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GEORGE ELIOT AND DARWINISM

Victor OLARU

Abstract: However much were 19th century British intellectuals interested in science based on methodological research, Darwin’s The Origin of Species (1859) took them by surprise and produced great changes in the period’s mentality. His work shaped the course of Victorian scientific, theological and artistic thought, determining various direct or indirect reactions with most major poets and fiction writers of the late Victorian period, George Eliot included. This article attempts to emphasize Eliot’s engagement with Darwin’s theory, demonstrating the importance of science in such a novel as Middlemarch. Reference is also made to other Eliot writings: Silas Marner, Adam Bede, Daniel Daronda, and The Mill on the Floss.

Keywords: Darwinism, mentality change, Victorian fiction, George Eliot, Middlemarch.

George Eliot was fascinated by the scientific world and, although she wrote novels, her interest in science is equally important, for her, as art. Not only did she read the scientific works and their reviews and criticism, but she also kept an exact evidence of her readings, scientific or not, as Gillian Beer informs us (2004: 16). However singular, George Eliot was not the only writer that was interested in science; her contemporary intellectuals were too, irrespective of their occupation. Science, as research, offers different methods of precise study. Victorians were interested in science and scientific research based on methodological study, which involved more than a chat between friends and family. The Victorian society as a whole was keen on discovering what had not been discovered yet. Nevertheless, they were not prepared for Charles Darwin’s studies which caused great perturbation in Victorian conservatism. There had been some studies on different subjects – psychology, physiology, physics and mathematics – their initiators such as G.H. Lewes, Claude Bernard, John Tyndall, W.K. Clifford and Clerk Maxwell using a literary non-mathematic discourse that came in handy to the Victorian reader interested in science. However, Darwin’s Origin of Species published in 1859 had the greatest impact. (Beer: 4, Postlethwaite: 99)

Victorians, including Eliot, were interested in discovering what man is like, as an individual. A new science began its existence in the 1840s, phrenology, which represents “the detailed study of the shape and size of the cranium as a supposed indication of character and mental abilities” (Oxford English Dictionary). George Eliot herself had her head cast by phrenologist James Deville in London in 1844. She wrote to Maria Lewis, her former teacher: “having had my propensities sentiments and intellect gauged a second time, I am pronounced to possess a large organ of ‘adhesiveness,’ a still larger one of ‘firmness,’ and [one] as large of conscientiousness.” (quoted in Postlethwaite: 104)

George Eliot accompanied her soul mate, the philosopher and literary critic George Henry Lewes in all his scientific and research travels. During one of these travels she wrote this journal entry where she gives a description of her observations which display her ability to handle a

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remarkable scientific vocabulary: “Indeed, every day I gleaned some little bit of naturalistic experience, either through G’s calling on me to look through the microscope or from hunting on the rocks… There are tide-pools to be seen almost at every other step on the littoral zone at Ilfracombe… the Corallina officinalis was then in its greatest perfection, and with its purple pink fronds threw into relief the dark olive fronds of the Laminariae on one side and the vivid green of the Ulva and Enteromorpha on the other. After we had been there a few weeks the Corallina was faded and I noticed the Mesogloia vermicularis and M. virescens, which look very lovely in the water from the white cilia which make the most delicate fringe to their yellow-brown whip like fronds.” (qtd. in Postlethwaite: 106-107)

Biological science was an interest that both Marian Evans and Lewes shared from their earliest acquaintance in 1852. Science offered George Eliot the prospect of faithful and accurate observation as the foundation for the realism of her fiction. In science Eliot could find the objectivity that she yearned for. In one of Lewes’s writings, *Physiology of Common Life*, he offers the definition: “[s]cience is the endeavour to make the order of our ideas correspond with the order of the things themselves; not to make out a scheme for Nature, which shall correspond with our ideas” (Chapter ix, “The hind and the Bbain,” Section I – “The Cebebbuh”: 85). Following Lewes’s article, Eliot’s 1865 essay “The Influence of Rationalism” reads: “the great conception of universal regular sequence … could only grow out of the patient watching of external fact, and that silencing of preconceived notions, which are urged upon the mind by the problems of physical science” (quoted in Postlethwaite: 108). Eliot’s characters become objective to the outer world and to their own actions and thoughts only after the process of self-knowledge and self-sacrifice. In order to interpret life correctly they ought to know themselves first. Eliot pays much attention to the language she uses both in her novels and essays as well as in her personal writings. The term “microscope” is recurrent in *Middlemarch*, her most scientific novel, and it is Lydgate who uses it in order to find “the primitive tissue.” (2: 15: 95)

Eliot’s interest in science was not only related to her novel-writing; the scientific-based journeys that we have mentioned demonstrate this. A fact that is less known about Eliot and Lewes’s private life is that on the occasion of his sixty-first birthday Eliot had a telephone “installed at the Priory,” their famous London residence (*The Letters of George Henry Lewes*, 2: 210, quoted in Picker 2003: 104). Also, Picker quotes Eliot’s last manuscript’s beginning that was meant to be part of a novel she never published, probably begun in 1880, the year she died: “The story will take you if you please into Central England and into what have often been called the Good old times. It is a telescope you may look through a telephone you may put your ear to: but there is no compulsion” (William Baker, “A New George Eliot Manuscript.” (qtd. in Picker 2003: 109)

Darwin chose to inform his contemporaries of his discoveries in a narrative discourse that should help the reader to penetrate the thick walls of science. In his works Darwin expressed a world of “gladness and destruction: life, making and destroying itself” (Beer: xix): “Nothing is easier than to admit in words the truth of the struggle for life, or more difficult – at least I have found it so – than constantly to bear this conclusion in mind. …We behold the face of nature bright with gladness, we often see superabundance of food; we do not see, or we forget that the birds which are idly singing round us mostly live on insects or seeds, and are thus constantly destroying life.” (Darwin: 40, quoted in Beer: 15)

Given the tension in natural life, the tension in the life of human beings seems natural in its turn too. The relationship between man-woman is one between conqueror and conquered. Therefore, the tension can culminate with some of female characters’ actions that emphasise their rebellious nature, in other words, they desire to achieve nonconformist actions through which
they hope to show that they can use their free will and thus be nonconformist. Should we take the relationship between Gwendolen Harleth and Henleigh Mallinger Grandcourt in *Daniel Daronda*, we will be in accord with Darwin’s statement. Gwendolen is in permanent quest of dominating Grandcourt and Grandcourt, in his turn, dominates Gwendolen who becomes the prisoner of “enforced passivity” (Beer: 36). Gwendolen tries to overcome social and cultural barriers as she invites Mirah Lapidoth to sing at the Grandcourts’ party that does not take place after Grandcourt has come not only to fear Daniel Deronda’s influence on Gwendolen but also suspect they have a love affair. In *Adam Bede* tension takes different forms and dimensions: first, there is the tension triggered by the feelings of love and attraction between Hetty and Adam, on the one hand, and Hetty and Arthur, on the other hand.

Their affair culminates with Hetty’s decision to find Arthur and inform him of her pregnancy, but she does not find him and feels forced to abandon her new-born baby. Second, there is the tension that Dinah experiences when she realises she can feel love for a man even though she has decided that she will be a preacher for ever. In Dinah’s case, we consider that what she experiences is a philosophical pressure which forces her to ponder her feelings. Third, there is the moral weight that Arthur has to deal with when he realises he is the only one that can save Hetty from being hanged. In *Silas Marner*, the realistic portrayal of a weaver’s life which is turned upside down when his money is stolen and a child trespasses his isolated cottage. The tension that emerges in this novel comes as a result of an immoral act that has perpetuated for a long period of time; this pressure dissipates only when it is faced, i.e. when Eppie refuses to leave her adoptive father.

Gillian Beer claims that the biological determinism that some critics distinguish in Darwin’s taxonomy has become paramount to the contentions about mapping the human genome. Were this true, then Eliotean female characters such as Rosamond Vincy, in *Middlemarch*, ought to be exonerated from all her ill-doings for her capacity of determining what is right or what is wrong is inherited from her parents, who are two models of the lowest existence of human feeling and compassion in the whole Eliotean work.

Throughout the 1850s and well into the 1860s, there existed a developmental theory which was generally referred to as ‘the Development Hypothesis’. According to Postlethwaite’s article “George Eliot and science,” the hypothesis represented the enigmatic state of the natural world for there is a difference between what nature is and what we presume it to be. Gillian Beer quotes Kuhn who discusses this stage in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* where he presents the process of scientific discovery of nature that begins with the perception of “anomaly, i.e. with the recognition that nature has somehow violated the paradigm-induced expectations that govern normal science” (Kuhn: 52, quoted in Beer: 1). He maintains that in order to perceive that alteration, theory must be “adjust[ed].” Kuhn’s presentation of anomaly is similar to the way in which Eliot’s female characters’ rebellious (nonconformist) actions are considered by the other characters, such as Maggie Tulliver’s supposed elopement, Romola di Bardi’s impulse to leave, Mrs Transome’s instinct for fear, Mary Garth’s desire to help Fred become a moral man.

One may assert that Eliot’s literary writings could be assimilated to discovery. Her narrative introduces us into a world which seems perfect and, however, something happens that could be considered as an anomaly. For example, in *Middlemarch*, were we to consider the age difference, the difference in life goals and ideology, the marriage between Dorothea Brooke and Reverend Edward Casaubon constitutes in itself an anomaly. Dorothea is in search of an “epic life” and this is what she expects from her marriage, not to be trapped in a relationship with someone about whom she thought she had read his mind. In Eliot’s works, the readers become the “scientist[s]”; the narrator’s task is to present “a new sort of fact” to them so that the latter
“[h]ave learned to see nature in a different way”, which, surprisingly “is not quite a scientific fact at all” (Beer 2004: 1). Modern readers may find Eliot’s novels difficult to understand because of the notions she uses, i.e. scientific which includes medicine and physics, or literary. Thus, the narrator of *Middlemarch* appears to be a sociologist as the multi-plots are united as a “cobweb.” Instances of such terms appear less in Eliot’s novels and more in her later ones, which demonstrates the argument regarding the centeredness of nature in Eliot’s earlier novels, while in her later works her attention was drawn more by political and social issues of Victorian society.

For Darwin, “variation” is the key element of the evolutionary development. Varied species of plants and animals exist on the surface of the Earth, some of them even resemble with one another: “The resemblance, in the shape of the body and in the fin-like anterior limbs, between the dugong, which is a pachydermatous animal, and the whale, and between both these mammals and fishes is analogical” (Darwin: 410). Variation is a word that can be found in Eliotean writings too. Still, there is a difference between the two approaches: Darwin suggests there is no limit of variation, while Eliot, in discussing ironically “the social lot of women” does so: “If there were one level of feminine incompetence as strict as the ability to count three and no more, the social lot of women might be treated with scientific certitude. Meanwhile the indefiniteness remains, and the limits of variation are really much wider than any one would imagine from the sameness of women’s coiffure and the favourite love-stories in prose and verse” (Prelude, 1: 2-3). For Eliot, “variation under domestication”, the first chapter of Darwin’s *Origin of Species*, consists for women in a complicated enterprise. The narrator of *Middlemarch* criticises the Victorian attitude to woman as she was considered unable to have similar accomplishments to man, thus, she was ruled as “incompeten[t]” (Beer 2004: 139-140). It is woman’s apparent incompetency that the narrator uses to criticise the Victorian perception of woman’s abilities, especially the intellectual ones in *Middlemarch*: the characters of Dorothea Brooke (Casaubon/Ladislaw) and Mary Garth (Vincy).

In depicting her characters and their actions, Eliot made use of several words that, in the Victorian age, were directly linked to science. Some critics such as Colvin and Edward Dowden have commented on her use of medical and scientific terms: “She has actually employed in a work of fiction such words as ‘dynamic’ and ‘natural selection’, at which the critic picks up his delicate ears and shies... Language, the instrument of literary art, is an instrument of ever-extending range, and the truest pedantry, in an age when the air is saturated with scientific thought, would be to reject those accessions to language which are the special gain of time. Insensibility to the contemporary movement in science is itself essentially unliterary... The cultured imagination is affected by it, as the imagination of Spen[cer’s] time was affected by his use of the neoclassical mythology of the Renaissance.” (Dowden: 54, quoted in Beer: 140)

Eliot’s female characters can be described by using Eliot’s scientific terms, as Dorothea may described as dynamic: “She was open, ardent, and not in the least self-admiring” (1: 1: 7) We should like to emphasise Eliot’s use of scientific terms from an intertextual perspective. These scientific terms help her narrators depict thorough (and sometimes intricate) characters. Thus the words that she makes use of get new meanings, such as “web” which is used with a sociological meaning, i.e. it depicts the community and the interpersonal relationships that Eliot’s narratives present. Lydgate’s scientific research offers Dorothea the prospect to become familiar with a new domain. It is this fact that underlines her open-mindedness towards reform. Dorothea maintains faith in Lydgate when the general opprobrium disapproves of his behaviour.

Furthermore, there are certain key words that can be observed in her novels – the most prominent one is “web” that appears in several of her novels. In *Middlemarch* it is first used when the narrator states the goal: “I at least have so much to do in unravelling certain human lots,
and seeing how they were woven and interwoven, that all the light I can command must be concentrated on this particular web, and not dispersed over that tempting range of relevancies called the universe” (2: 15: 117). In *Silas Marner* the weaver has a “web” of his own that he constantly builds, it symbolises the new beginning after fifteen years of solitude and sorrow; possessing a web and improving it all the time, means he and Eppie form a closed circuit around each other. In *The Mill on the Floss* the web has a negative connotation as it is used by the narrator to refer to the Tullivers’ sad life: “the mingled thread in the web of their life was so curiously twisted together that there could be no joy without a sorrow coming close upon it.” (5:7:365)

Scientific references remain constant across the span of George Eliot’s career, her novels record their development. All her novels contain positivist ideas and dilemmas of determinism and free will woven in a meticulously “web” of social realism. In her novels there can be identified three keys, as Postlethwaite argues: “observation,” “generalization” and “the organism and the medium.” (2001: 108)

From her perspective, the Victorian writer, firstly, pays attention to details by careful examination of events and feelings, secondly, finds general explanations for the characters’ individual actions and evolution and, thirdly, she achieves contextual interpretations between “the organism and the medium” (2001: 108). According to what we have just stated, Eliot’s novels consist of manifold such instances. In *Adam Bede* the narrator takes us back in the past through a historical reference: “With a single drop of ink for a mirror, the Egyptian sorcerer undertakes to reveal to any chance comer far-reaching visions of the past” (*Adam Bede*, 1: 1: 3). The largest generalisation that Eliot makes use of in her novels is her (re)presentation and analysis of female characters, of different social classes, but mainly the middle-class, through which she criticises woman’s lot in Victorian society.

Postlethwaite considers that the term “key” has a scientific reference in Eliot’s novels as through such a ‘rational’ tool the narrator accomplishes the depiction of female characters in a representative social environment, similar to the one mentioned by Eliot in her essay “The Natural History of German Life”: “The external conditions which society has inherited from the past are but the manifestation of inherited internal conditions in the human beings who compose it; the internal conditions and the external are related to each other as the organism and its medium” (110). Thus, female characters’ representation is dependent upon Victorian woman’s condition that Eliot had in mind when she depicted her in her realist novels. A female character as Gwendolen is expected to be crushed by a male counterpart that only intends to transform her into a suitable wife for, but also the other characters as in *Middlemarch* where Mary Garth’s choice of not burning Mr Featherstone’s latest will brings along Fred Vincy’s social downfall as the Garths inform Mr Farebrother: “[...] The old scoundrel wanted Mary to burn one of the wills the very night he died, when she was sitting up with him by herself, and he offered her a sum of money that he had in the box by him if she would do it. But Mary, you understand, could do no such thing—would not be handling his iron chest, and so on. Now, you see, the will he wanted burnt was this last, so that if Mary had done what he wanted, Fred Vincy would have had ten thousand pounds. The old man did turn to him at the last. That touches poor Mary close; she couldn’t help it—she was in the right to do what she did, but she feels, as she says, much as if she had knocked down somebody’s property and broken it against her will, when she was rightfully defending herself. I feel with her, somehow, and if I could make any amends to the poor lad, instead of bearing him a grudge for the harm he did us, I should be glad to do it. Now, what is your opinion, sir? Susan doesn’t agree with me. She says—tell what you say, Susan.” . . . “Mary could not have acted otherwise, even if she had known what would be the effect on Fred,” said
Mrs Garth, pausing from her work, and looking at Mr Farebrother. “And she was quite ignorant of it. It seems to me, a loss which falls on another because we have done right is not to lie upon our conscience” (4: 40: 253). Therefore, moral acts can determine other characters’ evolution. From a moral point of view, Mary Garth has acted correctly; however, she feels she has done wrong to the man she loves. Nevertheless, it is through this deterministic happening that Fred’s change is possible as he is forced to work in order to become morally eligible for Mary.

Eliot’s novels are replete with images of “the inner and outer” world; the narrator struggles to represent reality as faithfully as possible. Eliot’s realistic creed prevented her from idealising human existence. Eliot’s fine psychological analysis relies on science as Lewes wrote in Problems of Life and Mind: “Human Psychology has to seek its data in Biology and Sociology” (I: 101) and “if we desire to decipher Human Psychology we must study the Human Organism in its relations to the Social Medium” (I: 140). George Eliot must have thought the same for she studied the woman lot in its “Social Medium”, the Victorian patriarchal society.

George Eliot’s novels are gradually based on a scientific input that is at its highest peak in Middlemarch, but her earlier novels bear scientific marks. One such influence is the use of Bentham’s theory of conformity and punishment that Michel Foucault brought back to light. Bentham’s panopticon resembles Victorian society, as Eliot realistically portrayed it, through the structures that constitute it: the family of origin which is led by patriarchal laws as it is the father who fills the position of head of the family, the new family the woman enters through marriage, the community the female character lives in. All these parts form a whole that enforces discipline in order to obtain conformity and metes punishment in order to correct any deviations from the rule. Eliot presents female characters which either comply with patriarchal society or do not. Eliot’s female protagonists’ evolution underlines the scientific feature of Eliot’s realism. However, her artistic creed did not exclude sympathy as the essential element that can help her characters overcome any impediments: while she was leaving Florence, for the first time, Romola meets Savonarola whose message focuses on the concept of sympathy; in Adam Bede Dinah is the messenger that delivers sympathy to all the other characters, male and female: namely to Hetty, which offers the latter the chance to live even though in exile, to Lisbeth, who suffers after her husband’s death, to Adam after he finds out about the secret love affair between Hetty and Arthur. Dinah turns out to evolve from a non-conformist into a conformist after she renounces preaching in exchange of marrying Adam.

The use of scientific remarks in Eliot’s novels shows not only her interest in sciences, but also her ability to interpret those recent theories that Victorians were keen on. Shuttleworth considers that Lydgate’s interpretation of Dorothea’s mental state after Casaubon’s death is based on “theories of hysteria as a form of repression, and particularly sexual repression” (quoted in Trotter 2006: 44). It is due to her awareness of woman’s lot in Victorian society that Eliot is able to develop this theme later in Daniel Deronda in the representation of Gwendolen.

Eliot uses scientific references as diverse as possible; Picker argues that Eliot was also interested in sounds as a scientific field. In one of her journal entries she declared: “I am reading about plants, and Helmholtz on music” (Picker 2003: 87). In another passage of her notes she describes the vibrations coming out of a bell as result of “playing upon a flute under the bell” (Picker 2003: 87). The same idea of sound vibrations is reiterated in chapter 31 of Middlemarch where the epigraph describes the opposition between the sounds coming out of a flute and “the huge bell tremble” (31: 286, Picker 87-88). Picker also signals the simile and metaphor of electricity that the narrator of “Mr Gilfil’s Love-Story” uses (2003: 88): “The vibration rushed through Caterina like an electric shock” (183). Another scientific entry related to sounds and their effect on the human body can be quoted from The Mill on the Floss where Maggie given the
circumstances “was taken hold of and shaken […] by a wave too strong for her” (6: 7: 428).

“Wave” here is related to the effect of sound as in music wave, but we consider that Eliot also referred to the effect that Stephen’s music has on Maggie for the attraction between the two appears to be part of an electric “wave.” In the musical entertainment scene terms such as “tenors,” “troubadour,” and “antidote” suggest the variety of sciences that Eliot is able to resort to in her novels.

Eliot’s interest in science was not only related to her novel-writing; the scientific-based journeys that we have mentioned demonstrate this. A fact that is less known about Eliot and Lewes’s private life is that on the occasion of his sixty-first birthday Eliot had a telephone “installed at the Priory,” their famous London residence (The Letters of George Henry Lewes, 2: 210, quoted in Picker 2003: 104). Also, Picker quotes Eliot’s last manuscript’s beginning that was meant to be part of a novel she never published, probably begun in 1880, the year she died: “The story will take you if you please into Central England and into what have often been called the Good old times. It is a telescope you may look through a telephone you may put your ear to: but there is no compulsion” (William Baker, “A New George Eliot Manuscript,” qtd. in Picker 2003: 109)

Science is, for Eliot, an important means in her attempt to represent objectively the female self. Biological differences, which are used as excuse by man, determine woman’s inferiority to man. Eliot is in a scientific quest to “decipher Human Psychology” and the environment it appears in. (Postlethwaite 2001: 114)

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