GEORGE ELIOT REVIEW

Title: The Human Intelligence of George Eliot’s Omniscient Narration

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Print source: Hurst, Louetta. "The Human Intelligence of George Eliot’s Omniscient Narration."

George Eliot Review, no. 56, 2025, p. 65-74.

THE HUMAN INTELLIGENCE OF GEORGE ELIOT'S OMNISCIENT NARRATION

By Lou Hurst

The importance – if any – of human authorship for literary production has been questioned since the earliest attempts to create narratives using computers or other technologies.[1] The heightened concerns of our current moment, when rapid composition of original, entertaining novels using software-based text generation has become feasible, provide a new lens for appreciating the historical development and the enduring value of our literary craftsmanship traditions. I submit that George Eliot's novelistic corpus offers a remarkable guide to this frontier, specifically when we look to her deployment of a venerable literary device: the omniscient narrator. Her use of the device reflects her vocational commitment to connect human minds to each other, through taught and modeled sympathy, in order to facilitate real-world benignant behaviour. Further, certain refinements to its deployment over her career speak to the ultimate humanistic value she found, and we can find, in imaginative literature: namely, its emphasis on our shared experience *as* human beings who are fallible, cognitively limited, and psychically isolated, yet who live in constant commerce with others like us in society and within nature.

To appreciate the significance of Eliot's omniscient narration we must confront its peculiar formal difficulties, and in particular, the problems of how it projects an illusion of personhood. Omniscient narration has always played a salient role in literary theory because, at least superficially, it presents embedded commentary on the very act of creation, while rhetorically managing reader response – a manoeuvre distinctive to literary art. As a formal choice it is vulnerable to aesthetic criticism, often on the basis that it represents overbearing authorial intrusiveness. Critical discussions of the convention thus often involve remarks about technical skill: for instance, W. J. Harvey says that Eliot's *Scenes of Clerical Life* 'can fairly be dismissed as the work of a novice' since it 'exploits the omniscient mode in so blatant and distressing a manner'.[2] Wayne Booth on the other hand hails Eliot's omniscient narrator as one of the 'great commentators' of fiction, and as he suggests, its voice shapes our sense of her authorship together with admiration of her artistic integrity: 'Much [omniscient narratorial] commentary that seems excessive, if judged by narrow standards of fiction, is wholly defensible when seen as contributing to our sense of traveling with a trustworthy companion, an author who is sincerely battling to do justice to his materials. George Eliot, for example, involves us constantly in her battle to deal with the truth'.[3]

Invoking *the truth* indicates, appropriately, a sense of ethical responsibility on the part of an artist. The imperative to establish *the truth*, in matters of fact and moral judgment and convey it authoritatively to a reading audience is what seems to motivate the deployment of omniscient narration in the realist novel. Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth has written that literary realism relies on the assumption that objective truth exists apart from all individual subjectivities; this would mean that a potential 'consensus' exists among all perspectives, and that all separate consciousnesses are theoretically continuous in a single consciousness, which in the realist novel is represented by the narrator. The idea of the 'collective' is thus important for Ermarth's conception of the narrator's role: '[T]he narrator is a collective result, the specifier of consensus'.[4] The omniscient narrator, in this view, is not inherently superior (in knowledge or judgment) to characters within the novel but merely possesses the knowledge they could all theoretically obtain; or, more precisely, the narrator exists as a passive representation of that potential knowledge, as the entirety of the continuum of their partial, overlapping perspectives. In this analysis Ermarth extends J. Hillis Miller's characterization of the conventional omniscient narrator of the Victorian novel as a 'collective mind' or 'a general consciousness', a set of sensibilities and values that is shared by the community as a whole, and which is eventually inclusive of all mankind.[5]

The epistemological problems associated with 'omniscience' may thus tend to destabilize the illusion of the narrator's individuality, to the point of even undermining its logical coherence. Indeed, Ermarth's assertion that the so-called omniscient narrator represents a 'collective result' leads her to determine that, despite all semblance of personality, the narrator should be best understood as a 'nobody', 'not really intelligible as an individual' (65); indeed, '[t]he insubstantiality of the narrator is a prerequisite condition for the narrator's power' (78). However, so often in Eliot's novels, with their notorious addresses to the reader and deft modulations of tone, we cannot so easily dispel the impression of a substantiated, opinionated personality who is vigilant over her presentation of events and their real-time reception, all in the name of a commitment to 'truth'. In *Adam Bede*, for instance, the narrator pauses the story to declare her intention 'to give a faithful account of men and things as they have mirrored themselves in my mind' (193). Even Ermarth acknowledges that Eliot's narrator is an 'intermittently personalized voice,' that she 'inches toward personification' (237). Booth is a critic who has sought positive value in this illusion of personhood, however intermittent; seeking a term to account for the impression that a discriminating individual stands behind all the elements of the novel, a term that is 'as broad as the work itself but still capable of calling attention to that work as the product

of a choosing, evaluating person rather than as a self-existing thing' (74), he introduces the concept of an 'implied author,' and describes the narrators of novels like Eliot's as its 'dramatized spokesmen'.

Following this cue, a next step is to ask how Eliot's omniscient narrators connect to her biographical person – that is, if the narrator is the *implied* author, how far can we pursue the implication? I argue that owing to Eliot's distinctive career trajectory, vocational philosophy, and lasting influence, her narrators uniquely demonstrate how the voice of the author can extend outside the story into a real-world dimension that comprehends other discourse, including about the act of fiction creation.

According to Paul Dawson, the omniscient narrator convention has in fact seen a resurgence in late twentieth- early twenty-first-century Western fiction, which he attributes to a working out of anxieties about the diminishing stature of literary fiction in the culture.[6] The omniscient narrator convention gestures back to a (possibly illusory) past in which novelists held a more exalted cultural position; the Victorian period is certainly the apogee of this vision, and Eliot one of its exemplary figures. John Holloway in his classic study of 'Victorian sages' lists Eliot (along with Hardy) as an example of a sage, or didactic 'life-philosopher', who chooses to expound a particular moral outlook through imaginative writing in the novel form.[7] Her moral outlook, and her confidence in the power of literature to promote it, is expanded in numerous passages within the novels themselves, such as the story-pausing Chapter XVII of *Adam Bede*, but also articulated at length elsewhere, as in numerous essays and letters. Having come to novel writing only after an exceptionally fruitful career as a literary critic and theorist, Eliot turned to imaginative literature and its traditional formal tools for their unparalleled power to portray her vision of an organically united social cosmos. She thereby developed an extraordinarily strong authorial persona that is continuous with a rich nonfiction literary corpus and other real-world activity. It is therefore a particularly compelling exercise to read Eliot's narrators as direct extensions of her authorial (and critical) persona.

Eliot's modern readers may feel a further impulse when engaging with the voices of her omniscient narrators: namely to connect to, and in a sense reanimate, a woman removed in time, and lost to death from our own society. Our intuition to collect her writings, distinguish them from those of her peers, and harmonize (or biographically explain) their inconsistencies, might perhaps be analyzed under Foucault's concept of the 'author function'. Foucault explains that the author-function 'results from a complex operation whose purpose is to construct the rational entity we call an author'.[8] Yet he describes such an operation as entirely discursive and categorical, premised in fact on the author's 'disappearance'. However, in the case of Eliot, who while

she lived personally and professed a vocation of literary imagination and repeatedly dramatized its enactment using her omniscient narrators, it can be usefully argued that she encourages our inclination to *discover* the author – the 'source of expression' (Foucault, 308) that threads its way through all of her imaginative productions, and a historical figure with propensities, preferences, intentions and situational circumstances that reward our investigation. Indeed Foucault notes that 'in our day, literary works are totally dominated by the sovereignty of the author'(306) – that is, whatever our approach to other kinds of writing, our culture (at least as of the latter twentieth century) still valorizes human individuality as fundamental to imaginative (fiction) authorship. Further, as 'these operations [that constitute the author function] vary according to the period and the form of discourse concerned' (307), we as modern readers respond to Eliot's fiction in ways conditioned by our acquaintance with the Victorian novel and its characteristic conventions, such as the omniscient narrative mode – endorsing Dawson's suggestion that the convention carries cultural legacies which modern fiction writers seek to leverage for their own vocational purposes.

Eliot's narrators therefore arguably serve as a vehicle for extending her fictional worlds into real-world discourses, including current-day criticism of her own work. However, critical discourse is hardly their only point of contact with the real world – that is, the world where human beings move and act, and where our organic, non-literary lives are lived. One of Eliot's key objectives as an author, of course, is to promote sympathy in readers – not only to arouse it through her character portrayals, but to teach its importance and its practice. If sympathy connotes a compassionate understanding of, and responsiveness to, the experiences of others, surely this can only be realized through community with other human beings, on the basis of some shared capacity for feeling. Eliot's narrator must seek a way to both model and mobilize this shared capacity by somehow avowing her own experiential knowledge of human affairs. A common rhetorical strategy she employs is, as Suzanne Graver puts it, the 'appeal to common experience',[9] using inclusive 'we' – as seen for instance in *Silas Marner*: 'I suppose one reason why we are seldom able to comfort our neighbours with our words is that our goodwill gets adulterated, in spite of ourselves, before it can pass our lips'.[10]

There are two key observations to make here about Eliot's narrators. First, in the effort to inculcate sympathy, the narrator often seeks credibility by dramatizing her concrete involvement in her characters' world. *Contra* Ermarth's assertion that the narrator is 'not intelligible as a corporeal existence' (66), Eliot's narrator invokes her own corporeality to underwrite her portrayals of moral truth. When the earnest cleric Tryan in 'Janet's Repentance' is cruelly mocked by a riotous public, the narrator declares: 'I

am on the level and in the press with him, as he struggles his way along the stony road, through the crowd of unloving fellow-men'.[11] Even her more playful transitions emphasize her sensory engagement with the dramatized world, as when we are introduced to Rev. Irwine in Chapter 5 of *Adam Bede*: 'Let me take you into that dining room […] We will enter very softly, and stand still in the open doorway […]'.[12] The injunction to 'tolerate, pity and love' our 'fellow-mortals' (*Adam Bede* 194) can never be premised on a wholly disembodied, dislocated knowledge, and thus it is important for the narrator to convincingly capture the texture of life experienced through human senses.

A second key point is that Eliot's commitment to validate sympathy by rhetorically simulating human embodiment ultimately leads her omniscient narrator into a sort of paradox: that human embodied life in fact entails limitations in knowledge, and the experience of being misled by senses and surfaces. For all her zeal to establish *the truth*, the narrator must therefore relinquish some degree of omniscient authority in order to convey sympathy effectively. We may see evidence of the problem in her complex treatment of physical appearance – one of the realities of embodied social life. Consider: if an omniscient narrator is privileged at getting at the 'truth' of her characters' lives and moral qualities through her exclusive ability to enter into their minds, we might then expect her to exploit this privilege by frequently pointing out that exterior appearance is no key to interior character. Yet repeatedly in Eliot's novels, exterior appearance and interiority become conflated, and self-reinforcing; often physical appearance is recognized as a determinant of character or a means of its expression. *Daniel Deronda* opens with a question about Gwendolen Harleth: 'Was she beautiful or was she not beautiful?'[13] – a question evidently freighted with urgent moral consequence; while it originates in the private mind of Daniel Deronda, several scenes of later community discussion centre around the same problem, from the opening scene among fashionable guests at a resort, through to Chapter 52 among the Meyricks and a jealous Mirah. The narrator herself cannot intervene to resolve the matter definitively: only characters who live within Gwendolyn's world can legitimately shed light on the answer. Furthermore, characterization through physical appearance works in multiple directions, since the way a person's appearance is perceived is partly a function of the observer's own constitution. In *Adam Bede*, the narrator feels the need to defend Adam for his love of Hetty based on her beauty alone, saying that 'the noblest nature is often the most blinded to the character of the one woman's soul that the beauty clothes' (385). The perception of Hetty's physical beauty is important for the narrator's characterizations of Adam and of Arthur. In *Romola*, after decisively showing that Tito has given himself over to evil, the narrator remarks that 'there was no brand of duplicity on his brow; neither

was there any stamp of candour,' and puts the odd question: 'Was it that Tito's face attracted or repelled according to the mental attitude of the observer? Was it a cypher with more than one key?'.[14] Then by staging various groups of characters debating the meaning of Tito's personal beauty vis-a-vis his trustworthiness, the narrator dramatizes the very essence and mechanism of his duplicity.

These are evocative cases where we find the omniscient narrator appearing to depend on, or defer to, the imagined human community to establish the moral 'truth' about a given character or situation, given their material investment in in-universe events. I would posit that this is done to support an important principle: that whatever the benefits of contemplating imaginative literature, the concrete world of active human commerce always takes precedence, as the place where the need for sympathy originates and where the benefit of its practice must return.

A related consequence of the narrator's sympathetic self-embodiment is seen in the treatment of community dialogue in the form of choral chatter, or gossip. Rosemarie Bodenheimer finds that George Eliot's attitude about gossip changed over her career, contingent upon her own ambivalent and fluctuating relationship with her publishers, critics, and reading public, and that the trajectory of this change can be traced in her novels. In *The Mill on the Floss*, written soon after hurtful public speculation about the identity of the author of *Adam Bede* led to Eliot's 'outing' as Marian Lewes, gossip is portrayed as a malevolent and overwhelming agent of destruction ('Gossip bursts into the text of *The Mill on the Floss* like a flood of violence'[15]); however, by the writing of *Middlemarch*, Eliot had tempered her opinion of gossip, becoming able to demonstrate that it is 'not only inevitable but often essential to the circulation of information needed by members of the community' (151). Suzanne Graver discusses how Eliot deployed the omniscient author convention to construct a community of Victorian readers with shared norms and values. Looking at patterns of direct address to the reader in Eliot's novels, Graver, too, sees a development over time, and argues that it was conscious and strategic, with Eliot taking pains to modulate her narrators' tone and use of personal pronouns in order to shape and subtly subvert her readers' moral attitudes without alienating them altogether, as she had done with the harshness of *The Mill on the Floss*.

Both of these critics therefore identify *The Mill on the Floss* as a turning point for the omniscient narrator's deployment. This is a novel where the narrator's truth-telling, as it were, competes with the dialogue of characters who are especially hostile to her focal character, Maggie Tulliver. In such a case it is especially important to investigate how the narrator creates distance between herself and the fictional community, and shapes the reader's reaction

to their voices. Doing so brings us to a final key observation about Eliot's narrators: contrary to the suggestions of Ermarth and Hillis Miller that they ideally represent a 'collective' intelligence, in fact they always portray a human consciousness that is decidedly *singular*. Human lives after all are lived singularly, and human personalities express themselves through individual personhood; as we have seen, the narrator therefore rhetorically strives to simulate her own individual embodiment. But we may ask, what could be the value of a singular consciousness in helping us engage sympathy, as opposed to a more comprehensive, detached intelligence with presumably greater access to 'truth'? Would it not indeed be more effective for the narrator to somehow represent a depersonalized collective mind?

The answer, I believe, is that at least early in her career Eliot's narrators modeled sympathy largely by *resisting* the collective voice of a community – often seeming to present it, in fact, expressly in order to resist it, in the interest of defending a focal character of primary sympathetic concern. The pattern reflects Raymond Williams' observation that, set against a static 'landscape' of rural, working-class community collectives who typically speak in choral mode, in an Eliot novel 'the emotional direction […] is towards separated individuals'.[16] The narrator must also emerge as a separated individual, since all her mechanisms of defending her favoured characters – defiance, admonishment, resistance, refusal – are necessarily those of a singular human voice, steadfast, poised and elevated, with personalized emotional shadings conveyed through tone.

Discussing the opening scenes of several Eliot novels, Ermarth notes: 'In each of these opening developments the distinct voice of the personalized narrator becomes part of a constellation of voices, the single consciousness part of a constellation of minds accumulated around one or another point in time or space' (239). Beginning with *Scenes of Clerical Life*, however, we have found that Eliot's narrator is rarely content to merely exist as one among many voices, but prefers to gather and present rival voices into multiple choral groups. A repeated and memorable element in her novels is a carefully-staged scene – say, several set in the Rainbow Tavern in the middle section of *Silas Marner* – where a group of minor characters, many of whom appear only in such scenes, gather to discuss matters that touch upon the focal character. The narrator, as it were, stands outside the gathered collective, commenting in various ways upon the deficiencies of the participants, particularly in regard to their capacity of seeing the truth as the narrator sees it (and would have the reader see it).

The narrator's bids for sympathy in *Scenes of Clerical Life* consist of directly countering the erring character judgments of such ignorant or hostile collectives, who in their most sinister guise become 'the crowd' (266). In

Maggie's crisis of scandal in *The Mill on the Floss*, the narrator focuses her rhetorical powers not primarily on defending Maggie from the community's accusations – there are no expressions of defiant comradeship here akin to 'I am in the press with him' from 'Janet's Repentance' – but rather to demonstrate the gossipers' overwhelming power to effect Maggie's social destruction, which does constitute 'the truth' of the world in which she lives. The narrator's defence can only take the indirect form of moralizing about the evils of casting judgment without knowledge and, more importantly, without sympathy. It is highly significant that the substance of community gossip in the chapter 'St Ogg's Passes Judgment' is presented not in dialogue, but as a true chorus: at first the disembodied voice of a group of unnamed speakers (when the narrator presents the hypothetical talk that would have arisen had Maggie married Stephen), and then eventually in free indirect discourse. This latter device, however, requires that the narrator's voice subsumes the voices of the gossipers, whose attitude directly conflicts with her own judgment, and thus become almost insupportably heavy here with deeply sardonic bitterness.

For a contrast, we can examine how the narrator dispatches scenes of community discussion in *Middlemarch* – a novel which famously foregrounds (not least through its extended metaphors) the concepts of perspective and perception, as well as interrelatedness of all individuals within a community. With its complex character relationships and intersecting plot strands, it would seem to present a case where the narrator's control over perspectives is at its most imperative, and competition for presenting 'the truth' most intense. According to D. A. Miller, '[m]ost of the notable formal features of *Middlemarch* are easily seen as part of a reaction formation intended to counter the defectiveness of other perspectives on its materials [...]. The narrator's activity presupposes that the liabilities of other tellings will be rectified, prevented, or reduced to a negligible minimum in [her] own'.[17] However, Miller goes on to demonstrate that the narrator of *Middlemarch* actually seems to undermine her own status as the bearer of ultimate truth by suggesting (as in the metaphor of the pier-glass in the beginning of Chapter 27) how all perspectives, including her own by implication, are subjective and fallible; in fact, the narrator's omniscient superiority over other observers expressly consists of her awareness of this. W. J. Harvey praises *Middlemarch* for its 'steadiness of ironic contemplation' and says that in this novel 'the irony becomes self-inclusive and is directed not simply at the fictional microcosm but also at the omniscient author herself in her relation to that microcosm' (88). In other words, the narrator no longer uses irony merely as a way of tonally distancing herself from the presented community – and thereby aligning the reader with herself – but likewise as a way of self-consciously analyzing her own manoeuvres, emphasizing the difficulties of apprehending

and representing the truth of complicated, interdependent human lives.

In *Middlemarch*, therefore, we find something like a more complementary relationship between the narrator and the fictional communities portrayed. The narrator remains a human-like singular figure, but the suppleness of tone, the 'diffusion' of self-conscious irony that Harvey finds in *Middlemarch*, reads as a new humility or graciousness – perhaps, a partial sacrifice of omniscience for the sake of still richer humanness. This humility may, as D. A. Miller suggests, arise from her emphasis on the unreliability of perception, and on the incapacity to ever see, know, or feel the lives of others with complete accuracy – the fact that this in itself is a human condition, an inherent weakness of our fellow-men whom we finally nonetheless must learn to 'tolerate, pity, and love'.

Literature that is partially or entirely generated by nonhuman creativity will demand entirely new literary criticisms. Here we have surveyed some ways in which Eliot's novels, particularly in her sophisticated and evolving use of the omniscient narrator convention, provide material for a new formulation of the value of literary fiction in an era when its production conditions and possibilities have been radically changed. Ultimately, I predict, this development will place greater pressure on the formation of relationship between author and reader, and on the understanding that a promise of human connection stands behind the literary art we consume. The formal manoeuvres of Eliot's narration attest to why human authorship matters to us: they are optimized to represent a singular and embodied human intelligence, mediating the responses of human readers, guiding them toward fuller engagement with their organic world.

NOTES

1 For recent treatments of this topic see Mike Sharples and Rafael Pérez y Pérez, *Story Machines: How Computers Have Become Creative Writers* (New York: Routledge, 2022), and Dennis Yi Tenen, *Literary Theory for Robots: How Computers Learned to Write* (New York: Norton, 2024).

2 W. J. Harvey, *The Art of George Eliot* (New York: Oxford UP, 1962), p. 64. Further references to this work will be given in the text.

3 Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 2nd ed. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago, 1983), p. 214. Further references to this work will be given in the text.

4 Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth, *Realism and Consensus in the English Novel* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1983), p. 65. Further references to this work will be given in the text.

5 J. Hillis Miller, *The Form of Victorian Fiction: Thackeray, Dickens, Trollope, George Eliot, Meredith, and Hardy* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1968), p, 84. Further references to this work will be given in the text.

6 Paul Dawson, *The Return of the Omniscient Narrator: Authorship and Authority in Twenty-First Century Fiction* (Columbus, OH: The Ohio State UP, 2013).

7 John Holloway, *The Victorian Sage: Studies in Argument* (London: Macmillan, 1953).

8 Michel Foucault, 'What is an Author?' [1969], in *Modernity and its Discontents*, ed. by J. Marsh, J. D. Caputo, and M. Westphal (New York: Fordham University Press, 1992), pp. 299–314, p. 307. Further references to this work will be given in the text.

9 Suzanne Graver, *George Eliot and Community: A Study in Social Theory and Fictional Form* (Berkeley, CA: University of California, 1984), p. 283. Further references to this work will be given in the text.

10 George Eliot, *Silas Marner* [1861] (New York: Signet, 1999), p. 77.

11 George Eliot, *Scenes of Clerical Life*, ed. by Jennifer Gribble (New York: Penguin, 1998), p. 266. Further references to this work will be given in the text.

12 George Eliot, *Adam Bede*, ed. by Margaret Reynolds (New York: Penguin, 2008), p. 61. Further references to this work will be given in the text.

13 George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, ed. by Terence Cave (New York: Penguin, 1995), p. 7.

14 George Eliot, *Romola*, ed. by Dorothea Barrett (New York: Penguin, 1996), p. 102.

15 Bodenheimer, Rosemarie. *The Real Life of Mary Ann Evans: George Eliot, Her Letters and Fiction* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1994), p. 146.

16 Raymond Williams, 'The Knowable Community in George Eliot's Novels', *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 2.3 (1969), pp. 255–68, p. 258.

17 D. A. Miller, *Narrative and Its Discontents: Problems of Closure in the Traditional Novel* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1981), p. 153. Further references to this work will be given in the text.