



GEORGE ELIOT REVIEW

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Author(s): Georgia Walton

Original Source: Walton, Georgia. "George Eliot's Enchanted Real (Prize Essay)." *George Eliot Review*, no. 52, 2021, pp. 7-15.

Digital editions of the *George Eliot Review* and the *George Eliot Fellowship Review* are published on behalf of the George Eliot Fellowship by the: *George Eliot Review Online*, edited by Beverley Park Rilett, <https://GeorgeEliotReview.org>.

GEORGE ELIOT'S ENCHANTED REAL

By Georgia Walton

To be enchanted is to fall under a spell or to be swept up and out of oneself by aesthetic pleasure; it is an experience that we expect to take us out of reality rather than to bring us face to face with it. Despite this, our experience in the 'real world' is littered with moments of enchantment; in nature, art and elsewhere we are confronted with objects and ideas that are able to dazzle and to inspire wonder. This was not lost on George Eliot, whose realist fictions, I argue here, both extol and facilitate experiences of enchantment. The staunchly materialist proclivities that are synonymous with nineteenth-century realism and Eliot's work in particular may seem incongruous with an enchanted experience. Indeed, the gothic, that other mainstay of Victorian aesthetic culture, appears to be more attuned to the occult sensibilities that the term implies; if the gothic represents the inexplicable, the irrational and the unknown, realism is founded on reason, empiricism and the ordinary. However, though the mood of enchantment is suggestive of a mysteriously exercised power, the term also intimates a state of heightened sensory attention to the world. As Jane Bennett argues, enchantment is a 'joyful human mood that results from a special way of engaging with the world'.¹ The realist genre's commitment to expansive and detailed world building serves to draw the reader into an affective and engrossed relationship with the text and its characters. In this article, I argue that enchanted experience is central to Eliot's realism. Drawing on Bennett's theory of enchantment, I suggest here that the ethical impetus of Eliot's fiction pivots on a form of enchanted attachment to the world. I begin with a brief example from *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) as an example of how Eliot weaves enchantment into the form of her realism before showing how the ethical actions of characters in *Daniel Deronda* (1876) are predicated upon a narrative movement towards enchantment.

Bennett describes enchantment as 'a state of wonder' which involves the 'temporary suspension of chronological time and bodily movement' (5). For Bennett, enchantment is a phenomenon which occurs when the subject experiences temporal or physical immobilization simultaneously with a heightened sensory awareness:

Thoughts, but also limbs [...] are brought to rest, even as the senses continue to operate, indeed, in high gear. You notice new colours, discern details previously ignored, hear extraordinary sounds as familiar landscapes sharpen and intensify. The world comes alive as a selection of singularities. Enchantment includes, then, a condition of exhilaration or acute sensory activity. To be simultaneously transfixed in wonder and transported by

sense, to be both caught up and carried away – enchantment is marked by this odd combination of somatic effects. (5)

Bennett sees the experience of enchantment as an awareness of the peculiar quality of a moment in time. It is an affective state that engages both the senses and the mind but also has an oddly pacifying and immobilizing effect on the body. This mood of heightened receptivity to sensory detail is uniquely found in the deliberative mimesis of Eliot's fiction. Indeed, realist novels frequently suspend the narrative action of their plots to furnish their reader with lengthy passages of material description. Take for example the opening chapter of *The Mill on the Floss*. Here, Eliot exhibits her relish for material detail and we are plunged from the outset of the novel into immersive description:

A wide plain, where the broadening Floss hurries on between its green banks to the sea, and the loving tide, rushing to meet it, checks its passage with an impetuous embrace. On this mighty tide the black ships – laden with the fresh-scented fir-planks, with rounded sacks of oil-bearing seed, or with the dark glitter of coal – are borne along to the town of St Ogg's, which shows its aged, fluted red roofs and the broad gables of its wharves between the low wooded hill and the river brink, tinging the water with a soft purple hue under the transient glance of this February sun [...].²

The narrator continues in this vein for a lengthy paragraph settling the reader, visual detail by visual detail, into the bucolic scene. J. Hillis Miller argues that Eliot's material specificity is a tool to enable a wide range of readers to relate to it; '[a]lmost everyone [...] has seen a small brook, or a sunset, or a flower opening, or touched a velvet-skinned peach'.³ He sees the detailed description as a facet of empathy, a way to engage the reader with the tactile experience of the characters. Though I agree with this reading, I see another motive for Eliot's aesthetic decision; by creating a specific material account, Eliot is attempting to make her readers alive to the specificity of sensuous life and to hold them in its thrall. In the second paragraph of the novel, this detailed description is broken by an interjection from the novel's narrator, who describes being caught up in the act of looking: 'I must stand a minute or two here on the bridge and look at it, though the clouds are threatening, and it is far on in the afternoon' (7). This intervention privileges the subjective viewpoint and the highly personalized act of looking. The narrator is transfixed by the scene but eventually manages to tear her eyes away to rest upon another figure, that of protagonist Maggie Tulliver, equally transfixed and arousing the envy of her dog who cannot divert her attention from the spinning mill 'sending out its diamond jets of water'; 'his [the dog's] playfellow in the beaver bonnet is so rapt in its movement' (8). Both the narrator and Maggie are held in the

stasis of visual contemplation. At the end of this short first chapter Eliot reveals that this extended visual description has taken place in the memory of the narrator:

Ah, my arms are really benumbed. I have been pressing my elbows on the arms of my chair, and dreaming that I was standing on the bridge in front of Dorlcote Mill, as it looked one February afternoon many years ago. Before I dozed off, I was going to tell you what Mr. and Mrs. Tulliver were talking about, as they sat by the bright fire in the left-hand parlour, on that very afternoon I have been dreaming of. (8)

The narrator, as the driving force of the story is held suspended in time, caught up in her remembrance of the scene. Thus, Eliot opens her novel with an experience of enchantment brought about by attention to the specificity of material life.

Realism and Enchantment in *Daniel Deronda*

George Levine argues that the plot of *Daniel Deronda* is unusual in that it ‘reverses the realist disenchantment narrative by *beginning* in disenchantment [emphasis original]’.⁴ Instead of starting out with an ideal that is tempered by reality over the course of the novel, Eliot’s eponymous protagonist begins as a motiveless English gentleman and ends as a Jew, steeped in mysticism and poised to travel east in search of a homeland. Though Levine’s comment refers to Daniel, the novel’s parallel story of Gwendolen Harleth also represents a movement towards enchantment; ‘The Spoiled Child’ we meet at the start of the book learns through painful experience to embrace the full breadth of human experience.⁵ At the end of the novel Gwendolen assures her mother even in the midst of fits of grief, ‘[d]on’t be afraid. I am going to live’ (884). Indeed, Gwendolen’s commitment to life in its entirety is perhaps a more significant shift to enchantment than Daniel’s pioneering quest for a new world. Despite what Levine says, the trajectories of these characters do also encompass the encroaching realism more common to nineteenth-century *Bildungsroman* narratives; Daniel comes to greater self-awareness through the discovery of the truth of his own origin and Gwendolen gains, through pain and loss, a fuller knowledge of the world. Over the course of the novel, both Daniel and Gwendolen develop a more engaged, enlivened and productive relationship with the world. Indeed, Eliot’s final novel inhabits a more polemic mode than her previous works. In leaving Daniel set to ‘restore a political existence to [his] people’ (880) Eliot permits her hero to fulfil the epic future denied to her previous (female) protagonists; despite a revolutionary impulse, *Middlemarch*’s Dorothea settles into a life of ordinary morality as the dutiful wife of a political reformer and Romola’s radical action is confined to the domestic. In *Daniel*

Deronda, learning to be enchanted by the world is concurrent with an increased political and ethical impetus.

Daniel Deronda has often been found to be lacking in realism. However, this criticism is usually levelled at only half of the novel. Critics from Henry James to F.R. Leavis have complained that parallel stories of the novel are incongruous with one another.⁶ The Gwendolen plot has primarily been read as an example of realism, whereas the Daniel plot is seen to be governed by coincidence and destiny in a more prophetic mode.⁷ Leavis suggested that the Daniel or 'Jewish' plot should be dispensed with entirely and the novel renamed, 'Gwendolen Harleth'.⁸ However, contemporary criticism has made a concerted effort to show how the two strands of the novel impact upon one another. Sarah Gates has argued that the generic disparity between the two halves of the novel represents a tension between the epic and the domestic. Gates gives a close reading of a passage in which domestic description gives way to 'the poetry of epic catalogue.'⁹ Gates avers that Eliot 'enacts in microcosm the struggle of realism to contain, even to secularize, generic elements that are too exalted for its domestic sphere' (704). Instead, this sort of description mirrors the trajectory of the novel as a whole; realism *produces* the transcendent. Eliot's mingling of sublime energy and domestic reality through generic interplay suggests that the epic, poetic or sublime is present within the ordinary reality of domestic life; the more mystic, numinous quality of the Daniel plot lends the dynamic aspect to the realism of the Gwendolen plot.

As in *The Mill on the Floss*, Eliot begins her final novel with a moment of enchantment. Bennett writes that enchantment 'involves, in the first instance, a surprising encounter' and that though this can then lead to the pleasant feeling of being charmed by a spectacle it can also be 'a more *unheimlich* feeling of being disrupted or torn out of one's default sensory-physic-intellectual disposition' (5). In *Daniel Deronda* Eliot begins with an instance of enchantment such as this; when Daniel first sees Gwendolen at the gambling table in Leubronn:

Was she beautiful or not beautiful? and what was the secret of form or expression which gave the dynamic quality to her glance? Was the good or the evil genius dominant in those beams? Probably the evil; else why was the effect that of unrest rather than of undisturbed charm? Why the wish to look again was felt as coercion and not as longing in which the whole being consents? (3)

Caught between physical attraction and moral disgust, Daniel is enchanted by Gwendolen due to his own inability to reconcile his fascination with the detection of an 'evil' nature. He is captivated through 'coercion' by a woman who 'disrupt[s]' his expectation. Eliot figures this sense of enchantment as a

question; Daniel is drawn by Gwendolen's unknowable aspect. Bennett argues that that material world is a dynamic and vibrant place replete with possibilities to be enchanted. This capacity derives from what she names the 'cosmos'; 'that energetic aspect of things, thoughts, matter, which has not (yet) crystallised into a place of knowing or belonging' (166). Bennett's 'cosmos' is defined by its unknowable nature, though her '(yet)' suggests that part of its energy derives from the effort to know it. By beginning the novel with a series of questions, Eliot renders the mood of the text as interrogative. She then spends the rest of the novel, using the realist aesthetic, in an attempt to uncover and elucidate this unknowable aspect of the world. Here, Daniel is compelled by Gwendolen's dynamism, her 'indeterminate vitality'. Gwendolen too, is transfixed by Daniel, unable to resist his gaze: 'in the course of her survey her eyes met Deronda's, and instead of averting them as she would have desired to do, she was unpleasantly conscious that they were arrested – how long?'(6). This eroticized moment, with the two main characters compelled by mutual enchantment is the nexus of Eliot's plot and, as the meeting between the two primary characters, it weaves together the two seemingly incongruous halves of the narrative. Though the relevance of the two plots to one another has been contested, it is the otherness that Daniel and Gwendolen recognize in one another that is the driving force of both the plot and ethical project of the text. For Daniel this moment leads to his sympathy and desire to inculcate moral betterment in Gwendolen. And for her, it acts as the catalyst for the shedding of her own selfish outlook and her embrace of life. By beginning the novel with an instance of enchantment coloured by a questioning mood, Eliot renders it alive to the unknowable vitality of the world.

I will here pause for a moment in my analysis of Eliot's opening to explain what Isobel Armstrong has called, 'the supreme importance [...] of singing' in *Daniel Deronda*.¹⁰ Armstrong suggests that the form of the novel reflects the dialogue between music and language found in song; she claims that Jewish culture has long been associated with music and that the bourgeois world that Gwendolen inhabits is linked with literature (243). Thus, the form of the two, arguably disparate, parts of the novel concurs with that of its recurring motif. By understanding the two halves of the novel as a drama between sound and language, the relationship between real and the romantic, that I discussed above becomes even more striking; the lyrics of song are akin to the transcribed, knowable aspects of life and its music like the (not yet) knowable dimension of existence. This notion chimes with the work of Bennett's primary interlocutors Deleuze and Guattari, who understand the dynamic quality inherent in the world in terms of sound; for them, we live in a 'sonorous universe'.¹¹ Bennett says that 'sounds – specifically repetitive sounds like chants and refrains – provide sensory access to the cosmological (i.e., energetic and rumbling) dimension of things'

(166). Eliot fills her text with recurring objects and images; the necklace that Daniel retrieves from the pawn shop, Lydia Glasher's diamonds and the spectral face that Gwendolen repeatedly sees. In this way the novel is densely patterned and the images work as a sort of visual refrain. Thus, in the form and content of *Daniel Deronda*, Eliot represents a world 'buzzing' with energy. The two plot strands impact on each other so that the novel depicts a vibrant, 'sonorous' world where an unknowable energy is thrust into a dynamic relationship with the recordable aspects of the real.

In the light of this, we might see the novel's opening passage as significant for another reason. For Armstrong the doubleness of song marks a 'release from quotidian temporality' (249). The novel begins, disjointedly, halfway through the story. The narrative swirls around this initial meeting between Daniel and Gwendolen, thrusting the reader, after two short chapters, back to the previous year, before picking up in 'real time' at Chapter 21. Thus, their meeting is outside time and the narrative certainly set free from 'quotidian temporality'. Eliot's epigraph to the first chapter is an attempt to explain the proto-modernist chopping up of the story that places Daniel and Gwendolen's meeting first in the narrative:

Men can do nothing without the make-believe of a beginning. Even Science, the strict measurer, is obliged to start with a make-believe unit, and must fix on a point in the stars' unceasing journey when his sidereal clock shall pretend that time is at Nought. His less accurate grandmother Poetry has always been understood to start in the middle; but on reflection it appears that her proceeding is not very different from his; since Science too, reckons backwards as well as forwards, divides his unit into billions, and with his clock finger at Nought really sets off *in medias res*. No retrospect will take us to the true beginning, and whether our prologue be in heaven or on earth, it is but a fraction of that all-presupposing fact with which our story sets out. (3)

Eliot here suggests that human knowledge rests on the initial imaginative leap of a 'make believe beginning'. For Deleuze and Guattari, a break in rhythm or form is 'to join with the forces of the future, cosmic forces' (363). Eliot's metaphor of the scientist attempting to fathom the mysteries of the universe resonates with their belief that 'chaos is an immense black hole in which one endeavours to fix a fragile point as a centre' (363). For Eliot, this break in time, though it cannot itself be called a refrain, does mark the 'breakaway dimension' that Bennett associates with the refrain. The novel loops back to put the organizing principle into sharper focus, to organize experience around a single moment of enchantment that stretches both backwards and forwards. The effect of slicing the narrative and using this meeting point as its beginning

shows the moment as alive and dynamic. It contains both the past and the future of Daniel and Gwendolen. As Bennett sees it; ‘Deleuze and Guattari [...] imagine a world so overflowing with entities, creations, and forces that mutual infection is inevitable’ (168). Eliot represents just such a world, where time stretches backwards and forwards and different worlds bump up against one another to reveal new realities to the characters and to the reader. Thus, the two halves of the novel are placed in a necessary dialogue, complementing, and antagonizing one another.

Over the course of the novel, Daniel takes a leap from noticing the world, to attempting to change it. In this way the novel embodies Bennett’s assertion that, ‘[t]he fanciful and the real [...] are incestuous partners – we have no choice about them being connected; what counts is how we mobilize those connections’ (162). If the discernment of an indeterminate energy in the world has an ethical impulse, there must be some further process by which attention is transformed into the urge to be ethically active. Indeed, Daniel’s defining characteristic is his empathetic nature, but at the start of the novel he lacks a motive. Once he has discovered his true identity as a Jew, Daniel says to Mordecai:

It is you has given shape to, what I believe, is an inherited yearning – the effect of brooding, passionate thoughts in many ancestors – thoughts that seem to have been intensely present in my grandfather. Suppose the stolen offspring of some mountain tribe brought up in a city of the plain, or one with an inherited genius for painting, and born blind – the ancestral life would lie within them as a dim longing for unknown objects and sensations, and the spell bound habit of their frames would be like a cunningly-wrought musical instrument, never played on, but quivering throughout in uneasy mysterious moanings of its intricate structure that, under the right touch, gives music. Something like that, I think, has been my experience. (821)

Thus, music is produced when untapped potential is schooled in the correct art. Thus, yet again, enchanted experience is the product of labour enlivened by a more mysterious power – here rendered as an innate destiny. Daniel’s pioneering and sympathetic nature only becomes useful upon discovering his true nature and under Mordecai’s tutelage. Thus, Daniel discovers his calling and thus transforms his latent empathy into political action. Daniel tells Gwendolen at the end of the novel: ‘[w]hat makes life dreary is the want of motive’ (842). Thus, Daniel’s story is an enchantment tale; Eliot combines an increased notion of destiny with an increased realism and focus so that Daniel can transform his innate qualities into political action.

Part of this process must be that close and enraptured attention is as equally alive to what is terrible in the world, as to what is beautiful. Gwendolen

fuses her own submission to the reality of life with the striving for moral betterment; 'I shall live [...] I shall be better' (884). Bennett suggests that enchanted experience is the mechanism by which sorrow at inequality becomes a concerted effort to eradicate it; 'such attentiveness can help to transform shock at tragedy into a political will to reform painful social structures' (160). If the experience of enchantment is the recognition of the energy inherent in the world, then Gwendolen's story shows that it must also embrace what is terrible and sorrowful. Thus Eliot's final word both in the novel and her own career as a novelist, despite the painful nature of awareness of the world, is that being alive to the real is the only course of ethical action and the only desirable path.

Over the course of *Daniel Deronda*, Eliot's two protagonists – and particularly Gwendolen – learn to be wholly engaged with every aspect of life. For Bennett, the awareness and experience of suffering when commingled with a feeling of wonder has a greater ethical impulse. However, it is essential for Eliot that this is grounded in the real world. As Daniel moves towards idealism, Gwendolen moves towards realism; she becomes painfully aware of her own place in the world and emerges far from 'The Spoiled Child' that lends its name to the first book of the novel. Despite the sorrowful close of the narrative for Gwendolen – she is left excluded from the matrimonial happiness and epic potential in which the Daniel plot concludes – she has been awakened to life; 'for the first time being dislodged from the supremacy of her own world, and getting the sense that her horizon was but a dipping onward of an existence with which her own was revolving' (884). Throughout the novel Daniel is adept at imagining how others feel, but Gwendolen must learn it. The simultaneous burgeoning of both realism and enchantment in the novel is linked to Eliot's increased commitment to radical change; Gwendolen's narrative suggests that to be enchanted one must embrace the world in its entirety and Daniel's, that enchanted experience can be transferred into political energy. By situating Daniel's story of revolution within the polite society of Victorian England and alongside that of Gwendolen's more ordinary tale of a bad marriage, Eliot exposes how idealism is coexistent with realism and radical change is bred through a transformation of the ordinary.

Eliot endorses a realism that is enlivened by emotion and dedicated to it with the full force of intellect. In *Daniel Deronda* Eliot's protagonists move towards an enchanted relationship with the world; Daniel through increased idealism and Gwendolen by realizing there is a dynamic world outside of herself. However, this movement is combined, in all instances, with a loss of naivety and greater understanding of life. Thus, for Eliot, enchanted experience is concurrent with an increased realism. Eliot's career began with the staunch realism of *Scenes of Clerical Life* (1857) and *Adam Bede* (1859), and moves, like her characters, towards a more fervent idealism. The ethical project of

her realism developed from being the democratic representation of ordinary people to a more idealistic and polemic attitude to the world. Thus, her realist project ultimately emerges as a way to engage, more affectively, more assuredly and more productively with the full breadth of human experience. Through close attention to real life, realist art urges its readers into a more enchanted relationship with the material world.

NOTES

- 1 Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings and Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001) p. 37. Further references to this work will be given in the text.
- 2 George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1994), p. 7.
- 3 J. Hillis Miller, *Reading for Our Time: Adam Bede and Middlemarch Revisited* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), p. 10.
- 4 George Levine, *Dying to Know: Scientific Epistemology and Narrative in Victorian England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), p. 183.
- 5 George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda* [1876] (London: Penguin, 2012), p. 3. Further references to this edition will be given in the text.
- 6 Henry James, ‘*Daniel Deronda: A Conversation*’ reprinted in *The Great Tradition*, ed. by F.R. Leavis, (London: Chatto and Windus, 1954), pp. 249–266.
- 7 In her chapter on *Daniel Deronda* in *Critical Issues* Pauline Nestor makes the case that the novel marks a switch in Eliot’s outlook from determinism to prophecy.
- 8 F.R. Leavis, ‘*Daniel Deronda and Portrait of a Lady*’, also in *The Great Tradition*, pp. 79–154.
- 9 Sarah Gates, “‘A Difference of Native Language’: Gender, Genre, and Realism in *Daniel Deronda*”, *ELH*, 68:3 (2001), pp. 699–724, p. 704.
- 10 Isobel Armstrong, *Novel Politics: Democratic Imaginations in Nineteenth Century Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 246
- 11 Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guatarri, *A Thousand Plateaus* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).