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GEORGE ELIOT'S IDEAL ART

By Laura Greene

George Eliot's poetry has often been considered apart from and subordinate to her prose. Her poetical characters have been labeled too unrealistic, her verse stilted, the content muddled with abstraction: Eliot's early biographer Mathilde Blind states of *The Spanish Gypsy* (1868) that 'Zarca, the gipsy chief, is perhaps the most vividly drawn of George Eliot's purely ideal characters – characters which never have the flesh-and-blood reality of her Mrs. Poysers, her Silas Marners, and her dear little Totties and Eppies'. Blind states that Eliot's 'thoughts, instead of being naturally winged with melody, seem mechanically welded into song'.¹ For Eliot's contemporaries, her poetry sits uneasily next to her prose, not only falling short of the realism of her novels but lacking the undefinable and transcendent quality that characterizes true poetry. But the assumption latent in Blind's review and others was that Eliot was attempting to do in verse what she had so successfully done in her prose, when in fact, the impetus and essence of poetry, as Eliot understands it, is to transcend the form and function of prose writing. Take Eliot's critique of Robert Browning's *Men and Women*: '[Browning] rarely soars above a certain table-land – a footing between the level of prose and the topmost heights of poetry. He does not take possession of our souls and set them aglow, as the greatest poets – the greatest artists do'.²

Eliot's evaluation ironically echoes the reviews levelled at her own work: in an 1874 review of *The Legend of Jubal, and other Poems*, *The Standard* proclaims that Eliot 'lacks, it seems to us, that undefinable something that separates poetry from prose or from mere verse, and the want of which leaves the most poetical of prose writers [...] insufferably bad poets proper'.³ Nevertheless, Eliot's language in her review of Browning introduces an aesthetic that notably does not centre the real. Poetry, instead, occupies a place 'above the table-land' of prose, soaring over the materials of fiction. Rather than being a novel in verse, poetry, as Eliot writes in 'Notes on Form in Art' (1868), is superior to any other art as 'the fullest expression of the human soul'.⁴ In this essay, I will explore how Eliot's poetry, distinct from her novels, is informed by idealist aesthetics. Introducing Eliot's knowledge of various theories of art in 'A College Breakfast Party' (1878), I will examine Eliot's idealist conception of the genesis of art in her biblical poem 'The Legend of Jubal' (1874).

'A College Breakfast Party' exemplifies the interest Eliot took not only in philosophy but in theories of art beyond the realism for which she is known. This long poem follows a Socratic dialogue between 'Young Hamlet' and his companions, in which they explore the nebulous terms 'Matter, Force, | Self,

Not-self, Being, Seeming, Space and Time'.⁵ This 'downright plunge into metaphysics', as Leslie Stephen describes it in his 1902 review, is capped by a consideration of aesthetics and the role of poetry within these wider philosophical debates.⁶ Though no conclusion is reached, Hamlet ends the discussion by upholding the 'Ideal' in art:

The Ideal has discoveries which ask
No test, no faith, save that we joy in them:
A new-found continent, with spreading lands
Where pleasure charters all, where virtue, rank,
Use, right, and truth have but one name, Delight.
Thus Art's creations, when etherealized
To least admixture of the grosser fact
Delight may stamp as highest. (178)

Hamlet's theory of art appears to be antithetical to Eliot's: the 'admixture of the grosser fact' references an adherence to literary realism or the faithful representation of nature and society, which defines Eliot's novels. 'A new-found continent [...] | Where pleasure charters all [...]' [ll. 791–92] appears to be worlds away from *Middlemarch* or *St Ogg's*. Countering Hamlet's sentiments is Guildenstern's historicization of art and spiritual progress. He asks the party, '[...] Is your beautiful | A seedless, rootless flower, or has it grown | With human growth [...]' constituting 'the rising sum | Of human struggle, order, knowledge?' (177, [ll. 735–37]) While this understanding of the beautiful as an extension, not a transcendence, of the real, seems more indicative of Eliot's position in her fiction, there is an extent to which Eliot might be said to side with Hamlet. In her 'Notes on Form in Art', Eliot delineates that the prerogative of poetry is 'more or less not only determined by emotion but intended to express it' (180). Eliot extends this emphasis on feeling to all fiction as a process of finding 'what destiny pleases; we make what pleases us – or what we think will please others'. 'Joy', 'pleasure', and 'Delight' in art are not mere by-products of representation but rather facilitate more intense artistic expression. Eliot's observation that 'in the range of poetry we see wide distances of degree in the combination of emotive force with sequences that are not arbitrary and individual but true and universal' implies that aesthetic experience should be analogous to philosophic truth (181).

As Kimberly J. Stern and Hee Eun Helen Lee have observed, 'A College Breakfast Party' complicates, rather than clarifies, Eliot's philosophical views, exemplifying the 'uncertainty' and 'dissonances' present in philosophic discourse.⁷ But regardless of the extent to which Eliot agrees with any of her Shakespearean characters, the inclusion of these ideas, I suggest, complicates her realism. Though indisputable in her prose, there is a tendency to extend

realism, or a certain prescriptive definition of realism, to all aspects of Eliot's thinking: Richard Stang, for instance, has argued that Eliot's 'hard realism' governs all her writings, including her literary criticism and poetry.⁸ This view is supported by Eliot's 1856 review of John Ruskin's *Modern Painters*, in which she states that 'The truth of infinite value that he teaches is *realism* – the doctrine that all truth and beauty are to be attained by a humble and faithful study of nature, and not by substituting vague forms, bred by imagination on the mists of feeling, in place of definite, substantial reality'.⁹ Gillian Beer, Sally Shuttleworth, and others have extensively established how Eliot's realism was underpinned by various scientific theories.¹⁰ But as Gregory Tate has put forward, the materialist psychological theories that Eliot garnered from George Henry Lewes and Herbert Spencer were accompanied in her poetry by a metaphysical 'model of subjectivity [...] anchored in the concept of the soul'.¹¹ Building on Tate's point, I would suggest that while Eliot's understanding of realism hinges on observation and mimesis inculcated through the writings of Lewes, Darwin, and Spencer, her theory of poetry partially rests in the aesthetic theories of the German Idealists, particularly those of G. W. F. Hegel.

In 1842, Lewes undertook the 'task of introducing Hegel and German aesthetics' to an English audience.¹² Here, Lewes defines 'Æsthetics' as 'the *philosophy of Art* [...] the à-priori theory of Art – the absolute statement of the conditions, means and end of Art, rigorously deduced from philosophic principles' (4). Eliot's incorporation of such 'philosophic principles' into her poetry perhaps accounts for some of the critiques leveled against her: *The Guardian* labeled *The Spanish Gypsy* as 'a great intellectual work' rather than 'a noble poem', not recognizing that perhaps Eliot understood these to be the same.¹³ I would then agree with Stern that Eliot conceives of philosophy as 'a kind of poetry; poetry a kind of philosophy' (103). For both Lewes and Eliot, far from being separate endeavours, poetry and philosophy are united under the banner of absolute truth. Consequently, poetic truth is not an entirely realist conception, achieved through the 'faithful study of nature' ('Art and Belle Lettres', 343); rather, as Lewes states, 'The laws, then, of æsthetics, when truly analysed and posited, are immutable; for they are not those of taste and fashion, but the eternal principles of the human mind'. These principles grant knowledge of and realize the absolute, which Lewes defines as the 'totality of the universe both of mind and matter'. Lewes goes on to clarify how, for Hegel, 'this Absolute, conceived under the form of thought, is truth; when conceived under the form of nature or of external phænomena, is Beauty. Thus Beauty is spirit contemplating the spiritual in an object. Art is the Absolute incarnate in the beautiful' (44-45). While a realist aesthetic would attempt to accurately represent what is beautiful or true in the object, Hegel's aesthetics posits a

subject that represents the object as a spiritual extension of itself. Eliot, I would suggest, understands certain aspects of artistic production in this way as she writes, ‘what is a structure but a set of relations selected and combined in accordance with the sequence of mental states in the constructor, or with the *preconception* of a whole which he has *inwardly evolved*?’ (‘Notes’, 180, emphasis added). Poetry ultimately begins with the subject, not the object of representation.

Various critics have previously signaled Eliot’s Hegelianism and broader idealism: Darrel Mansell has noted the influence of Hegel’s view of tragedy on Eliot.¹⁴ Jonathan Loesberg allies Eliot’s idealism with her ethics or conception of sympathy, arguing that ‘despite her realism, or our understanding of it at any rate, Eliot’s aesthetic was more nearly German idealist’.¹⁵ Isobel Armstrong also has recently argued for Eliot’s ‘innovation’ in reading Hegel’s ‘master/slave through the passional relations of modern marriage and its manifold economic and other subjugation’ in *Middlemarch*.¹⁶ But with the possible exception of Ruth Abbot, who, in exploring the relationship between ideas and form in Eliot’s poetry, asserts that Eliot’s ‘interest in Hegel has [...] been underplayed’, these references to Eliot’s idealism tend to pass over her poetry.¹⁷ This is surprising given in her critical writings, Eliot most frequently allies the ideal with poetry, as she asserts in her ‘Notes’, poetry’s ‘medium, language, is the least imitative, and is in the most complex relation with what it expresses – Form begins in the choice of rhythms and images as signs of a mental state’ (182).

It would be helpful here to distinguish between Eliot’s understanding of poetic form and poetry. Eliot delineates that ‘*Poetry* begins when passion weds thought by finding expression in an image; but *poetic form* begins with a choice of elements, however meagre, as the accordant expressions of emotional states’. Rather than signaling imitation in art or the rules of verse, poetic form embodies the dynamic relationship between the ‘emotional states’ of the poet and this expression in verse, what Eliot terms ‘emotional thinking’ (‘Notes’, 182–83). But as Herbert Tucker has observed ‘poetry is the literary domain where “form” and “idea” are codeterminant, where the structure not only delivers the content but constitutes it’.¹⁸ Pertinent to this idea is Hegel’s separation in the *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences* (1817) of ‘form’ from ‘content’ and their ideal union in art:

And if content means no more than what is palpable and obvious to the senses, all philosophy and logic in particular must be at once acknowledged to be void of content, that is to say, of content perceptible to the senses. Even ordinary forms of thought however, and the common usage of language, do not in the least restrict the appellation of content to what is perceived by the senses, or to what has a being in place and

time. A book without content is, as every one knows, not a book with empty leaves, but one of which the content is as good as none. We shall find as the last result on closer analysis, that by what is called content an educated mind means nothing but the presence and power of thought. But this is to admit that thoughts are not empty forms without affinity to their content, and that in other spheres as well as in art the truth and the sterling value of the content essentially depend on the content showing itself identical with the form.¹⁹

Hegel's distinction mirrors Eliot's: while form begins with the senses and is a more rudimentary aspect of content, 'content' constitutes a more metaphysical coupling of sensation or emotion with thought in the poet's consciousness. While references to Eliot's direct reading of Hegel are scarce, it is clear she encountered his ideas through other channels. She was well aware of Lewes' treatment of Hegel in *The Biographical History of Philosophy* (1845-6), which underwent significant revision between editions.²⁰ Eliot was also a correspondent and friend of Benjamin Jowett, whom she frequently visited in Oxford.²¹ Known for his translations of Plato, which he and Eliot discuss in their letters, Jowett was also, as W. David Shaw has detailed, responsible for introducing 'Hegel to Oxford in the late 1840s', and was the teacher and mentor of T. H. Green, one of the founders of British Idealism, whom Eliot met in 1877.²²

Lewes' admiration of Hegel eventually shifted to deep scepticism, but the influence of idealist aesthetics, if not metaphysics, remains apparent in Lewes' writing and further illuminates the distinction between Eliot's realism and idealism. In his 1858 article 'Realism in Art: Recent German Fiction' Lewes asserts that 'Art always aims at the representation of Reality, *i.e.* of Truth; and no departure from truth is permissible, except such as inevitably lies in the nature of the medium itself. Realism is thus the basis of all Art, and its antithesis is not Idealism, but *Falsism*', a sentiment seconded in 'The Principles of Success in Literature' (1865).²³ As Lewes sets out, 'A poetical mind sees noble and affecting suggestions in details which the prosaic mind will interpret prosaically. And the true meaning of Idealism is precisely this vision of realities in their highest and most affecting form'.²⁴ Lewes' comments are principally stylistic rather than philosophical; yet, Lewes makes a crucial distinction between 'idealization' as a departure from the real and the 'ideal' as an embodiment of higher truth, which he aligns with fiction ('prosaic') and poetry ('poetical mind') respectively. Thus, the 'ideal' for Eliot can be further clarified: rather than exemplifying Lewes' '*Falsism*', the ideal in Eliot's poetry is not only 'a moral conception and a scientific tool', as George Levine has suggested, but also a philosophic and aesthetic stance.²⁵

Exemplifying Eliot's theorization of poetry as an 'ideal' union of feeling and thought, form and content, is her poem 'The Legend of Jubal', which

follows the descendants of Cain and the creation of music. Each of Jubal's brothers has some 'ambition' and 'action-shaping need'. Though Jubal shares the creative power of his brothers, he also possesses 'a frame | Fashioned to finer senses, which became | A yearning for some hidden soul of things'.²⁶ Already, there is an aesthetic ('finer senses') and metaphysical ('hidden soul') superiority granted to him. Listening to his brother's hammer, Jubal begins to hear 'some melody, | Wherein dumb longings inward speech has found' (48-49, ll. 252-3). As an artist, Jubal does not merely recreate the sounds he hears but actively constructs a melody, ideally embodying all aspects of emotion, experience, and truth:

The hollow vessel's clang, the clash, the boom,
 Like light that makes wide spiritual room
 And skyey spaces in the spaceless thought,
 Jubal such enlarged passion brought
 That love, hope, rage, and all experience,
 Were fused in vaster being, fetching thence
 Concords and discords, cadences and cries
 That seemed from some world-shrouded soul to rise,
 Some rapture more intense, some mightier rage,
 Some living sea that burst the bounds of man's brief age.

(49, ll. 258-67)

In these lines, there is no 'idealization' of reality or anxiety to absolve the negative; rather, this negativity or opposition is the catalyst for a transcendence from subjectivity through an artistic ideal. Jubal's music, and by extension, Eliot's poetry, attempts to contain all 'concords and discords, cadences and cries'. Though Jubal's music begins within the bounds of the subjective, the materials of both life and art are ultimately subsumed within a 'vaster being': 'rapture' and 'rage' must be amplified and 'fused', for the confines of 'man's brief age' to be overcome by a 'living sea' – a fitting image for Hegel's absolute. The imagery of art 'burst[ing] the bounds' of the temporal is embodied in the alexandrine form of this last line, which 'bursts the bounds' of the poem's iambic pentameter. This is a moment in which Eliot attempts to unite form with content and underscores the value she places in music and poetry as a means to achieve objective or universal knowledge.

Within Eliot's poetry, music represents a distinctive epistemology, imagined in 'Jubal' as 'melted speech – Melted with tears, smiles, glances – that can reach | More quickly through our frame's deep-winding night, | And without thought raise thought's best fruit, delight' (49, ll. 272-5). These lines are strikingly similar to those sentiments of Hamlet's, whereby 'Delight', realized through the spontaneous discoveries of the ideal, becomes the purpose of art ('A College Breakfast Party', 178, [ll. 789–96]). Music can

pierce the veil of appearance, man's 'deep-winding night' (l. 274), through sound. Eliot's valuation of music can also be directly tied to Hegel, as she writes in an 1848 letter to John Sibree,

I agree with you as to the inherent superiority of music – as that questionable woman Countess Hahn-Hahn says, painting and sculpture are but an idealizing of our actual existence. Music arches over this existence with another and a diviner. Amen too, to that ideen-voll observation of Hegel's. We hardly know what it is to feel for human misery until we have heard a shriek, and a more perfect hell might be made out of sounds than out of any preparation of fire and brimstone.²⁷

Eliot distinguishes between particular forms of art: painting and sculpture merely idealize the real, whereas music transcends the real, offering a more 'divine' yet universal experience. Notably, Hegel categorizes sculpture as the 'classical' type of art, whereas painting, music, and poetry are the 'romantic' arts. Eliot's coupling of painting and sculpture could be accounted for in Hegel's treatment of both these forms for their 'spatial sensuousness' versus the subjectivity and greater 'abstraction' of music and poetry.²⁸ Eliot herself allies these two forms of art closely as she states that poetry is 'made musical by the continual intercommunication of sensibility and thought', or emotion and ideas ('Notes', 183).

In 'Jubal', Eliot centres art not merely as a passing experience of beauty or vehicle for accurate representation but as the active process of realizing an absolute.

For as the delicate stream of odour wakes
The thought-wed sentience and some image makes
From out the mingled fragments of the past,
Finely compact in wholeness that will last,
So streamed as from the body of each sound
Subtler pulsations, swift as warmth, which found
All prisoned germs and all their powers unbound,
Till thought self-luminous flamed from memory,
And in creative vision wandered free.
Then Jubal, standing, rapturous arms upraised,
And on the dark with eager eyes he gazed,
As had some manifested god been there.
It was his thought he saw: the presence fair
Of unachieved achievement, the high task,
The struggling unborn spirit that doth ask
With irresistible cry for blood and breath,
Till feeding its great life we sink in death.

(50, ll. 290-306)

In his *Aesthetics*, Hegel theorizes music, as a romantic art, as one of ‘temporal ideality’, with sound ‘[liberating] the ideal content from its immersion in matter’ (§ 113, 95). In these lines, sound is tied to its materiality, yet, it is liberated (‘unbound’) in its dissemination. The sensorial and material experience of hearing Jubal’s music, with its ‘subtle pulsations’ and ‘warmth’, is just one aspect of the ‘wholeness’ or absolute, embodied in Jubal’s thought, constituting both subjectivity (‘thought-wed sentience’) and creative freedom. Thus, these lines reflect Hegel’s definition of poetry as ‘the universal art of the mind which has become free in its own nature and which is not tied to find its realization in external sensuous matter, but expatiates itself exclusively in the inner space and inner time of the ideas and feelings’, as Jubal’s ‘thought self-luminous [...] in creative vision wandered free’ (§ 114, 96). These lines impress that the infinite, realized through art, is no less powerful for belonging to human consciousness.

‘The Legend of Jubal’ centers artistic creation in consciousness as a union of feeling and thought, the aesthetic and the speculative. The product of this subjective union is not individual but rather implies or begins to realize a ‘vaster being’ or absolute. Inverting the emphasis on the temporality and tragedy of everyday human lives in her novels, the lines above privilege mind over matter and art above life. Jubal’s being, and that of all artists, is subsumed in the ‘great life’ of their art, which precedes and will outlast them, imagined in particularly idealist language as a ‘struggling unborn spirit’ (l. 304). Eliot’s engagement with idealism begins to clarify the aesthetic distance between her poetry and fiction. Though realism unquestionably dictates and defines Eliot’s novels and much of her intellectual life, realism cannot entirely explicate the metaphysical power that she grants particular art forms such as poetry. This revises what many have conceived as a failure of Eliot’s realism in her poetry as an aesthetic that attempts to incorporate itself within nineteenth-century theories of art and philosophy. Eliot’s ‘ideal’ art does not merely imitate reality but attempts to render it as a consummate whole.

NOTES

- 1 Mathilde Blind, *George Eliot* (London: W. H. Allen, 1888), pp. 166, 168.
- 2 George Eliot, ‘Belles Lettres’, *Westminster Review*, 65 (1856), p. 163.
- 3 Review of ‘A Volume of Poems by George Eliot’, *The Standard* (1874), p. 5.
- 4 George Eliot, ‘Notes on Form in Art’, in *The Complete Shorter Poetry of George Eliot*, ed. by Antonie Gerard van den Broek and William Baker, 2 vols (London: Routledge, 2016), p. 183.

- 5 George Eliot, 'A College Breakfast Party', *Macmillan's Magazine*, 38 (1878), p. 162, [ll. 45–46].
- 6 William Baker, *Critics on George Eliot* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1973), p. 46.
- 7 Kimberly J. Stern, 'The Poetics of Criticism: Philosophical Discourse in "A College Breakfast Party"', *George Eliot – George Henry Lewes Studies*, 60/61 (2011), p. 92; Hee Eun Helen Lee, 'Dissonant Poetics in George Eliot's "A College Breakfast Party"', *Victorian Poetry*, 61 (2023), p. 57.
- 8 Richard Stang, 'The Literary Criticism of George Eliot', *PMLA*, 72 (1957), p. 956.
- 9 George Eliot, 'Art and Belles Lettres', *Westminster Review*, 65 (1856), p. 343.
- 10 Gillian Beer, *Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction*. 3rd edn, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Sally Shuttleworth, *George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Science: The Make-Believe of a Beginning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).
- 11 Gregory Tate, *The Poet's Mind: The Psychology of Victorian Poetry 1830–1870* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 128.
- 12 G. H. Lewes, review of *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik*, by G. W. F. Hegel, *British and Foreign Review*, 13 (1842), p. 49.
- 13 Review of *The Spanish Gypsy*, by George Eliot, *The Guardian*, 24 (1868), p. 720.
- 14 Darrel Mansell, 'A Note on Hegel and George Eliot', *The Victorian Newsletter*, 27 (1965), pp. 12–15.
- 15 Jonathan Loesberg, 'Aesthetics, Ethics, and Unreadable Acts in George Eliot', in *Knowing the Past*, ed. by Suzy Anger (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), p. 122.
- 16 Isobel Armstrong, 'George Eliot, Hegel, and *Middlemarch*', *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 29 (2020), p. 15.
- 17 Ruth Abbott, 'George Eliot, Meter, and the Matter of Ideas: The Yale Poetry Notebook', *ELH*, 82 (2015), p. 1196.
- 18 Herbert F. Tucker, 'Quantity and Quality: The Strange Case of George Eliot, Minor Poet', *George Eliot – George Henry Lewes Studies*, 60/61 (2011), pp. 23–4.
- 19 William Wallace, *The Logic of Hegel: Translated from the Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1892), § 133, p. 244.
- 20 In a letter to Sara Sophia Hennell, Eliot writes that 'Mr. Lewes has got so interested in various parts of his revision – reading and re-reading Leibnitz, Hegel, and much of Kant' for the fourth edition of *The Biographical History of Philosophy*. See George Eliot to Sara Sophia Hennell, 18 November 1870, in *The George Eliot Letters*, ed. by Gordon S. Haight, 9 vols (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954–78), V (1955), p. 122.
- 21 E. A. McCobb cites these visits to Jowett as the inspiration for 'A College Breakfast Party'. See E. A. McCobb, "'Daniel Deronda" as Will and Representation: George Eliot and Schopenhauer', in *The Modern Language Review*, 80 (1985), p. 535.
- 22 W. David Shaw, *The Lucid Veil: Poetic Truth in the Victorian Age* (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), p. 234; 'GHL Diary', 19 May 1877, in *The George Eliot Letters*, ed. by Gordon S. Haight, 9 vols (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954–78), VI (1856), p. 375.
- 23 G. H. Lewes, 'Realism in Art: Recent German Fiction', *Westminster Review*, 6 (1856), p. 493.

- 24 G. H. Lewes, *The Principles of Success in Literature*, ed. by Fred N. Scott (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1892), p. 82.
- 25 George Levine, 'George Eliot's Hypothesis of Reality', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 35 (1980), p. 3.
- 26 George Eliot, 'The Legend of Jubal', in *The Complete Shorter Poetry of George Eliot*, ed. by Antonie Gerard van den Broek and William Baker, 2 vols (London: Routledge, 2016), p. 45, ll. 148–50.
- 27 George Eliot to John Sibree, 11 February 1848, in *The George Eliot Letters*, ed. by Gordon S. Haight, 9 vols (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954–78), I (1954), p. 247.
- 28 G. W. F. Hegel, *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics*, ed. by Michael Inwood (Penguin, 2004), § 110–115, pp. 95–97.