

# Beyond reticence : the power politics relationship in George Eliot

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## BEYOND RETICENCE: THE POWER POLITICS RELATIONSHIP IN GEORGE ELIOT

Deuxième volet d'une analyse des fonctions du dialogue dans les romans de George Eliot, la présente étude montre tout d'abord que les conversations des personnages constituent les vrais événements du récit. En dehors des dialogues, celui-ci explore essentiellement les effets des confrontations verbales sur la vie intime des individus. Cette manière de raconter situe les romans de l'auteur à mi-chemin entre le roman d'analyse sociale et le roman d'analyse de la vie intérieure.

L'étude établit ensuite l'existence, dans les dialogues, d'une violence sournoise, sous-jacente à la réticence qui modère les contacts sociaux. Le choc des égoïsmes est présenté en termes de rapport de forces. De ce fait, on peut dire des romans de George Eliot qu'ils traduisent en art de la narration d'abord, puis en vision, les métaphores «politiques» qui régissent, à leur insu, la vie affective et morale de ses personnages, ainsi que la vie politique et sociale de la société dans laquelle elle vivait.

Dialogues have always been an important feature of narrative art. With the development of the novel and short story, reports of conversations have even become part of the accepted way of telling a story. At certain periods and with certain writers, conversations have furthermore shown a tendency to develop into complete scenes, as in dramatic art, and this phenomenon is not without affecting the nature of the action told. Such is the case with most Victorian novelists, and with George Eliot in particular. Have not her novels been described as an addition of narrative comments and dialogues?<sup>1</sup> Now, in her case, this aspect of her work has received little attention,<sup>2</sup> and a study of the narrative function of her dialogues, and of the relationship between them and the narrative comments, seems a logical step towards a proper assessment of her narrative technique. My illustrations are drawn from her last novel, *Daniel Deronda*.<sup>3</sup>

The following remarks rely on a number of conclusions reached by previous studies which I recall in passing. In a previous analysis of George Eliot's preoccupation with reticence, I stressed the fact that her characters' guarded behaviour often

gave the impression that little happened in the conversations, so that the social drama remained muted and the more dramatic pages were those describing the characters pondering over their lives in solitude.<sup>4</sup> The following comments are offered not as a rejection of this view, but as an attempt to move beyond the theme of reticence to account for the central place nevertheless given to dialogue in the novelist's frescoes. In this new perspective, the narrative perspective, reticence appears, to use a medical analogy, as a mere symptom revealing the hidden nature of an unexpectedly violent drama in which the characters are involved.

More generally, behind my description, the reader will recognize the commonly accepted view that George Eliot's novels are tragedies of egoism.<sup>5</sup> Few writers have, within the scope of a single novel, portrayed such an amazing range of personalities. Among them, however, egoists form a conspicuous group, as they are normally the main force behind the action told by the novelist. As such they are of particular interest to the following inquiry. Throughout George Eliot's work they are usually seen trying to use or dominate each other, at the same time as they are afraid of being used or dominated. They are forever in quest of approval and anxious to win their acquaintances over to their causes or more simply to possess them, so that people seem to exist for others only in so far as these can give them what they want: threads of interest are at least as strong as those of family in drawing people together.<sup>6</sup> George Eliot's characters depend on others for their happiness, and their need of others leaves them, for all their fear and restraint, unprotected against other people's designs on them. The ends they pursue can evidently be more or less honorable. In *Daniel Deronda*, Grandcourt and Gwendolen Harleth are egoistically in search of mere self-gratification. It is their main motive in trying to use and dominate each other as well as their friends and relatives. Deronda's friend, Mordecai, on the other hand, would like the central character to devote his life to a disinterested cause. As for Mr. Gascoigne, he is typical of elderly people with settled habits and situations, and what he above all requires is an audience to impress them and himself with his sense of importance. So far as the narrative is concerned, George Eliot's tragedies of egoism can then be described as dramas of reciprocal consciousness and reciprocal exploitation, in other words as emphatically social and not just private tragedies.<sup>7</sup>

And where does this drama of reciprocal consciousness and exploitation find its development but in the conversations? For

George Eliot dialogues are not so much means of presenting the characters as ways of developing the action.<sup>8</sup> Conversations are given the dimension of full-blown scenes. The verbal exchanges are supported by careful stage - directions, which enable the novelist to take into consideration the whole of the speech act: not just the words, but also the behaviour accompanying them. This is important because, like her characters, she is aware that the purport of a discourse often does not coincide with the more physical aspects of the speech act, so that the drama can spring from the discrepancy between the two. Such scenes are at the heart of all social events: they are social events in themselves. As a result the narrative is not so much one of incidents as a report of successive conversations. This reliance of the narrative on dialogues has a first set of consequences for the art of the novel. First of all, the role of conversations as events argues for an underlying conception of verbal exchanges as primary or privileged links between people in their society, and as primary outlet for their energies. Conversations tend to take the place of more creative outlets for the characters, or at least to form a significant aspect of their creative gift when they have any. Klesmer is portrayed as a clever conversationalist as much as a gifted composer and pianist. Mordecai's whole life can be regarded as his preparation towards meeting Deronda and speaking to him of his dream. To the protagonists, conversations seem capable of changing their lives, getting them what they want, opening their eyes, or causing them endless worries. A second consequence is that verbal exchanges personify social and economic forces. The point needs stressing because interest in the historical background of the novels has led to the view that George Eliot's characters are exposed to an abstract and anonymous 'pressure of facts'.<sup>9</sup> On the contrary, the social, political and economic forces are always people, named or unnamed. They are people with whom the characters or their acquaintances have talked or corresponded. When something happens, it is always people who are responsible. When Gwendolen's mother is ruined, her daughter characteristically blames persons, not a system:

"Everything has gone against me. People have come near me only to blight me."

And the narrator adds: "Among the 'people' she was including Deronda." To her mother Gwendolen complains childishly:

“What is the good of calling people’s wickedness Providence? You said in your letter it was Mr. Lassmann’s fault we had lost our money. Has he run away with it all?” (p. 274)

In the same way, religion in *Adam Bede*, finance in *The Mill on the Floss* or *Middlemarch*, and politics in *Felix Holt*, only matter in so far as people make use of them. As for the third consequence of the reliance of the narrative on the dialogues, conversations quickly reveal that it is the moment something is talked about that counts for the characters, rather than the moment when it occurs. When Gwendolen Harleth, finding herself in reduced circumstances, is offered an opening as governess in a bishop’s family, what marks an epoch in her life is not the offer as such: it is the conversations she has with her acquaintances and relatives, who all urge her to accept against her inclination.

The Rector’s words were too pregnant with satisfactory meaning to himself for him to imagine the effect they produced on the mind of his niece. ‘Continuance of education’ — ‘bishop’s views’ — ‘privately strict’ — ‘Bible Society,’ — it was as if he had introduced a few snakes at large for the instruction of ladies who regarded them as all alike furnished with poison-bags, and biting or stinging according to convenience. To Gwendolen, already shrinking from the prospect opened to her, such phrases came like the growing heat of a burning-glass — not at all as the links of persuasive reflection which they formed for the good uncle. She began desperately to seek an alternative.

“There was another situation, I think, mamma spoke of?” she said, with determined self-mastery.

“Yes,” said the Rector, in rather a depreciatory tone; “but that is in a school. I should not have the same satisfaction in your taking that. It would be much harder work, you are aware, and not so good in any other respect. Besides, you have not an equal chance of getting it.”

“Oh dear no,” said Mrs Gascoigne, “it would be much harder for you, my dear — much less appropriate. You might not have a bedroom to yourself.” And Gwendolen’s memories of school suggested other particulars which forced her to admit to herself that this alternative would be no relief (pp. 313-314).

On the technical level this reliance of the narrative on the dialogues goes along with a blurring of the narrative outline between the scenes: in the narrative comments indications of time and

place are used sparingly and the novelist can have recourse to the iterative mode. We have an example of the procedure in the passage following the dialogue quoted above. The conversation that Gwendolen has with her mother, aunt and uncle about her prospects of earning her own living continues after the uncle's departure with a further attempt of the aunt to reinforce the effect of her husband the rector's words, but Gwendolen gets bored and the dialogue on p. 315 ends with a sudden effect of 'fade out':

But when the talk turned on furniture for the cottage, Gwendolen was not roused to show even a languid interest. She thought that she had done as much as could be expected of her this morning, and indeed felt at an heroic pitch in keeping to herself the struggle that was going on within her (p. 315).

This leads to another conversation on page 318, a conversation taking place some time later, which is introduced by the next clear narrative pointer:

One day when she was in the black and yellow bedroom . . . she suddenly roused herself to fetch the casket which contained her ornaments.

"Mamma," she began, glancing over the upper layer, "I had forgotten these things..." (p. 318).

In the intervening three pages, the attention is directed to what Gwendolen thinks during an indefinite period and to the way the first conversation weighs on her mind. The novelist focuses on her brooding and gives us only a faint idea of how long it lasts, where it takes place, and how Gwendolen lives during this time. This procedure definitely establishes the scenes as signposts in the progress of the action. They stand out, even if they are seldom critical confrontations. They can be said to mark the stages in the development of the action.

With this I come to the central point I want to make, to the question of the nature of the action the dialogues enable George Eliot to portray in her novels, or to put it in another way, the question of how her characters use conversations to assert their wills. Because these characters are what they are and invest so much in their conversations, these are seldom accidental. It would hardly be exaggerating to say that they never engage anyone in conversation without a purpose, or fail to seize the opportunity

presented to further their designs. If, on the one hand, verbalization helps the individuals to conceal their wilder impulses, and becomes synonymous with repression or concealment, on the other hand, it enables them to create an effect. Making impressions is a ruling passion of many a character in George Eliot's novels and a constant topic of interest in the lives of all. I have chosen four passages to illustrate the way this preoccupation influences the course of conversations. The first is an instance of how two well-matched and self-willed characters try to make their point of view prevail without giving away what is at the back of their minds. Among other things this excerpt from their conversation is a good example of a character's (in this case Grandcourt's) eagerness to enter into a conversation from which he expects to benefit, of another's (in this case Mrs. Glasher's) fear of losing control and attempt to defuse the crisis, and of the way the decencies of friendly intercourse repress the violence of the passions, which find an oblique outlet in the tone of the voices and attitudes. The situation is the following: Grandcourt is trying to retrieve the family diamonds he has carelessly left in the hands of a discarded mistress, to offer them to his future wife on their wedding day.

At last they were alone again, with the candles above them, face to face with each other. Grandcourt looked at his watch, and then said, in an apparently indifferent drawl, "There is one thing I had to mention, Lydia. My diamonds — you have them."

"Yes, I have them," she answered promptly, rising, and standing with her arms thrust down and her fingers threaded, while Grandcourt sat still. She had expected the topic, and made her resolve about it. But she meant to carry out her resolve, if possible, without exasperating him. During the hours of silence she had longed to recall the words which had only widened the breach between them.

"They are in this house, I suppose?"

"No; not in this house."

"I thought you said you kept them by you."

"When I said so it was true. They are in the bank at Dudley."

"Get them away, will you? I must make an arrangement for your delivering them to some one."

"Make no arrangement. They shall be delivered to the person you intended them for. I will make the arrangement."

"What do you mean?"

“What I say. I have always told you that I would give them up to your wife. I shall keep my word. She is not your wife yet.”

“This is foolery,” said Grandcourt, with undertoned disgust (pp. 395-396).

The conversation goes on in this thrust and parry style for another page.

The second passage offers a rather straightforward example of the manner in which a domineering man can tyrannize over his dependants and impress on them that he can control their very reactions. Here Grandcourt stops just short of being insolent and rude in words:

However, Lush’s easy prospect of indefinite procrastination was cut off the next morning by Grandcourt’s saluting him with the question —

“Are you making all the arrangements for our starting by the Paris train?”

“I didn’t know you meant to start,” said Lush not exactly taken by surprise.

“You might have known,” said Grandcourt, looking at the burnt length of his cigar, and speaking in that lowered tone which was usual with him when he meant to express disgust and be peremptory. “Just see to everything, will you? and mind no brute gets into the same carriage with us. And leave my P.P.C. at the Mallingers” (p. 325).

The third quotation is intended to suggest that external factors can complicate without end the process of making impressions to exert pressures. Much will depend on the personality of the protagonists, on their social status or on the situation. Other complications result from the fact that egoism may also entail blindness to what others feel or think, or from the fact that the characters may be such imperfect masters of their own passions that they become unpredictable to themselves. It also happens that individuals make lasting impressions on others without being aware of it, simply because of what they have come to represent for these persons. Grandcourt’s presence is sufficient to remind Lady Mallinger that she has failed to give her husband a male offspring. The case is altogether different in the following passage. Here Gwendolen provokes a verbal exchange with her usual flirtatious affectation of directness. She would like to bring Deronda to her



feet, as she has done with Grandcourt. She fails, partly because Deronda is different and because a previous circumstance has made her feel morally inferior to him: as a consequence her strategy breaks down.

“Mr Deronda, you must enlighten my ignorance. I want to know why you thought it wrong for me to gamble. Is it because I am a woman?”

“Not altogether; but I regretted it the more because you were a woman,” said Deronda, with an irrepressible smile. Apparently it must be understood between them now that it was he who sent the necklace. “I think it would be better for men not to gamble. It is a besotting kind of taste, likely to turn into a disease. And, besides, there is something revolting to me in raking a heap of money together, and internally chuckling over it, when others are feeling the loss of it. I should even call it base, if it were more than an exceptional lapse. There are enough inevitable turns of fortune which force us to see that our gain is another’s loss: — that is one of the ugly aspects of life. One would like to reduce it as much as one could, not get amusement out of exaggerating it.” Deronda’s voice had gathered some indignation while he was speaking.

“But you do admit that we can’t help things,” said Gwendolen, with a drop in her tone. The answer had not been anything like what she had expected. “I mean that things are so in spite of us; we can’t always help it that our gain is another’s loss.”

“Clearly. Because of that, we should help it where we can.”

Gwendolen, biting her lip inside, paused a moment, and then forcing herself to speak with an air of playfulness again, said —

“But why should you regret it more because I am a woman?”

“Perhaps because we need that you should be better than we are.”

“But suppose we need that men should be better than we are,” said Gwendolen, with a little air of “check!”

“That is rather a difficulty,” said Deronda, smiling. “I suppose I should have said, we each of us think it would be better for the other to be good.”

“You see, I needed you to be better than I was — and you thought so,” said Gwendolen, nodding and laughing, while she put her horse forward and joined Grandcourt, who made no observation (pp. 382-383).

The fourth case is different. It shows that a character need not be present to exert an influence: he can simply be talked about. A third person is looked for to play the part of a confidant. It is in such a conversation Deronda has with his tutor about history (p. 203) that he becomes conscious of Sir Hugo Mallinger's ambiguous role in his life, with the result that later on he feels more at ease in Sir Hugo's company than away from him, because it is then the man, whom he likes, that appears to count, and not his role as a parental substitute. The preoccupation with effect is so widespread in George Eliot's novels that many conversations have no other topic.

“Yes, but I hardly think you know what her [Gwendolen's] reasons were.”

“You do, apparently,” said Grandcourt, not betraying by so much as an eyelash that he cared for the reasons.

“Yes, and you had better know too, that you may judge of the influence you have over her, if she swallows her reasons and accepts you . . .” (p. 331).

In short, dialogues serve to crystallize impressions, influences and emotions. Because conversations contain violence and reveal it, and because George Eliot's characters, forever active and pursuing their own interests, use them to exert pressures, they can be said to be always, directly or indirectly, a starting point for what follows: the prose narrative usually explores the effects of one or several previous conversations when it describes a character's withdrawal upon himself. The clash of wills, impulses and egoisms, which leads the characters to be vampires and succubi for each other, and to become each other's nemesis, as David Carroll puts it,<sup>10</sup> takes unexpected turns in the conversations, unexpected at least for the characters. Owing to the discrepancy between the effect looked for and the effect achieved, verbal exchanges are imponderables. In this respect, dialogues each time redirect the course of the characters' actions. They give *Daniel Deronda* and all George Eliot's novels this peculiar form of dramas radiating from many centres and moving fitfully in one direction and then another. Conversations are these dramatic centres. But they start things and set them in motion: they never fulfil nor conclude anything: the narrative comments that follow do that. Conversations seldom reveal their full impact while they last, but only afterwards, which explains why they have been neglected.

However it is they that imprint on the narrative the rhythm of social intercourse which is at the heart of all her fiction.

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What precedes has defined the narrative importance of dialogues in George Eliot's novels and by implication revealed the dependence of narrative comments, which explore the characters' reactions to previous conversations and analyze the psychological effects of the drama of reciprocal consciousness and exploitation taking place in them. Conversely there is also a point on which the narrative comments throw light on the characters' art of exerting pressures and on the nature of the essentially verbal drama. The novelist leaves the reader in no doubt as to the nature of her stories and of the contacts her characters have with one another.

The whole matter seems to turn around the use of certain words, some of which stand out like the word 'reticence' which first drew my attention to George Eliot's dialogues. On this problem of the choice of words, however, the critic must tread carefully. As E. L. Epstein reminds students of literature, nothing is more impressionistic than such a determination of what words are important in a text: this is 'nothing more than the following up of an intuition, employing only an inexplicit method of description, perhaps because no other method is justified.'<sup>11</sup> The present instance is no exception, and the following remarks are offered tentatively for what they are worth. A proper estimate of what words are most significant in George Eliot's work is rendered more difficult by the fact that the vocabulary used to describe psychological effects is borrowed from what William Empson would call 'physical metaphors',<sup>12</sup> but physical metaphors often so commonly used as to belong to the realm of dead metaphors. This can hardly make them very conspicuous, even when they masquerade as unusual adjectives. If they draw attention to themselves, it is either because they are associated with words which recur too frequently to pass unnoticed; or because they are particularly relevant to the mental action; or because they can be found in clusters of words, such as the following one:

At that moment his strongest wish was to be completely *master* of this creature . . . that she knew things which had made her start away from him, *spurred* him to *triumph* over that repugnance . . . And she — ah, piteous equality in the need

to *dominate!* — she was *overcome*, like the thirsty one who is drawn towards the seeming water in the desert, *overcome* by the suffused sense that here in this man's *homage* to her lay the rescue from helpless *subjection* to an *oppressive* lot (p. 346).<sup>13</sup>

Neutral words like “effect”, “affect”, “impress” or “impression” are not rare in *Daniel Deronda*, though they are usually elided, and the description of reactions left to speak for itself. This leaves us with three groupings of “marked” words to describe the nature of the effects: the first category refers to what might be called the realm of power politics. It is the richest and includes terms describing political struggles and international rivalries. A second category compares effects to the inflicting of bodily harm. As to the third, which forms a link between the other two groups, it includes words describing the physical use of force to master an opponent, whether human or animal. In the first paragraph of *Daniel Deronda*, the novelist opposes “coercion” to “longing”, thus stating at once that power and action are going to be more important than “passion” in its etymological sense.

Because of its concrete metonymic quality, the third group is the one that has attracted most attention. It includes references to the tamer of wild beasts and horse-breaker, which make the parallel between man's attitude to people and animals evident, if perhaps a little artificial, as in the previous quotation. It also seals the link with the animal motif, mainly associated with Grandcourt and Gwendolen, an animal motif whose handling anticipates D. H. Lawrence's in *Women in Love*. Barbara Hardy argues that the animal imagery provides a continuous source of pathos.<sup>14</sup> My contention on this point is simply that George Eliot is more concerned with the use of force to dominate others and to fulfil one's selfish ends than with the pathetic aspect of experiences. The fact can be noticed even where she uses the same vocabulary to describe the way the characters are driven by their impulses and the way they are acted upon by others. When she does so, it is to draw the attention to the characters' responsibility for their own troubles: they can become their own tyrants on occasions. She lays the emphasis on the active cause before appraising the effect. In this way she presents a character's impulse as an “impetuous advent of new images [*taking*] possession of him” and creating a “terrible sense of *collision* between a strong rush of feeling and the dread of its betrayal” (p. 206. My italics).

But with these images we have already come to another category of concepts, more central to the novel, if we can judge from the number of words it includes and the overtones it controls. This is the group of 'marked' words implying that we should consider personal relationships in society as social forces trying to get the upper hand over each other, or as rival states making use of their superiority to impose their law on weaker ones. Words like "power" and "command" recur again and again in *Daniel Deronda*. Here is a list of a few kindred terms and references showing the richness and diversity of this group: "authority" (p. 177),<sup>15</sup> "coercion" (p. 35), "compel" (p. 345), "constraint" (p. 173), "enslaving" (p. 281), "entangling" (p. 49), "force" (p. 314), "impel" (p. 321), "lead" and "leadership" (pp. 79, 69), "manage" (p. 173), "master", "mastery" and "over-mastering" (pp. 69, 365, 283), "potent" (p. 71), "pressure" (p. 39), "subjection" (p. 173), and "tyrannous" (p. 324). Successful members of society are viewed as conquerors who have used war or at least warlike attitudes and gestures to achieve their aims. Their action is described in terms such as "thrust" or "dart" (pp. 45, 114), "attack" and "crush" (p. 47), "penetrate" (p. 347), "defy", "fortify" and "clash" (pp. 47, 177, 282). Victory gives characters a feeling of elation usually expressed by words conveying the idea of conquest and expansion like "annexation" (p. 51), "empire", used in its different meanings (p. 337), "interference" (p. 375) and above all "triumph" (p. 28). It all ends with an assertion of hegemony and with recognition of sovereignty ("sovereign", p. 371), "tribute" (p. 337) and "homage" (ibid.) received or given, when "rebellion" does not lead to "repression" (pp. 83, 393).

As for the defeated characters, under "pressure", they realize the importance of integrity. The novelist, exploiting the double meaning of this word, here again uses spatial and territorial metaphors, like "core" (p. 47), or "territory" (p. 51). But the key word in this category is the verb "shrink,"<sup>16</sup> one of the words that recurs most frequently under her pen<sup>17</sup>. The word "shrink" also has two different meanings with which to play: becoming smaller and recoiling in fear or horror, and it serves to establish a link between the group of 'marked' words describing human relationships as a game of power politics and the group of words conveying the idea of bodily harm. In George Eliot, a loss of integrity or defeat is associated with suffering. Overpowered and dependent, the person becomes a wounded organism which can

so George Eliot's vision. The previous analysis has brought out that the close support which the dialogue and narrative comments lend to each other is of another sort. To pursue the musical analogy, the relation between them is harmonic, not contrapuntal, in her novels. The dialogues form an extension of the narrative comments, and the narrative comments of the dialogues. George Eliot's narrative technique points the way to the contemporary development of a narrative consisting in presenting a story from the perspective of a participant in the action. For her characters trying to get out of their ontological isolation, conversations are occasions for exchanges, alliances, collisions, or, though rarely, moments of communion with another person. Usually the contacts are however disappointing and throw the individual back on himself, leaving him to feel the smart of the encounter and devise new strategies to renew the contact. George Eliot's novels are offered as sympathetic accounts of human frailty in society and of the suffering entailed in blindness. They are also stories of people who try to react against this situation. If George Eliot's vision of life is the contrary of comic: if it is tragic even more than pathetic, it is precisely because, in her novels, the relation between dialogue and comments changes, each in turn developing the emotional harmonics of the previous unit in a spirit which is that of empathy rather than moral detachment.

The way George Eliot exploits the potential aggressivity present in conversations also raises it to the status of a distinctive theme in her novels. Paraphrasing L. C. Knight on Shakespeare, it is possible to say that this aggressivity is a theme from below the level of "plot" and "character", which takes form as a living structure; that it is not just an "abstract theme", or a "bare general proposition", but represents an interest that springs from the interplay of different attitudes, the psychology of the characters, the nature of dramatic situations and the progress of the action. On the level of the individual's life and psychology, the art of making one's presence felt in conversation, and the imagery which explores such effects, seem to imply that doing, or more exactly that form of doing which speaking is, can result in being more, and suffering someone else's pressure in being less. Described in spatial terms, life may be said to be represented as the story of an ownership that must be preserved against the encroachments of others, but can also be extended at the expense of others. Extension entails prestige, and loss the misery of mortification. The comparison of the individual to the state, and of the

be described as suffering from “concussion” (p. 40), “bruises” (p. 310), “numbness” (p. 317), any form of “injury” (p. 323), or which is “stung” (p. 313) or “winces” (p. 42) or “curl[s] up and harden[s] like a sea-anemone” when it must submit (p. 113). What is striking is that this is not so much the vocabulary of pain experienced as of pain inflicted and received.

Such a dry list of words cannot do justice to the subtlety with which George Eliot uses the ramifications of her discreet imagery, but at least it makes it clear that, for her, individuals and society, private life and political life, are actuated by similar motives: the game played by her characters in their conversations is comparable to that of states with each other. Her most egoistical characters, those who often influence the course of events most directly, pursue, to put it in the terms of her imagery, a policy of power and expansion. In this respect the narrative comments throw light on the nature of the actions developed in the verbal exchanges and situate the characters’ strategies in the larger context of the functioning of a whole society.

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There is potential aggressivity in all word exchanges according to sociologists and linguists,<sup>18</sup> and the mere fact of finding aggressivity displayed in George Eliot’s dialogues cannot be said to make them remarkable in themselves in any sense. Her originality begins to appear in the way she makes more widespread use of this potential aggressivity to further her plots than many other novelists, and above all in the way she exploits it deliberately as her narrative comments show she does. At this point her narrative use of dialogue intersects with her vision of life and society. Her vision derives a distinct flavour from the way she handles this technical feature. It is not possible to multiply comparisons here, but one is inescapable. Jane Austen, another great analyst of human reticence, uses a similar balance between the two constitutive elements, dialogue and narrative comments, analyzed above, but to a different end. She weaves them as a counterpoint of diegesis and mimesis, to borrow Gérard Genette’s distinction.<sup>19</sup> The counterpoint serves to underline her characters’ progress towards moral growth, or their moral stagnation, by contrasting them with her own sense of the relativity of human perfection or imperfection. As a result, her vision, in so far as it focuses on individual achievements and personal relationships, is comic. Not

egoist to an imperialistic power, implicit in the descriptive vocabulary, also brings out a connection between the novelist's conception of human relationships as illustrated by her narrative art and certain ideologies of her society, like categorical individualism and liberalism, which favoured a policy of laissez-faire, expansionism and hegemony in Victorian England. Not that George Eliot pays particular attention to that larger context of confrontations. In so far as international affairs are concerned, her novels, with the exception of *Daniel Deronda*, which deals with the problem of a Jewish state, seldom allude to them: their universe is that of provincial and national affairs. It seems nevertheless legitimate to make the connection between the human relationships the novelist describes and the larger context of her own world because her use of vocabulary invites us to do so. Her realistic portraits of three-dimensional 'rounded' characters have been said to express a belief in the unity of human nature and society.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, the way the narrative prose comments on the nature of the dialogues, or the dialogues exploit the references to aggressivity made all through the novels, makes it look as though she had turned "the metaphors [her characters] live by," and those her society lived by, into a narrative technique.<sup>21</sup> Here again, however, must be stressed the fact that in dramatizing metaphors, even common dead metaphors, which have had a long life and are still part of the common language for most of them, George Eliot is not doing something unique, something that has never been done before. She is doing it again, in her century, in the context of its ideologies, and the echoes these receive in her work are simply another aspect of the non-militant, unexceptional realism of this great realistic novelist.

The implicit comparison between politics and individual relationships achieves two further effects: on the one hand it conjures up a vision of threatening forces underlying all social life, and on the other hand it makes it clear that the violence is contained and only smolders under the surface in George Eliot's novels. It enables the reader to see the characters' art of putting themselves forward and using others as a dangerous game of power politics aiming at enslaving people who are perhaps struggling for recognition. Conversely, it suggests that imperialistic expansion is nothing but a sadistic inflicting of pain. It also makes us see the characters' relationships as a sort of cold war — only a metaphor, of course —, in which the display of power can be as determining as its use.<sup>22</sup>



There remains to say a word of what becomes of that subdued violence. When it does not find an outlet in the dialogues, it does not evaporate. It is turned inward. The tensions that must be contained in conversations torment the characters in solitude. This is what makes George Eliot's novels great dramas of implosive violence, an implosive violence which grows out of the social contacts and conversations, as we can see in the story of the unhappy relationship between vain and pretty Hetty Sorel and stern, high-minded Adam Bede, in that of Casaubon and Dorothy's married life, as well as in that of Grandcourt's courtship of Gwendolen or of Deronda and Mordecai's friendship.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Quentin Anderson, 'George Eliot in *Middlemarch*.' *Pelican Guide to English Literature*, vol. 6 (London, 1966), p. 288.

<sup>2</sup> Usually the narrative comments are judged all important. See for instance Barbara Hardy, *The Novels of George Eliot* (London, 1973), pp. 11-13, and W. J. Harvey, *The Art of George Eliot* (London, 1969), a chapter of which, 'Diction, Imagery and Rhetoric,' hardly mentions dialogues. Another misleading comment is that of Robert Liddell (*The Novels of George Eliot*, London, 1977), who deplores the fact that there is not more dialogue because it is so good, but adds that the best talk is that of the lighter characters (p. 156).

<sup>3</sup> It is quoted in the Penguin edition.

<sup>4</sup> Soon to appear in *English Studies* 64:3 (1983).

<sup>5</sup> Barbara Hardy, pp. 12, 68-77.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Liddell, p. 152.

<sup>7</sup> A view suggested by the studies which focus on the psychology of the characters, the patterns of opposition between them, the characters' relationships and the form of the novels, like those of Barbara Hardy, and Alan Mintz (*George Eliot and the Novel of Vocation*, Cambridge, Mass, 1978).

<sup>8</sup> With George Eliot's characters, the word 'action' can be used in its philosophical sense of 'intentional doing': see Donald Davidson, *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford, 1980).

<sup>9</sup> Recent research on George Eliot has gone in quest of the historical, social, political and economic background of the novels and has tended to insist on what David Carroll calls 'the pressure of facts on the individual.' ('*Middlemarch* and the Externality of Fact,' *This Particular Web*, edited by Ian Adam, Toronto, 1975, pp. 73-74). See also Arnold Kettle, "*Middlemarch*," *An Introduction to the English Novel* (London, 1969), pp. 112, 160, which describes G. Eliot's view of society as static.

<sup>10</sup> Op. cit., pp. 84, 90.

<sup>11</sup> *Language and Style* (London, 1978), p. 71.

<sup>12</sup> *English Pastoral Poetry* (London, 1938), p. 60.

<sup>13</sup> My italics.

<sup>14</sup> Op. cit. p. 53.

<sup>15</sup> Page numbers give only one instance of the use of a word.

<sup>16</sup> *Daniel Deronda*, pp. 46, 51, 209, 213, 231, 233, 247, 272, 313, & ff.

<sup>17</sup> More frequently at least than is usual in fiction where the word is common enough. George Eliot may be said in this respect to reanimate the dead metaphor in it.

<sup>18</sup> Erving Goffman (*Interaction Ritual*, New York, 1967) and Professor G.E. Roulet from Geneva University.

<sup>19</sup> *Figures III* (Paris, 1972), pp. 191-193. David Lodge has developed this distinction in a contribution to a volume of studies on narrative and narratology shortly to appear.

<sup>20</sup> Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London, 1981), pp. 83-87.

<sup>21</sup> The expression is borrowed from *Metaphors We Live By*, by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (Chicago, 1980).

<sup>22</sup> It is possible to see here an instance of those selfbetrayals of a dominant ideology in the narrative procedure, such as Edward Said detects in the work of Flaubert (*Orientalism*, New York, 1978).

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