded by attempting to justify the ethics he wished to propagate on rational grounds. Eliot responded to the philosopher's plea by turning to Dutch art and locating the capacity for ethical adjudication within the morally reflexive self. Judging by the entry in her Dresden traveling journal that she penned at the same time that she was in the midst of composing the aesthetic polemic in *Adam Bede*, Eliot's conviction that morality could not be reduced to rational experience was more indebted to the Dutch painters Teniers, Ryckart, Dou, Terburg, and van Mieris than to Kant (*L*, vol. 2, pp. 48–49).

Mill asks in his essay whether religion can be justified in an age when its claims are either unverifiable or patently false. Although his final answer is negative, Mill offers along the way a sympathetic exploration of the function and use of religion that would have appealed to an unbelieving but reverent mind such as George Eliot's. Curiously, Mill waits until the end of his essay to enumerate his objections to the Christian construction of God's nature. The crucial issue is not simply God's existence, but the moral implications of a system such as Christianity that postulates divinity. God's existence can neither be proven nor definitively disproven, Mill asserts. Absolute truth is inaccessible to humans, but we can reason with conviction about morality. The most productive line of inquiry is not the question of God's existence but rather the merits of the God specific religions posit. Mill asks: Does this God, in his many manifestations, merit worship? Mill believes that, far from improving character, worship, particularly as practiced by the Christian church, dulls our sensibilities to true morality. Mill ponders how, if believers are asked to direct their "highest worship" to a being who is responsible for creating hell, that same religion could refrain from distorting "right and wrong"?<sup>14</sup> For Mill, this is a logical impossibility: the very injunction to worship the inventor of hell is itself an abrogation of morality, and Christianity is damned by its own terms. "The utility of religion," Mill trenchantly observes, "did not need to be asserted until the arguments for its truth had in a great measure ceased to convince" (*TER*, p. 70).<sup>15</sup> Once religion's truth-value is eviscerated, as it decisively had been, for Mill at least, by the nineteenth-century, all that is left to

the philosopher is to excavate its moral legacy and to determine whether the myths propagated by religion can be reconciled to the social good.

For Mill, belief in a Christian God is inconsistent with integrity of character. The compromise consists in more than epistemological laxity. The intellectual grounds of religion are “backed by moral bribery” and entail the “subordination of the understanding” (*TER*, p. 71). Belief in a Christian God, even if one could accept the postulate for God’s existence, is seen by Mill as a compact with the Devil. In place of devilish doctrine, Mill offers the “boundless power of education” (*TER*, p. 82). Knowledge is Mill’s substitute for religion, but what of those wishing to be saved who have no access to education? According to Mill, “there is one moral contradiction inseparable from every form of Christianity, which no ingenuity can resolve and no sophistry explain away. It is, that so precious a gift, bestowed on a few, should have been withheld from the many” (*TER*, p. 115). Christianity’s confinement to the elect is its most damning moral flaw. What of those from whom the enlightenment of religion is hidden? Are they to be cast aside and forgotten?

Mill divides his discussion of post-Christian morality into two parts. First, he aims to determine whether the social benefits of religion can come from another less corrupt source. In the second section—“more important” (*TER*, p. 77) in the author’s own estimation—Mill finds in secular society a substitute for the personal consolations of religion. If this “more important” offering compels less powerfully than did his offering in the first part, that is because the philosopher has set himself a more difficult task. Mill maintains that religion has never been the predominant motive in most people’s lives, regardless of their claims to the contrary. Actions motivated by what passes for religion can be classified in three ways, according to Mill: education, authority, and public opinion. Education is the best motive, especially when it involves remembering what was learned during one’s youth. “It is especially characteristic of early education,” writes Mill, that it possesses “what is much more difficult for later convictions to obtain—command over feelings” (*TER*, p. 81). In Mill’s view, education at its best, if “inculcated from childhood” (*TER*, p. 81), is as effective at shaping character as religious belief.

After education, authority comes second in Mill’s moral hierarchy of motivations for human behavior. Authority, according to Mill, is “the evidence on which the mass of mankind believe everything which they are said to know, except facts of which their own senses have taken cognizance” (*TER*, p. 78). The philosopher does not exempt enlightened

intellectuals from the powerful influence of authority; “even the wisest” unquestioningly accept on authority “all those truths of science, or facts in history, or in life, of which they have not personally examined the proofs” (*TER*, p. 78). The ability to distinguish right from wrong derives less from intuitive contact with God than from common opinion, as Mill argues by citing the eighteenth-century German Romantic poet Novalis (d. 1801): “My belief has gained infinitely to me from the moment when one other human being has begun to believe the same” (*TER*, p. 79, Mill’s citation). According to this view, our convictions lack meaning until they are shared by others.

The third and most powerful motivation identified by Mill is public opinion. Mill claims that most people’s consciences are constituted exclusively on the basis of this third value. If public opinion unanimously equates murder with virtue, the average voter will likely side with this consensus. It would not be necessary to consult any alternative moral compass, or to look inward for guidance. Mill does not fail to incorporate courageous individuals who cling tenaciously to their beliefs into his normative anthropology of the human. Such people, he says, still submit to human authority when public opinion unanimously points to one solution. From a human perspective, the most infallible source for truth is what consensus assumes to be true. Humans are gifted with the ability to perceive the logic that governs consensus as fallacious; they cannot however see beyond the fallacies propagated by this form of public authority. Hence, the critique of consensus is purely negative. No one, not even the philosopher, can avoid depending on authority when confronting the most consequential truths identified by Mill.

Mill could not discredit Christianity as a foundation for morality without proposing a new idol. Borrowing from Comte’s *System of Positive Polity* (1843), subtitled *Treatise on Sociology Instituting the Religion of Humanity*, Mill’s ethical system replaces Christianity by a “Religion of Humanity” (*TER*, p. 111). In his treatise, Comte had defined religion as “the state of complete harmony peculiar to human life . . . when all the parts of Life are ordered in their natural relations to each other.”<sup>16</sup> Such harmony was attractive to Mill insofar as it could be easily reconciled to his utilitarian philosophy. Mill made productive use of Comte’s Religion of Humanity throughout the *Three Essays*, particularly in “The Utility of Religion.”

## III

Let us now turn to Eliot's dilemma, as filtered through the prism of what Hegel refers to as Dutch realism's "concretely pious worldliness [*Weltlichen konkret-fromm*]" (VA, p. 122), a worldliness that attests, as Hegel laments, to the secularization of contemporary life. Eliot attempted in *Adam Bede* to bear witness to the moral lives of her characters through recourse to nonmetaphysical mimetic modes, paralleling Rorty's reaction against the representationalist philosophy of his time. Significantly, Eliot's nonrepresentational mimesis could only take place through an engagement with Dutch realism. The philosophy of Eliot's era could not sustain her turn against representational aesthetics. Even Feuerbach, the German thinker whom Eliot translated into English, and who scandalized his contemporaries by making of theodicy an anthropological question, fell short.<sup>17</sup>

Like his author, Mr. Irwine, the rector of Hayslope, where *Adam Bede* is set, does not believe in God. Never addressed by a title befitting his rank in the novel, the rector believes "that the religious benefits the peasant drew from the church where his fathers worshipped" had little if anything to do with "a clear understanding of the Liturgy or the sermon" (AB, p. 76). Noting that Mr. Irwine "thought the custom of baptism more important" than the doctrine to which it corresponded, Eliot painstakingly emphasizes that the rector did more good for the parish than doctrine and catechism alone could ever have done. More interested in human character than in religion, Mr. Irwine "was fonder of church history than of divinity" (AB, p. 76).

The paradox raised by Eliot's representation, both as a narrator and through the complex personality of Mr. Irwine, was already immanent in Mill's and Comte's theodicies. Both philosophers argued against irrational belief in divinity. At the same time, Mill and Comte proposed moral systems, the coherence of which were premised on more than instrumental values. The philosophers' compromises with established religion generated secular moralities on Christian bases. Eliot overcame this paradox, intrinsic to these utilitarian systems of unbelief that presupposed the existence of non-utilitarian belief systems, when she imitated the Dutch school and saturated her aesthetic in the earthly and unmetaphysical visions of Teniers, Ryckaert, Dou, Terburg, and van Mieris. The hermeneutic paradox that requires utilitarian reductions to be grounded in non-utilitarian realities could not be resolved within either Mill's or Comte's system. It was left to the novelist, the composer

of fictions, to do what philosophical positivism could not achieve: Eliot embraced an aesthetics that predated the advent of what Rorty calls “philosophy-as-epistemology.”

Rorty’s genealogy for “philosophy-as-epistemology” is simple: “Descartes’s invention of the mind—his coalescence of beliefs and sensations into Lockean ideas . . . provided a field of inquiry which seemed ‘prior’ to the subjects on which the ancient philosophers had had opinions. Further, it provided a field within which *certainty*, as opposed to mere *opinion*, was possible” (*PMN*, pp. 136–67). This latter move is, by Rorty’s account, the founding error of modern philosophy. Suddenly, certainty was considered a category apart from received belief, while the beliefs humans held in common, most consequentially if least directly among them religion, were subjected to philosophic scrutiny through the Cartesian *cogito ergo sum*.

#### IV

Hegel’s discomfort with the post-Reformation portrayal of Jesus has already been noted. The account given in his *Lectures on Aesthetics* both eerily anticipates Eliot’s aesthetic polemic in *Adam Bede* and lays bare the division that cuts through the philosopher’s attitude toward the visual art produced in his homeland. Hegel argues that, once we understand Dutch realism on its own terms, “we will no longer suppose that the Dutch masters should have portrayed only the old [Greek] gods, myths, and fables, or the Madonna, the Crucifixion, martyrs, Popes, and saints” (*VA*, p. 130). Dutch realism’s achievement, Hegel notes, was to forge a vision of humanity as such without a metaphysical supplement. Such paintings tell us “what the human spirit [*Geist*] and character consists of, and what that *man* and *this man* is [was der *Mensch* und was *dieser Mensch* ist]” (*VA*, p. 130). The particularity of Dutch realism, even and especially on Hegel’s account, runs strongly against the grain of the Cartesian split between the world that exists outside the mind and the world the mind claims to represent with scientific precision. This particularity, which cuts through the content / form divide and into the very core of Eliot’s aesthetic, also runs against the grain of the Hegelian system of values that privileges the whole over the fragment and the general over the particular.

One more voice should be joined to this chorus of thinkers who have weighed in on the boundary-transcending work done by the literary imagination as in relation to modern epistemology. “To a greater or

lesser extent," Bakhtin writes, "every novel is a dialogized system . . . Language in the novel not only represents, but itself serves as the object of representation. Novelistic discourse is always criticizing itself."<sup>18</sup> The Russian theorist defines the novel through contrasts with other genres, including the epic, the lyric, and the drama. On a more discursive level, the novel also contrasts with specific discourses and disciplines, including philosophy. But whereas the novels of Dostoevsky, Bakhtin's paradigmatic novelist, are well known for their dependence on and critiques of nineteenth-century philosophy, Eliot's equally penetrating engagements with the philosophical utilitarianism of her time have been strangely severed from the study of her artistry.

Eliot herself affirmed Bakhtin's credo in a letter to Charles Bray in 1859, the same year *Adam Bede* was published: "The only effect I ardently long to produce by my writings is, that those who read them should be better able to *imagine* and to *feel* the pains and joys of those who differ from themselves in everything but the broad fact of being struggling, erring, human creatures" (*L*, vol. 3, pp. 110–11). While Eliot emphasized the production of affect in her readers, her professional ambition was sustained by a philosophical critique. Eliot aimed to achieve through her art what her criticism did not do: to render the particularity of human experience by impregnating the totality of existence—and not merely those aspects of it that had already been glorified by hierarchal aesthetic systems—with sublimity. In one of his most luminous passages, Hegel evokes the paintings of Pieter Bruegel when he refers to such visual evocations as "the Sunday of life, that equalizes everything and removes all evil" (*VA*, p. 130). And yet Hegel does not succeed in breaching his metaphysical determinism. Just as the antirepresentationalist Rorty replaced a philosophy invested in the "mirror of nature" with a window opening onto uncertain vistas, so did our novelist counter the representational fallacy with an aesthetics drawn from the philosophically peripheral visual discourse of Dutch realism.

If Eliot the novelist's first priority is to do aesthetic justice to the minutiae of life, it follows that the concept of beauty upheld by this literary genre will likewise diverge. Hence she proclaims in her polemic: "let us love that other beauty too, which lies in no secret of proportion" (*AB*, p. 177). As evidenced by another painting by Gerrit Dou that shaped Eliot's conception of art, *Young Woman at Her Toilet* (fig. 2), windows accommodate the porous mimesis that violates representationalist proportions more readily than mirrors. Windows opens vistas; they expand, revise, and transform. Mirrors, by contrast, enclose, reproducing correct

proportions while at the same time generating the illusion that the object of representation is a self-sufficient entity. Unlike mirrors, which capture only the image of those who glance in their direction, windows mediate between both the observer and the subject of the observer's observation. A figurative wall placed between subject and object, a window draws attention to the mediated nature of any act of representation. Mirrors by contrast obscure this panoptic complexity by producing the illusion of the viewing subject's unmediated encounter with the object viewed. It is not difficult to appreciate how the "mirror of nature" metaphor proved so potent a symbol for representationalist philosophy; only a little more scrutiny is required to see how Dutch realism undermines mimetically simplistic foundations.

At the beginning of book 2, the narrator scorns readers offended by the unorthodox Mr. Irwine. Tongue in cheek, she suggests that she would put edifying sermons into the pastor's mouth if she "held it the highest vocation of the novelist to represent things as they never have been and never will be" (*AB*, p. 174). This narrator, however, will not compromise on her artistic ambition merely to satisfy a nineteenth-century preference for representations that function more as mirrors than as windows. In her own words, the narrator's "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 her mind (*AB*, p. 174). Eliot's account is faithful not to reality as such, but to the mirrors that frame her characters' lives. The reference to mirroring implies that her characters are already bound up in an artificial system of representation. The mirroring imagery further contrasts with Comtean objectivism. The novelist's goal is less to portray reality as it is than to depict, as in a window, the many the mirrors reality generates.

Mill argued that morality's weathervane must be located in human needs rather than in religious precepts. Eliot's characters earn their goodness; no one is predestined to good or evil until he or she makes moral choices about how life should be lived. "Our deeds determine us, as much as we determine our deeds," the narrator declares after Adam discovers Arthur Donnithorne in the garden kissing his beloved Hetty Sorrel. (This statement interestingly revises Feuerbach's famous dictum that "a person is what he eats [*der Mensch ist, was er isst*]" with a less materialistic account of human identity.)<sup>19</sup> The novelist continues: "Until we know . . . the peculiar combination of outward with inward facts, which constitutes a man's critical actions, it will be better not to think ourselves wise about his character" (*AB*, p. 301). Eliot's aphorism



Fig. 2. Gerrit Dou, *Young Woman at Her Toilet*

elaborates on Mill's statement that "the only mode in which any active principle in human nature can be cultivated" is "by habitual exercise" (*TER*, p. 111). The novelistic claim, however, is more penetrating than the utilitarian philosopher's prescription, and usefully accounts for the workings of free will in the context of human fallibility. The struggle in Eliot's novels is not between acting virtuously or being careless of others. The real struggle on which her plots and characters pivot is that moment when the moral impulse flashes across her characters' mental universe and they commit themselves to one side or the other. Eliot is interested in the moment when a will that is free agrees to live through the consequences of its actions.

Eliot's concept of human goodness presumes freedom of the will. The more a person engages in evil, the more natural becomes its enactment. The more we compel ourselves to be generous, the more natural such behavior becomes. Our choices shape us in the very act of choosing. Constrained by the limits inherent in the self, freedom equals willful bondage. Eliot's narrative style bears out these contentions. She draws attention to the role of free will in the initial choices we make for good or evil. When we cast our lot with one side or the other, we are bound by our affinity for that side. But our fate is not fixed until we choose of our own free will, and even afterwards, minds can be changed. In choosing, we are chosen. Our choices choose us. So far, this line of reasoning is entirely consistent with utilitarian, not to mention existentialist, morality. But differences become apparent as the novel proceeds.

Hetty Sorrel's cousin Dinah Morris is the second orphan in *Adam Bede*, after Hetty herself. The novel's structure deliberately parallels Dinah and Hetty, whose common biographical inheritance only accentuates the antithetical nature of their characters. Upon first learning that Hetty is an orphan, the reader's first impulse is to account for her crime of killing her unwanted baby through the lens of her social circumstances, but we need to look more closely at the context in which her orphanhood occurs. Dinah was not born to better circumstances than Hetty, yet her character is radically unlike that of her impetuous cousin. Both cousins come from factory-polluted industrial towns, and neither had the fortune to grow up in a household with two loving parents. Both find homes with people who love and cherish them. The cousins' parallel childhood histories do little to explicate the divergences in their characters.

As if their parallel biographies were not enough to impress on our imaginations the similarities and contrasts between Hetty and Dinah, the two women's lives are frequently juxtaposed in the narrative. Consider the novelistic presentation of the cousins' reaction to the death of Adam's father. In "Hetty's World," the first chapter following this event, we see how little room there is in Hetty's heart to sympathize with Adam, who loves her more than anyone else in the world. In the following chapter, "Dinah Visits Lisbeth," we witness how much room there is in Dinah's heart to sympathize with people she barely knows. Dinah and Hetty are also the two women in this novel who change Adam's life. The contrast between the two relationships is striking: whereas Hetty delights in being courted and does not reciprocate Adam's love, Dinah

loves Adam on her own initiative, independent of any expectation of receiving in return the love she bestows on others.

Further adding to the train of mirror images, Hetty dresses like Dinah when she comes to dinner one night, thereby shocking her whole family. She takes off her girlish clothes at Adam's suggestion, after he has praised Dinah's "natural" beauty. It is unclear whether Hetty is merely playfully assuming Dinah's identity, or whether her physical metamorphosis is indicative of a permanent transformation. After she has left the dinner table, the consensus is that Hetty could never fit inside Dinah's clothes, that her beauty, artificial and superficial as it is, suits her alone. Hetty spends her last days before exile to Australia (punishment for murdering her child) in Dinah's arms. Dinah accompanies her cousin to the scaffold before her sentence is commuted to exile in a last-minute reprieve. Dinah's attachment to Hetty exemplifies more than generic love for her fellow human. Dinah is pervaded with an awareness of the special mission she has to accomplish with Hetty. Perhaps she knows that Hetty needs her more than she needs any other person on earth.

The mirror/window contrast is played out most intensely in a telling narrative interlude that foreshadows the events that follow. Dinah gazes out on the village of Hayslope through a window lit by the moon, "delighting in her bedroom window" during this moment of reverie, because it gives her "a wide view over the fields" (*AB*, p. 157). Simultaneously, as the narrator's bird's eye view informs us, Hetty is overcome by "an ill temper with her looking-glass" (*AB*, p. 149) whenever she gets dressed. Hetty does not appreciate her mirror as much as Dinah appreciates her window because of the "numerous dim blotches" that mar its surface (*AB*, p. 150). Rather than "swinging backwards and forwards" as a mirror should, Hetty's looking glass is "fixed in an upright position" and allows only for "one good view of her head and neck" (*AB*, p. 150), thereby leaving her desire to gaze on her own body unconsummated. The mimesis generated by Hetty's mirror is clearly inferior to the more fluid but also more dynamic prismatic imagery generated by Dinah's window.

All characters in *Adam Bede* have peculiar relationships to either the reflective capacities of mirrors or the vista-extending capacities of windows. Inasmuch as he is Hetty's doppelgänger, it is not surprising to discover Arthur Donnithorne's attachment to the mirror. The first time we see him alone, Arthur moves, as Hetty would have liked to do, "about his dressing-room seeing his well-looking British person reflected in the old-fashioned mirrors" (*AB*, p. 126). At the same time, he holds

“a discussion with himself,” yet another indication of narcissism that makes him a good match for Hetty, whose child he unlawfully fathers (*AB*, p. 126). Further suggestive of Arthur’s kinship with mirrors, when he visits Hayslope’s rector Mr. Irwine in search of guidance, the rector, who also happens to be Arthur’s godfather, tells him that breakfast is the best time of the day because “no dust has settled on one’s mind then, and it presents a clear mirror to the rays of things” (*AB*, p. 168). And yet the mirror invoked by Mr. Irwine has a double signification. Far from reflecting himself, as with the mirrors favored by Arthur and Hetty, the mirror Mr. Irwine admires illuminates, prismatically, the “rays of things.” For its ability to illuminate new vistas rather than simply to reflect, Mr. Irwine’s mirror approximates most closely Dinah’s window.

When they gaze in their mirrors, Hetty and Arthur see only themselves, skewed in the light of solipsistic and decontextualized representations. They do not see the social surroundings in which their selves are enclosed. Most crucially, they are oblivious of the mirror’s frame. Eliot reminds us that, while they may appear at first glance as ideal mediums for literary realism, mirrors do not necessarily depict things as they are, but rather magnify objects that fall into their line of vision while foreshortening the surrounding environs. The right depiction depends on the viewer’s eyes. Both windows and mirrors foster the viewing of images out of proportion to their actual place in scheme of things, but while windows make this distortion visible, mirrors hide the proportional shifts that are intrinsic to the representational process.

With their glass panes crosshatched with iron bars that run directly through the radius of the representations they generate, window frames do not allow the viewer to forget the artificiality inherent in representation itself. By contrast, mirror frames generate airtight circles around the images inscribed on their surfaces, block out surrounding objects, and obscure representation’s artificiality from view. So long as Hetty and Arthur are oblivious to the frames encircling their faces—so long as they see only the image on the mirror’s surface without perceiving all that falls outside the mirror’s frame, and therefore remain oblivious to the social context in which they are embedded—they conflate their own desires with moral righteousness and are incapable of assuming moral responsibility for their actions.

The most perceptive characters in *Adam Bede*, most notably Dinah, rely on windows to access worlds outside their minds. While Hetty’s mirror helps her only to see herself, Dinah’s window affords a panorama of the valley below. On the eve of her departure, rather than immiserat-

ing herself in her own suffering, Dinah remembers “the struggles and weariness” she faced along with those she has met in Hayslope (*AB*, p. 157). While windows invoke foreign landscapes, mirrors reflect egos distorted by narcissism. Turning again to Dou’s *Young Woman at Her Toilet*, we should note the extreme lucidity of the image projected by the window when compared with the image projected by the mirror in the dimly illumined dressing chamber. When it is light outside but dark inside, the window affords a perspective onto the world outside that is no less lucid for the lack of light within. When it is bright inside but dark outside, the window becomes a mirror, and those who look outside see only reflections of themselves. Their vision is transformed by the light that seeps through the window. By contrast, mirrors mechanically reproduce a narrow angle of vision, and their representative capacities are not modulated by the direction of the light. Rather than interacting with its environment, a mirror merely copies. Optically, mirrors foster narcissism. Windows, by contrast, optically foster a sense of community by incorporating physical surroundings; they tell us that our consciousness does not encompass all of reality. A mirror can become a window only when its representational angle is directed away from the observer.

Adam, like Dinah, lives in a world of windows. His views of Hetty occur through the medium of the window, as when “Hetty, once more in her own dress . . . was seated picking currents near the window, where Adam could see her quite well” (*AB*, p. 224). After Hetty has been jailed, Adam takes to gazing out the window again. On one occasion, he looks “fixedly out of the window, apparently turning over some new idea in his mind” (*AB*, p. 408). At no point in the novel does Hetty gaze out a window. The closest she comes to window gazing is on the single occasion when she raises a letter up to a window to capture the light of a moon. In this instance, of course, she merely uses the reflection of the moon coming from the window rather than gazing out the window to the other side. As if in anticipation of her spiritual regeneration, Hetty dreams of returning to the “dairy with the Guelder roses peeping in at the window” (*AB*, p. 361), but never in the story do we find her turning her head toward a window in order to see what lies on the other side.

After Hetty has been found guilty of manslaughter, Dinah visits Adam in the hopes of persuading him to visit Hetty in her cell. Adam responds to Dinah’s request by rising from his chair and looking “away out of the window” (*AB*, p. 433). Adam’s outward, window-mediated gaze precedes his momentous decision to visit Hetty the next day. The characters in *Adam Bede* whose imaginative sympathy runs deepest cast their eyes

on vistas afforded by windows before they act. By contrast, characters blinded with self-love, like Hetty and Arthur, stare at themselves in mirrors as they go about destroying their families and advancing their own interests. Hetty and Arthur fail to understand that, far from being an abstract guide to conduct, morality spontaneously arises from love toward one's fellow humans. It is most effectively induced within *Adam Bede's* moral framework through the vistas projected by windows. It is impossible for a human to be moral, just as it impossible for a philosophy to be coherent, when the mirror's optics dominate representation and everything outside the frame is either ignored or visualized as a mirror of the viewer's self.

In the context of George Eliot's own literary career, *Adam Bede's* windows may seem to yield to the mirrors of *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda*. Many generations of critics have protested against a dosage of philosophy that seems too intense for this early novel to accommodate. Already in 1895, it was suggested that *Adam Bede* marked the moment in Eliot's literary career when the novelist "exhausted herself and her own resources of observation as an eye-witness."<sup>20</sup> Eliot's subsequent output, this now-forgotten critic continued, was marked by too much philosophy and too little artistry. This argument against Eliot's aesthetic misses the most lasting aspect of Eliot's contribution: when the novelist philosophizes, she intervenes in philosophy while extending the novel's capacity for epistemological critique.

Notwithstanding its substantive affinities as well as her debts to Comte, Mill, and Feuerbach, the philosophy that animates Eliot's novelistic aesthetic runs against the grain of nineteenth-century utilitarian ethics. Although they both might have been surprised to find themselves bed-fellows, Eliot belongs in the company of those who, like Rorty, argues for philosophy as a "transitional genre" that bridges the gap between "a religious past, with a place for everything and everything in its place" to a "literary culture, in which we will turn to imaginative literature for ideas about the sorts of persons" we wish to be and the sorts of societies we wish to reside in (*PMN*, p. xxiv). Had the argument been addressed to her directly, Eliot may have dissented from Rorty's contention that questions such as "Does truth exist?" are "false and pointless"<sup>21</sup> inasmuch as the answers we seek from epistemology are already given to us in experience, but her novelistic critique of Comte and Mill amounts to a similarly radical transformation.

1. G. W. F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Aesthetik*, ed. D. H. G. Hotho (Berlin: Duncker und Humblot, 1843), vol. 3, pp. 124–30; hereafter abbreviated *VA*. As indicated below, Hegel's account of the Dutch aesthetic is not uniformly negative.
2. Tzvetan Todorov, *Éloge du Quotidien: Essai sur la peinture hollandaise du XVIIe siècle* (Paris: Adam Biro, 1993), p. 180; hereafter abbreviated *EQ*.
3. For this argument with respect to the realist novel in general, see R. B. Yeazell, *Art of the Everyday: Dutch Painting and the Realist Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008); Mario Praz, *The Hero in Eclipse in Victorian Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956), especially pp. 29–37. For the argument with reference to Eliot in particular, see Hugh Witemeyer, *George Eliot and the Visual Arts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979); Yeazell, pp. 91–24; Praz, pp. 319ff.
4. George Eliot, *Adam Bede* (New York: Penguin Books, 1961), p. 176; hereafter abbreviated *AB*. The novel was of course published pseudonymously, and George Eliot was the pen name for Mary Ann Evans. I refer to the narrator of *Adam Bede* as female only for the sake of convenience, and in the awareness that a nineteenth-century readership would have been perceived the narrator as generically male.
5. J. W. Cross, ed., *George Eliot's Life as Related in Her Letters and Journals*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: William Blackwood, 1885), vol.1, p. 219; hereafter abbreviated *L*.
6. The connection between Dou's painting and Eliot's text was first made in Norma Jean Davis, "Pictorialism in George Eliot's Art" (Ph.D. dissertation, Northwestern University, 1972), p. 71, and, independently, in Bernard Richards, "The Use of the Visual Arts in the Nineteenth-Century Novel" (Ph.D. dissertation, Oxford University, 1972), p. 152.
7. John Ruskin, "Fiction—Fair and Foul," in *On the Old Road: A Collection of Miscellaneous Essays* (London: George Allen, 1885), p. 145. For another typical example of the time, see the anonymous review in *The Crayon* 6 (1859): 324. For a more favorable assessment of the same aspect of Eliot's political significance in the history of British literature, see Raymond Williams, "The Knowable Community in George Eliot's Novels," *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 2/3 (1969): 255–68.
8. Michael Williams, "Introduction to the Thirtieth Anniversary Edition," in Richard Rorty, *Philosophy in the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), p. xiii (emphasis in the original); hereafter abbreviated *PMN*.
9. This distinction follows Gérard Genette, who defines mimesis as "a maximum of information and a minimum of the informer" and diegesis by "the opposite relation" (*Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. Jane Lewin, [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980], p. 166).
10. For the division between the first and second phase of Eliot's creative career, see Mathilde Parlett, "The Influence of Contemporary Criticism on George Eliot," *Studies in Philology* 30 (1933): 103–32.
11. For this division between the early Eliot "influenced by romance" and the later Eliot, influenced by "anatomy," see, inter alia, Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 312.

12. For a tabulation and critique of the dominant schools of Eliot scholarship adhering to the literature/philosophy dichotomy, see U. C. Knoepfelmacher, "George Eliot, Feuerbach, and the Question of Criticism," *Victorian Studies* 7 (1964): 306–9.
13. For discussion of Eliot's possible familiarity with Mill's *Three Essays*, see T. R. Wright, "George Eliot and Positivism: A Reassessment," *The Modern Language Review* 76 (1981): 257–72.
14. John Stuart Mill, *Three Essays on Religion* (New York: Greenwood Press Publishers, 1969), p. 74; hereafter abbreviated *TER*.
15. Justice cannot be done here to Mill's view on religion. For recent scholarship on this subject, see Linda C. Raeder, *John Stuart Mill and the Religion of Humanity* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002) and T. R. Wright, *The Religion of Humanity: The Impact of Comtean Positivism on Victorian Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).
16. Auguste Comte, *Système de politique positive, ou traité de sociologie instituant la religion de l'Humanité*, 4 vols. (Paris: Carilian-Goeury, 1851–1854), vol. 2, p. 8.
17. Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. Marian Evans (London: Trübner & Co., 1881).
18. Mikhail Bakhtin, "From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse," *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 49.
19. Ludwig Feuerbach, Review of Jakob Moleschott, *Lehre Der Nahrungsmittel* (1850), *Blätter für literarische Unterhaltung*, ed. Brockhaus 269 (1850): 1074.
20. Frederick Harrison, "George Eliot's Place in Literature," *The Forum*, September (1895): 71. Compare Leslie Stephen's statement that Eliot began to seriously philosophize in her novels only after writing *Silas Marner* (1861) in his study *George Eliot*, in the English Men [!] of Letters Series (London: Macmillan, 1904), pp. 105, 108, 112.
21. Richard Rorty, "Philosophy as a Transitional Genre," in *Philosophy as Cultural Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 89.