George Eliot, Presentism and Generational Thinking

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JVC Roundtable: Born in 1819

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‘My self-consciousness was heightened to that pitch of intensity in which our own emotions take the form of a drama which urges itself imperatively on our contemplation, and we begin to weep, less under the sense of our suffering than at the thought of it.’[[2]](#footnote-2)

It may seem odd to open a discussion of George Eliot’s generational thinking with an epigraph from one of her very few texts set in, and about, the presence of the present. ‘The Lifted Veil’ (1859), after all, is not only rare in its proleptic storyline, in which its narrator, Latimer, moves into a future he has already envisioned thanks to an uncanny gift of clairvoyance; it is also unusual in its experiment with first person narration. But these aspects of Eliot’s story throw into relief how and why the more conventional canon of her novels, set in a recent past framed by an omniscient narrator, use generational thought. To be conscious of the present – fully alert and aware of all the currents of feeling – risks nothing less than paralysing self-consciousness; inter-subjective experience is displaced by an abstracted drama in which the self is always centre stage. Latimer’s insight into the thoughts of his contemporaries is ‘like a preternaturally heightened sense of hearing, making audible to one a roar of sound where others find perfect stillness’ (18). Exhausted by the ‘fermenting heap’ of egoism and frivolities he hears all around him, Latimer’s heart gives out and he dies in absolute isolation, anticipating Eliot’s later prediction of what happens to those who hear ‘the roar on the other side of silence’.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Present existence, present feelings, present politics, in Eliot’s hands, constitute a din of egotism. We need the past in order to make sense of the present and thinking through retrospect is the way in which her fiction gives space to an analytical reflection of now. Her use of historical form represents a freedom from the intensive individualism of present experience and allows the fine network of relations between self and world to be perceptible. In her late *Impressions of* *Theophrastus Such* – another rare experiment in first person narration of the present – the narrator of ‘Shadows of the Coming Race’ envisages a future world run by machines, liberating ‘the earth’s atmosphere [from] screaming consciousnesses which, in our comparatively clumsy race, make an intolerable noise and fuss to each other about every petty ant-like performance, looking on at all work only as it were to spring a rattle here or blow a trumpet there, with a ridiculous sense of being effective’.[[4]](#footnote-4) Pattern, structure, community, collectivity – and, indeed, generation -- are clearest in retrospect for Eliot.

Eliot’s historical mode is often a means by which her work probes the uneven developments of her own present of high capitalist modernity. But in Eliot’s hands that critique is not one easily aligned with historical materialism. Eliot’s works embody history as organic development that is generational in its transmission and a slow shift in structures of feeling in its processes of change.[[5]](#footnote-5) In her later novels, however, modernity and its discontents become tangible to characters within the narrative and that sense of historical experience is expressed through the medium of generational consciousness. If ‘The Lifted Veil’ explores the paralysing self-consciousness of a pure presentism, *Felix Holt* and *Daniel Deronda* start to envision characters aware of their own historical moment as a generation and approach the problem of collective consciousness in and of a political present.

In a recent intervention on presentism in *Victorian Studies*, Benjamin Morgan suggests:

A presentism adapted from Ruskin would invert what [Frederic] Jameson called ‘an essentially historicist perspective, in which our readings of the past are vitally dependent on our experience of the present’; it would name, instead, a perspective in which our readings of the present are vitally dependent upon our experience of the past.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Morgan’s perceptive inversion identifies some of the uses of the past Eliot shared with Ruskin and many of her generational contemporaries born in 1819. For what is *Daniel Deronda* if not a novel that strives in its formal twisting of *fabula* and *sjuzet* and its plots of discovered inheritance and the rewriting of the present, to manifest that malleability of present perspective by the past? But Eliot is a novelist for now, more than ever, at her bicentenary in 2019, because her works go further than this to confront readers directly with problems arising from a strongly presentist use of history: problems that Ruskin – and some current advocates of ‘strategic presentism’ – tend to avoid. [[7]](#footnote-7) How can the past be ‘experienced’ in the present and who gets to experience it; how can anyone ‘read’ the present in its form of a fluctuating drama of egos; is it possible to forge a collective identity in modernity without the resources of the past? To think of Eliot as a member of a generation – born in 1819 – is to think about how her works and her own life-story map a kind of loving hatred for the collective force of the past against which modern individuals strive and fail and strive again to reach a sense of connectedness with their present moment.

In formal terms, Eliot’s tendency to set her novels in the recent past – what I have termed elsewhere the ‘just’ past - puts her at one with the generation that followed Walter Scott. [[8]](#footnote-8) Scott’s *Waverley; or, ‘Tis Sixty Years Since* (1814) delighted Eliot and her fellow readers born in 1819 (including of course Queen Victoria herself) with an account of the ‘characters and passions’ of the ‘last generation’ designed for those of ‘this critical generation’.[[9]](#footnote-9) The narrowly historical settings of *Adam Bede*, The *Mill on the Floss*, *Silas Marner*, *Felix Holt* and *Middlemarch* not only amplify the contemporary sense of writing in the shadow of Walter Scott, but also demand that readers recognize the organic relation of present to past. ‘Three-quarters of a century ago’, Eliot’s Theophrastus Such muses, ‘is not a distance that lends much enchantment to the view. We are familiar with the average men of that period, and are still consciously encumbered with its bad contrivances and mistaken acts.’[[10]](#footnote-10) Eliot’s narrative mode of inter-generational history implicates readers as agents in the often violent processes of nineteenth-century modernity since 1819, travelling forward into a new technological future away from the embarrassments of one’s elders, yet constrained by the inherited forms of that past.

In Eliot’s early works, the use of the term ‘generation’ itself clusters around the interjections of her omniscient narrator. Mirroring Scott in her construction of a narrative frame of the ‘just’ past, the language of generation recurs across the novels set in her native Warwickshire as a standard part of how the narrator constructs a collective identity with the implied reader. ‘Our’ modernity is dependent on frames and scenes of generational distinction. In *Scenes of Clerical Life*, *Adam Bede*, *Mill on the Floss* and *Silas Marner* the term is central to the narrator’s presentation of a certain *mise en scène*: a household (‘Mr and Mrs Glegg at Home’; ‘Adam Visits the Hall Farm’; the squire’s hospitality in Raveloe), a church with congregation (‘Amos Barton’, ‘Mr Gilfil’s Love Story’). In this earlier iteration of generational narrative, the works write back to Ruskin’s reflections on historicism: something Eliot quotes at length in her essay, the ‘Natural History of German Life’. On the continent, Ruskin argues, ‘we feel the ancient world to be a real thing, and at one with the new …all is continuous; and the words “from generation to generation” understandable here’.[[11]](#footnote-11) For Eliot – and I would argue for Ruskin and their peers born in 1819 – there is no such sense of continuity and ‘incarnate history’ in England, a nation, unlike much of continental Europe, modernized by what Eliot identifies as ‘Protestantism and commerce’. Instead the presence of the past needs to be summoned by ‘an effort of memory and reflection’: an effort, I have suggested, Eliot increasingly formulates through her works as a kind of prosthetic memory for the severed subjects of modernity.[[12]](#footnote-12)

The omniscient narrator, in the early Warwickshire novels, summons up the past as a generation. This past is not the architectural remains treasured by Ruskin, but what we might now figure in that fashionable critical term, ‘intangible heritage’: how people set the table, conducted themselves at it, sang liturgy, and celebrated festivals.[[13]](#footnote-13) Eliot’s language of generation is thus central to how her works give form to the past not so much as history, but as ethnography.[[14]](#footnote-14) In Eliot’s hands, the generational past is fungible, preserved and re-presented in writing. Whereas Mrs Tulliver weeps at the thought of her carefully stitched marking being picked out of the heritable materials of her linen cupboard, whirled into the marketplace as anonymous commodities by family bankruptcy, *The Mill on the Floss* itself embodies the translation of intangible generational pasts into portable affect. Eliot’s early provincial novels embody a portable sense of the past for an unrooted and increasingly globalized generation of mid-nineteenth-century readers. The generational identity of her implied readers is constructed as a negative: a disparate band, lacking the shared culture of the recent past.

If we think about writers supremely conscious of their own generational identity in its own right, by contrast, the Bloomsbury Group tops the list.[[15]](#footnote-15) The acute sense of finding new art forms to articulate the rupture of past from present in the wake of the First World War is palpable in the works of Virginia Woolf, Roger Fry, Clive Bell and many others. In that context, massive shifts in geopolitical structures are made manifest in formal experiment and a very real sense – quite contrary to Scott’s historicist continuities – that consciousness itself had been altered: no longer could it be contended that there were ‘passions common to men at all stages of society … which have alike agitated the human heart’.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Eliot’s later works, I want to suggest, push the novel towards that sense of modernity as rupture and formal upheaval enforced by global historical change; a direction that can be mapped by characters coming to their own sense of generational consciousness and manifesting an encounter with historical experience. In *Felix Holt, the Radical* and *Daniel Deronda* protagonists come to understand their own modernity and embody a dynamic force of change driven by troubled inheritance. In *Middlemarch* (1871), a concept of generationality is evident in the paratext of the novel’s eight book titles: ‘Old and Young’; ‘The Dead Hand’; ‘Sunset and Sunrise’. The table of contents imposes generational sequence as a means of interpreting the ‘just past’ of 1830s, but the majority of characters within the novel view read their relatively bounded provincial lives through parataxis. To live and to experience Middlemarch as a character, that is, is to look sideways across the variety of forms of marriage, money, desire, ambition, captured in deliberately narrow confines of town and its outlying villages, rather than to come to a sense of consciousness of an historical moment. In this lies the extraordinary power of that novel’s narrator, in sole possession, for the last time in Eliot’s works, of history as a process that shapes experience, elaborating the change that is to make – that has already made – Middlemarch a place of impossible return as ‘fresh threads of connection’ weave it into the global nineteenth century. If ‘Destiny stands by sarcastic with our dramatis personae folded in her hand’, then the narrator of *Middlemarch* ensures, equally, that History stands by her side, clutching the generational consciousness of characters. With the markedly more mobile plots and characters of *Felix Holt* and *Daniel Deronda*, however, comes a qualitative shift towards the articulation of history as lived experience, articulated through generational consciousness. The language of generations seeps outwards from the omniscient narrator’s control of historical distance to the speech of characters who themselves try to become agents in a world system of competing histories.

Lauren Goodlad has suggested that novels of this slightly later period reflect the emergence of a distinctively globalized ‘geopolitical aesthetic’. For Goodlad, Walter Benjamin’s categorization of two types of experience in modernity is vital for understanding the work of the realist novel in registering such ‘repressed global histories’.[[17]](#footnote-17) Whilst *Erlebnis* signifies ‘experience in its most individualized, intense, and ephemeral form’, *Erfahrung* implies ‘experience in the form of cumulative, historical engagement’.[[18]](#footnote-18) If ‘The Lifted Veil’ embodies the nightmarish possibilities of extreme *Erlebnis*, paralysed by super-saturation in present sensation, Felix Holt and Gwendolen Harleth enact an enforced journey to *Erfahrung* through an affective recoil from the past generations that surrounds them. Felix and Gwendolen map a trajectory in which disgust and fear of the past generation propel them forwards into futurity and modernity as historically conscious subjects. The just past settings of Eliot’s novels contain past generations as prosthetic memories; aids to a sense of retrospective collective attachment through the forms of realist fiction. When it comes to the experience of characters within her later novels, however, a sudden forced awareness of one’s own place in a generation is a thing from which characters often recoil.

Felix Holt seems to hate the habits and lifeways of his family and the workers whom he strives to educate and lead in his struggle for political reform. Individual talent, the narrative implies, opens a future in which Felix is destined to rise and leave his class and place of origin behind, but Felix’s belief in the necessity of collective action leads him to reconstruct an attachment to the midlands provincial generation from which he seemed bound to escape: ‘Whatever the hopes for the world may be – whether great or small – I am a man of this generation; I will try to make life less bitter for the few within my reach’.[[19]](#footnote-19) The result may, in Felix’s case, seem to be failure and obscurity, but the dynamic principle of a recoil to futurity becomes increasingly evident in Eliot’s late works. We need the past, Eliot’s works suggest, to spring us into a future. The present moment, however, remains a tangle of circumstance in which the individual is overwhelmed by the crowd of competing egos and passions – whether in the shape of Latimer’s poisonous country house, or Felix’s polling day riot. This, I would suggest, is in part due to Eliot’s coruscating scepticism about collective identities as a social force in the present– particularly those of class – a subject I will return to in my more biographical coda.

If Felix is propelled by a hatred for his own history, Gwendolen Harleth – the superlative example of an unrooted modern subject in Eliot’s works – is at first petrified by its presence. When Gwendolen insists that the hidden painting of ‘the dead face and the fleeing figure’ in the wainscot panels at Offendene is locked up, she enacts a suppression of the past that she requires to function as a modern subject.[[20]](#footnote-20) When that panel flies open ‘she looked like a statue into which the soul of Fear had entered’; an embodiment of the acute vulnerability of pure presentists to the disordering power of the past as it chases us into the future.[[21]](#footnote-21) Her terror continues into her marriage to Grandcourt, played out in a light touch in her conversations with Sir Hugo at the Abbey: ‘It is very nice to come after ancestors and monks, but they should know their places and keep underground. I should be rather frightened to go about this house all alone. I suppose the old generations must be angry with us because we have altered things so much’.[[22]](#footnote-22) At the end of the novel, however, Gwendolen is forced from the singular tenuous thread of her present desires by an acceptance of her own part in a world shaped by ‘the slow urgency of growing generations’.[[23]](#footnote-23) She moves from a condition of presentist *Erlebnis* to the charged consciousness of *Erfahrung*: Gwendolen can never experience the past, but she must learn to read it and become conscious of how its suppressed histories have formed her place in the present. Deronda’s own plot is of one whose future is changed utterly and wittingly by his discovery of the textual and theological lore of Judaism: ‘the effects prepared by generations’ which ‘triumph’ over any ‘satisfaction of the self’.[[24]](#footnote-24) Gwendolen’s eventual resolution, ‘I shall live’, represents the displacement of present desire by future-oriented action. In her discovery of what readers of the novel have known pretty much all along – Daniel’s inheritance and love for Mirah – she enacts the trauma of a modernity that has suppressed its past. But only out of the process of reading the past and untangling the plots of the novel to understand her own place within it can a future life – a better life – come into being.

Thinking of generations with Eliot therefore offers some answers to Morgan’s calls for a presentism ‘in which our readings of the present are vitally dependent upon our experience of the past’. Eliot’s depiction of her contemporary present as hyper-stimulated *Erlebnis* questions just how far it is possible to ‘read’ one’s present moment, when experience saturates us with an emotional drama in which the self occupies centre stage. It is only when her most modern characters, Felix, Gwendolen, Daniel, come to read and understand their own pasts as part of a wider collective (hi)story that their experience of the generational present unfolds to embrace a place in historical processes that is *Erfahrung*. The process of reading itself, *Daniel Deronda* implies, represents the process through which the tangled web of interlaced individual stories needs to be absorbed: the complex, temporally disordered form of that novel enforces such knowledge upon readers. Reading is retrospective – as the novel impresses upon us in form and content – and might be subject to revision and debate – as Daniel’s confrontation with his mother demonstrates. But it is only out of such struggles over the past that an understanding of present experience can move beyond the ego to the fuller consciousness of *Erfahrung* and the processes of generational change.

I want to end by returning to what I have termed as the loving hatred for one’s own generation in Eliot’s works in relation to her own story of exceptionalism. Generation in Eliot’s works is a much finer distinction than a simple age cohort or shared year of birth.[[25]](#footnote-25) It speaks of a shared cultural experience – not necessarily tied to a particular nation or specific geographic location – but of a particular scale and mode of existence, most commonly figured as ‘provincial life’.[[26]](#footnote-26) There would be little or nothing in a nineteenth-century grasp of generational identity of 1819 that could connect Victoria, Albert, Eliot, and Ernest Jones, for example, even though now we might teach the writings of all four and see a cohort all documenting impressions of technological innovation and the age of improvement, or of the politics of industrialism and imperialism. In Eliot’s early letters, there is a palpable fear of being consumed by that collective force of her very particular generation in provincial Warwickshire. Back from school in Coventry and supporting her father’s work as a land agent in a busy agricultural neighbourhood, the young Mary Anne Evans compared her context to the genre paintings of David Wilkie:

… mine is too often a world such as Wilkie can so well paint, a *walled-in* world, furnished with all the details which he remembers so accurately, and the least interesting part thereof is often what I suppose must be designated the intelligent; but I deny that it even has a comparative claim to the appellation.[[27]](#footnote-27) (27 Oct. 1840)

In Eliot’s own career, she fled that walled-in world for ever, severing herself from a sense of her place in generational sequence and the lifeworld of provincialism. Eliot threatened to kill herself rather than ever return to the duties of unmarried sister and the collective expectations of a family just on the cusp of securing respectable middle-class standing. The exceptional individual, fleeing the past in search of a fully fulfilled existence in a future life, underpins Eliot’s narratives of resistance to the power of collective identities in the present. Yet her works gained so much of their reach and popularity in their seeming commemoration of that ‘walled in world’ of provincial life in the ‘just past’. Her characters, too, rarely effect the full severance from the weight of the previous generation as she did herself.

The paradox is that Eliot’s personal narrative of severance from generations past and upwards mobility in a cosmopolitan literary world makes her so easily allied with an easy retrospective sense of the generation ‘born in 1819’: the biography of Marian Evans might seem emblematic of a world of increasing mobility, speed, progress, and global print culture. Yet for Marian Evans herself, I would suggest, that mobility was a generational rupture that necessitated and produced an aesthetic form of repair. The past, Eliot’s Warwickshire novels insist, is beyond the bounds of experience: the omniscient narrator’s framing of a generational ‘just past’ presents it as an object of interpretation, not of personal encounter. To sympathize is to read our way into another point of view, not to experience that past ourselves. Learning to read the past is a crucial part of Eliot’s realist aesthetic: a reparative act out of which temporary bonds of affiliation might be formed even for those rootless atoms born in 1819 and after. Only through that act of reading a generational past – and feeling our way to affinity with and loathing of it – Eliot implies, can the present be experienced as anything other than a conflux of sensations and a din of outlandish egotism in public and private life alike.

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1. My thanks to Helen Kingstone and Trev Broughton, and to Carolyn Burdett for conversations that shaped this article. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. George Eliot, ‘The Lifted Veil’, in *The Lifted Veil and Brother Jacob*, ed. by Helen Small, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, ed. by W.J. Harvey (London: Penguin, 1985), p. 226. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. George Eliot, *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* ed. by Nancy Henry (London: Pickering Chatto, 1994), p. 139. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See Suzanne Graver, *George Eliot and Community: A Study in Social Theory and Fictional Form* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1984). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Benjamin Morgan, ‘Scale, Resonance, Presence’, *Victorian Studies*, 59.1 (2016): 109-112. https://muse.jhu.edu/ (accessed September 25, 2018). Morgan cites Frederic Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), p. xi. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See ‘V21 Forum on Strategic Presentism’, *Victorian Studies,* 59.1 (2016): 87-126. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See also Helen Kingstone, *Victorian Narratives of the Recent Past: History, Memory, Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2016); Ruth Livesey, *Writing the Stage Coach Nation: Locality on the Move in Nineteenth-Century British Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Walter Scott, *Waverley; or, ‘Tis Sixty Years Since*, ed. by Claire Lamont (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Eliot, *Theophrastus Such*, pp. 14-15. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. George Eliot, ‘The Natural History of German Life’, in *Essays* ed. by A.S. Byatt (London: Penguin, 1984). On Ruskin and accretion see Pearl S. Brilmyer, ‘Durations of Presents Past: Ruskin and the Accretive Quality of Time’ *Victorian Studies*, 59.1 (2016): 94-97. *Project MUSE*, muse.jhu.edu/article/649955. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Livesey, *Stage Coach Nation* p.192-205; on prosthetic memory see also Ann Rigney, *The Afterlives of Walter Scott: Memory on the Move* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) and Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. For an overview of this concept in relation in contemporary global legal studies see Federico Lenzerini, ‘Intangible Cultural Heritage: The Living Culture of Peoples’, European Journal of International Law, 22.1 (2011):101–120, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ejil/chr006> In a useful circularity for my argument Lenzerini starts by citing Raymond Williams on local culture in *Border Country* (1960). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. For a wider angle on such ‘autoethnography’ and national identity in Eliot see James Buzard, *Disorienting Fiction: The Autoethnographic Work of Nineteenth-Century British Novels* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), pp. 279-298. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. See Barbara Caine, ‘When Did the Victorian Period End? Questions of Gender and Generation’, *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 11.2 (2006): 317-25. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Scott, *Waverley*, p. 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Lauren Goodlad, *The Victorian Geopolitical Aesthetic: Realism, Sovereignty and Transnational Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 112. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Goodlad, *Geopolitical Aesthetic*, p. 112. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. George Eliot, *Felix Holt, The Radical*, ed. by Fred C. Thomson (Oxford: Clarendon, 1980), p. 225. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, ed. by Barbara Hardy (London: Penguin, 1986), p. 56. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, p. 91. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, p. 461. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, p. 875. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, p. 727. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. See Martin Hewitt’s reflections on this fine-grained notion of generation for those living in the nineteenth century: ‘Victorian Generations’ (2015) https://profmartinhewitt.com/2015/05/31/victorian-generations/ [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. For excellent accounts of the question of scale and portability in provincialism see Josephine McDonagh, ‘Imagining Locality and Affiliation: George Eliot’s Villages’, in *A Companion to George Eliot* ed. by Amanda Anderson and Harry E. Shaw (Oxford: Blackwell, 2013), pp. 353-59 and

    McDonagh, ‘Rethinking Provincialism in Mid-Nineteenth-Century British Fiction’, *Victorian Studies,* 55.3 (2013), 399-424. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Gordon Haight, ed., *The George Eliot Letters, Vol. 1: 1836-1851* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954) p. 71. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)