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Christine Richards

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TOWARDS A CRITICAL REPUTATION:
HENRY JAMES ON FELIX HOLT, THE RADICAL
by Christine Richards

A productive starting point for a critical evaluation of Henry James’s criticism of George Eliot’s fiction is his unsigned review of *Felix Holt, the Radical,* which, as his first piece of criticism on her, is perhaps itself most usefully read against the background of the novel’s extremely favourable contemporary reception, for in his review James addresses the issues of the novel’s acclaim, arguing not only that the volume of praise it had already acquired was sufficient but also that Eliot’s increasing reputation would only attract more (E&W 911). This determination to call a halt to the praise showered on Eliot’s fifth novel – disregarding *Scenes of Clerical Life* – shows a certain arrogance on the part of the young critic who, by 1866, at the age of twenty-three, was far from having acquired a reputation either as a novelist or a critic. In fiction he had published only four short stories, and his relatively undistinguished first novel *Watch and Ward,* with its moments of stylistic sophistication and wit, showing glimpses of the novelist to come, was not to appear until 1870. His criticism, however, was more extensive. By the time he came to write the *Felix Holt* review he had, over a period of two years, published about twenty-five reviews. His objective at this stage does seem to have been to establish his reputation as a critic, although real evidence of this does not emerge until 1874 when he expediently turned a review of Turgenev’s *Spring Torrents* and ‘King Lear of the Steppes’ into a long critical essay which covered almost the whole Turgenev oeuvre. In 1866, on Eliot, however, when dealing with the question of why such ‘excessive homage’ had been paid to her, James recognized that the intellectual dimension of her fiction gave her a unique place in the tradition of the English novel: ‘It is so new a phenomenon for an English novelist to ... have powers of thought at all commensurate with his powers of imagination, that when a writer unites these conditions he is likely to receive excessive homage’ (E&W 911). Not surprisingly, then, James’s review is a mixture of harsh criticism and carefully modulated praise: ‘Better, perhaps, than any of George Eliot’s novels does “Felix Holt” illustrate her closely wedded talent and foibles’ (E&W 911). Yet scrutiny of his comments on Eliot’s fiction over his life-time tends to show that, as his own reputation as a novelist grew, he became increasingly generous, especially in the middle and later years. In 1877, for example, he placed the fiction of Eliot and Turgenev over that of any other living novelist on the world’s stage:

There are only two living novelists the appearance of whose new productions constitutes anything that can be called a literary event. If one of these writers is that blessing of reviewers the author of ‘Daniel Deronda’, the other is certainly the distinguished Russian whose name we have inscribed at the head of these remarks...’

Some forty years later he nostalgically recollected ‘lying on [his] bed at Swampscott, ... and reading, in ever so thrilled a state, George Eliot’s *Felix Holt,* just out, and of which I was to write, and *did* write, a review in the *Nation’.* In the Preface to *The Princess Casamassima,* too, he revalues Eliot’s fiction when he represents it not within its own terms so much as within those that suit an explanation of his own fictional emphasis and method, namely the psychological history of his characters with the power to transmit, as he thought, their moral con-
sciousness directly to the reader. Here he observes that Eliot also apparently attempts to show the histories of her characters ‘as determined by their feelings and the nature of their minds’, and it is this which makes ‘their emotions, their stirred intelligence, their moral consciousness… our very own adventure’ (E&W 1095). These comments tend to undermine twentieth-century interpretations of his criticism which imply that James always disapproved of novels with multiple plots, for none of Eliot’s, not even *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda*, figures among the ‘loose baggy monsters’ of Tolstoy, Thackeray and Dumas which James attacked on formal grounds in his Preface to *The Tragic Muse* (E&W 1107). However, despite the praise James accorded to Eliot just after the turn of the century, his last word on her in his much later autobiography shows a further variation in viewpoint. Here he reveals how personal contact with the writer in his youth affected his judgement to such an extent that he was virtually incapable of making a critical estimate of her outside what he termed ‘a living and recorded relation’ (61). Thus biography and criticism merge to the point where he skilfully avoids committing himself to the place that ‘the author of *Middlemarch* and *Silas Marner* may be conceived to have in the pride of our literature’. (Interestingly, the ambiguous praise he gives to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in his autobiography also reflects how his approach to another female writer, Harriet Beecher Stowe, changed over time.)

In the mid-1860s, however, partly because of his belief that Eliot was over-rated, and partly because of his own developing aesthetic organicism, which reveals itself in the *Felix Holt* review in his comment that Eliot’s novels are characterized by ‘that disproportion between the meagre effect of the whole and the vigorous character of the different parts’ (E&W 907), a line that ultimately led to his later, now almost legendary, condemnation of *Middlemarch* as ‘a treasure-house of details, but… an indifferent whole’ (E&W 907), James followed the examples of his contemporary critics who had expressed concern about the cumbersome plot of *Felix Holt*. He goes a stage further that these, though, arguing that in general the development of Eliot’s novels was forced, and their conclusions weak. Of three earlier poorly conceived endings, Hetty’s reprieve in *Adam Bede*, the inundation in *The Mill on the Floss* and, worse than both apparently, the reconciliation of Romola and Tessa in *Romola*, are his examples. Beside these, the plot of *Felix Holt* has no saving grace at all. It is ‘rusty’, ‘vulgar’, suffers from a forced development, and its hasty and unsatisfactory conclusion provides almost an anti-climax to the novel (E&W 907-12). Unfortunately James does not give details of its apparently forced development, but we can probably assume, along the lines of later critics, such as Kettle, that the two mysteries of parentage and the formidable structure of legal detail, which are a challenge for the reader to be quite clear – on a first reading – who knows what about whom, were at the root of his objection. He did not, at any rate, attempt to defend the novel in the later critical tradition of Thomson and van den Broek, who have argued respectively that the tortuousness of the legal plot, over which Eliot took so much care, works chiefly through its animation of the theme of slowly accruing Nemesis, and that her delays in unfolding its legal aspect, which created a web of relationships and intrigue, mean that the legal intricacies, although difficult to understand in isolation, when embedded in the narrative are relatively straightforward. James’s criticism of the conclusion of the novel lies chiefly in the inconsistency he perceived in the characterization of Felix who, implied in the title as a radical, is left at the end ‘only utterly married’ (E&W 908). Thus the promise of the title is only half kept because Felix’s passions are not brought to the right kind of head. James expected them to be
dedicated to politics instead of to marriage. The conventional wedding – and romance – of the conclusion thus spells the novel’s ruin for the author of The Portrait of a Lady.

Another of James’s criticisms is that Eliot’s representation of Felix’s opinions – rather than the opinions themselves – are subordinated to too many other fictional considerations, chiefly a preponderance of sketches of secondary figures, and too many discursive amplifications of incidental points. These last are almost certainly a reference to Eliot’s digressions, an argument developed at greater theoretical length in three of his later critical pieces on Eliot, the long 1866 essay, the review of Middlemarch (1873) and ‘Daniel Deronda: a Conversation’ (1876). In the Felix Holt notice, however, he compares the opinions and passions of Eliot’s characters with those of George Sand,13 a revealing comparison in political terms, since he always tended to associate Sand’s writing with freedom from oppression, with socialism, even with sedition: ‘To read George Sand in America was to be a Socialist, a transcendentalist, and an abolitionist’, he tells us in his review of Mademoiselle Merquem.14 For James, Sand’s socialism lay in her ‘passionate’, ‘bold’ and ‘aggressive’ attacks on narrow public morality whereas Eliot’s ‘constant’, ‘genial’ and ‘discreet’ tone (E&W 908) worked in reverse, repressing or muffling the presentation of a crisis, or shackling freedom in the depiction of a character whom Eliot might have wished, yet ultimately feared, to make consistently heroic (E&W 909). For James this is what happens to Felix, a character who, while not acting at variance with his high principles, is too frequently denied expression of them. Both they and he are too often absent from the scene. Thus, if Eliot had been able to fulfil the promise of her title by foregrounding, emboldening and impassioning Felix, politically instead of sexually, she might have had a real hero on her hands. Might. The point here is that, while veering so close to the point, James fails to pick up that the real nature of Felix’s radicalism represents no more of an agenda for working-class political change than the insipid version of Whiggery which inspires Harold Transome, namely, the rooting out of abuses such as ‘treating’. This is a politics which Kettle,15 and later Eagleton,16 have suggested denies Felix the opportunity of becoming a leader or of grappling in a serious way with the problems of popular leadership. But the difference between James’s position, and that of the later critics, lies in their interpretation of the term radical.17 In Felix Holt the word is applied to a variety of liberal rather than socialist viewpoints, including those of both Harold Transome and Felix, or indeed to anyone, it would seem, who opposes traditional Tory values and the status quo. If James’s solution to what he perceives as the defect in Felix’s character is to impassion his politics in the existing liberal tradition, and to give this a more central role, that of Kettle and Eagleton is to shift him from a position of gradualist liberalism to one of popular insurrectionism, clearly a political position too revolutionary for Eliot and, more importantly, for her conservative publisher John Blackwood. What James and Kettle share however, is a recognition that, by disarming Felix as an effective moral agent, Eliot disarms him as an effective force in the novel. James certainly has an important point here but he is well off course when he blames the lack of passion in Eliot’s characters, including Felix, on her discursive and reflective style, for Maggie Tulliver, the only character to escape this charge of his in Eliot’s fiction up to 1866, is as much embedded in her digressive and reflective discourse as any of her other characters.

Another criticism of James’s centres on the way Eliot handles Felix’s conversion to radicalism. He perceives this process as a series of ‘dramatic antecedents’ which necessarily demands
a ‘group of consequents’, equally dramatic (E&W 908-9). Undefined, these phrases are a little vague so that readers are left to assume that what he is referring to is not a series of actual incidents but Felix’s description to Rufus Lyon of the events in Scotland which led up to his conversion.

‘I laughed out loud at last to think of a poor devil like me, in a Scotch garret, with my stockings out at heel and a shilling or two to be dissipated upon, with a smell of raw haggis mounting from below, and old women breathing gin as they passed me on the stairs – wanting to turn my life into easy pleasure. Then I began to see what else it could be turned into. Not much, perhaps. This world is not a very fine place for a good many of the people in it. But I’ve made up my mind it shan’t be the worse for me, if I can help it. They may tell me I can’t alter the world – that there must be a certain number of sneaks and robbers in it, and if I don’t lie and filch somebody else will. Well, then, somebody else shall, for I won’t. That’s the upshot of my conversion, Mr Lyon, if you want to know it.’ (59)

From the above it would appear that the only ‘dramatic’ aspect of Felix’s conversion is its place in a dialogue, a position not much more sustainable than the claim that Eliot has failed to provide a group of consequents. For example, what we might take to be the first consequent is hinted at when Felix and Lyon are discussing the minister’s congregation in Sproxton, and Felix reveals that his ‘congregations’ are the Sproxton miners in the Sugar Loaf public house, a linguistic move which cleverly aligns political and religious dissent as well as indicating the nature of Felix’s radicalism. This works as a preparation for the actual scene in the Sugar Loaf which treats two aspects of Felix’s politics, first, his proselytizing tendency to convert non-voters to the gospel of temperance and education, and secondly, his intervention in the corrupt practice of treating during canvassing. We can speculate that a second consequent might be Felix’s nomination-day speech in Duffield, a further expression of his general scepticism about a delusive franchise which will by no means empower the working men who, by and large, constitute his audience. Ironically, these two scenes, more dramatic than any of James’s perceived ‘antecedents’, are actually cited by him as the most outstandingly realized scenes in the novel (E&W 910). Close scrutiny of his own theory of antecedents and consequents reveals, however, that he is somewhat inconsistent in its application. This is at its most obvious when he overlooks Felix’s relationship with Esther – the former’s female ‘congregation’, for Esther Lyons’s conversion to his politics of radicalism is a major thread in the narrative, extending from Felix’s first meeting with her when he criticizes her bourgeois admiration for Byron, the ‘mawkish’ Chateaubriand, and her genteel accomplishments, to the much later incident when her political development and sexual desire for him drive her to take the stand in court on his behalf. Yet despite this salient strand of narrative, James gives Eliot little credit for the depiction of her heroine, arguing that her great merits of intention subside without giving her a chance (E&W 909). Remarks such as these, together with his criticism of a plot which skilfully combines Esther’s political education with her rejection of her inheritance, make one wonder just how attentively James had read Felix Holt. He was, as we know, far from infallible as a critic. His incorrect assumption, for example, that Silas Marner was a Methodist instead of a Particular Baptist shows how his knowledge of church history failed to provide
him with a more subtle access to the encounter Eliot sets up between two Christian cultures in *Silas Marner*.19

On the positive side, however – and an exceedingly strong positive note does occasionally sound in the young critic’s harsh tone – James observes how the most interesting aspect of *Felix Holt* for him is Eliot’s depiction of country life in a Midlands described from a perspective of knowledge, suggestion and illustration to be found in no other English writer. Incipient in his compliment that there is nothing more powerful than the introductory chapter with its range of rustic figures, miners, tinkers, butchers, saddlers and undertakers – as good as anything she has written before (E&W 910) – is an approach to character which becomes one of the main themes of his later essay. Yet while praising Eliot’s depiction of these figures in *Felix Holt*, he overlooks the passages describing political unrest in North Loamshire, which erupt into this seemingly pastoral idyll. The coachmen, too, whose knowledge of popular local history includes the history of Transome Court itself, the place where there had been ‘a fine sight of lawsuits’ is another missed narrative cue, which if properly considered, might have tempered a view of the story as so singularly inartistic (E&W 908) and of the plot as quite so vulgar; for the narrator’s preamble gives us Sampson’s acquisition, from successive generations and popular sources, of tales of the Transomes, their bargaining away of the estate, and its consequent diversion to the Durfeys. Sampson’s knowledge of local history also includes the way Jermyn had taken his pickings, a comment which alerts the reader to the plot of legal dishonesty surrounding the claims. Thus, the complex legal complications of this much criticized plot of property and inheritance are established early, providing an informed context for a reading of Chapter One. Nor does Sampson’s coach disappear from the narrator’s colloquies with potential readers: its recurrence in Chapter VII when, on Harold’s arrival home, Sir Maximus and Lady Debarry visit Transome Court, an interactive relationship with the reader/critic is demanded, and we can attribute most, if not all, of what James perceives as the discursive amplification of incidental points to the attitudes and opinions of a narrator whose presence in the text, sometimes wryly comic, sometimes deeply ponderous, is prominent and opinionated enough to feature as a character – as indeed are those inhabiting her other fictions.20

James also has considerable praise for Eliot’s humour, but unfortunately gives no examples of it in the *Felix Holt* review, not even the comic incident on the road when Christian imparts to his shocked employers the news the Harold Transome is to defect from the Treby aristocracy by standing as a Radical for North Loamshire, or the Debarry staff gossip scene when he drops the lemon into the punch bowl on hearing how the last claim on the Transome estate had been made in the name of Henry Scaddon. In the later essay, however, James does note Eliot’s use of satire when, during Harold Transome’s speech to the electorate at Treby, the only interruption comes from a member of his own party. In the review he merely observes how her humanity colours her humour as well as her morality and rhetoric. mentioning in passing how the treatment of Mrs Poyser and Mrs Glegg rests on a broader perception of human incongruity than belongs to many masculine humorists, a point which reveals his latent anti-feminism. This patriarchal attitude is also to be found in his explanation of the popularity of Eliot’s humour, which he considers to be a reaction against the dogma that a woman has no humour, yet later he reveals himself to be part of that very dogma by arguing that Eliot’s writing contains a ‘masculine comprehensiveness’ which that of Maria Edgeworth and Jane Austen lacks.
Somewhat contradictorily, though, Eliot is also ‘feminine’, first because of her microscopic observation ‘not a myriad of whose keen notations are worth a single one of those great synthetic guesses with which a real master attacks the truth’, and secondly because of the ‘unbroken current of feeling and expression which distinguish the feminine mind’ (E&W 912). However, if James was severely critical of so many aspects of Felix Holt, its plot, its conclusion, its story, a style over-heavy with digression, and the characters of Felix, Esther and Mrs Transome – interestingly Harold Transome emerges as delicately and firmly conceived (E&W 911) – he certainly made up for it in his praise of Eliot’s morality and humanity. It is difficult to ascertain exactly what James meant by Eliot’s morality when he does not give any examples from the texts, and to complicate it even further, he sometimes uses the word sympathy as a synonym for humanity. Clearly his understanding of Eliot’s humanity does not include the portrait of Mrs Transome whom he thought occupied ‘a place disproportionate to the part she plays’ (E&W 911), and who ‘stands idle dramatically’. Thomson has argued specifically against James here, conceding that her idleness exists only in the sense that she gives the plot none of its twists. For Thomson, unlike for James, Mrs Transome is the embodiment of a tragic wretchedness and an impotent despair with which she can only look on at the slowly evolving legacy of her own deeds when the son in whom so many of her hopes have been invested, and for whom she has sinned, returns a stranger and a Nemesis: ‘the lizard’s egg, that white rounded passive prettiness, had become a brown, darting, determined lizard’.

To conclude, then, James’s review of Felix Holt represents the first impressions we have of his perception of Eliot’s talents and foibles. That he paid more attention to the foibles – the word is a euphemism given some of the vitriol he poured on the novel – than to her talent, can be put down in part to his need to establish his own credentials as a critic. The Felix Holt review was unsigned, which meant that although readers of the Nation were unaware of the piece’s authorship, members of the American East Coast were not. Editorial circles on the East Coast were closely-knit, and the style is easily recognizable as James’s. It is not without significance therefore that the 1866 essay two months later, which carried his name, is not only more temperate, but is characterized by a greater recognition of her talent, a recognition which was to remain a strong feature of his attitude towards her fiction until the end of his life.

Notes

I am grateful to the late Roger Gard for his encouragement during the preparation of this paper. It is dedicated to him.


3. These were: ‘A Tragedy of Error’ (1864), ‘The Story of a Year’ (1865), ‘A Landscape Painter’ and ‘A Day of Days’ (1866).


13. Cornelia Kelley was the first critic to suggest Sand as the unnamed female writer here, and, given James’s admiration for the representation of passion in Sand, there is no doubt that she is correct. See Cornelia P. Kelley, *The Early Development of Henry James* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1929), p. 65.


17. Rohan McWilliam interprets nineteenth-century radicalism as an attempt to democratize all levels of social life, from education to religion, expanding access to the public sphere. Respectability became a key radical issue. The libertine ethos of artisan soci-
ety in the early nineteenth-century was abandoned in favour of sobriety and moral advance, countering the middle-class view that working men were irresponsible drunks, Rohan McWilliam, *Popular Politics in Nineteenth-Century England* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), p. 47.


20. Pykett has observed the range of narratorial voices discernible in *Felix Holt* but, surprisingly, she does not synthesize this contemporary theory with her more traditional concept of plot, perceiving a separate social and love story plot, two plots which are more or less invisible, for where does one begin and the other end except in the arbitrary context of the reader? ‘George Eliot and Arnold: the narrator’s voice and ideology in *Felix Holt, the Radical’*, *Literature and History*, 11 (1985), 236.

