

George Eliot's remainder-man

In an epigraph to one of the chapters of *Felix Holt*, George Eliot likens vulgar jokers to a turkey-cock: “it has a cruel beak,” she writes, “and a silly iteration of ugly sounds...”⁸⁹. This paper is about cruel beaks and silly iterations, about verbal aggression and repetition in George Eliot’s writings. In particular, I’m curious about what seems at first like a stylistic tic, a way she has of fixing on a somewhat odd word or phrase and of repeating it two or three or more times within the space of a page or two, as if in the grip of a transient obsession, then, once attention has been thus drawn to it, dropping it. These repeatings then remain, like slubs in the weave of silk or linen, as local saliencies, a bit more opaque than the language around them, rendered slightly silly through iteration. Moreover, they seem to crop up at moments when another sort of silliness, the implausibility of some turn of events in the novel’s plot, is making itself felt. And it is that relation – between plotting that leaves all notions of verisimilitude behind, and verbal repetitions that call attention to themselves as oddities – that I shall be considering. I shall focus on *Felix Holt*, but I want to begin by looking at an instance from *Daniel Deronda* and another from *Silas Marner*.

⁸⁹ George Eliot, *Felix Holt, the Radical* [PH] (1866), London, Penguin, 1995, p.142. Further page references to this and other novels of George Eliot’s – *Daniel Deronda* [DD] (1876), London, Penguin, 1967, and *Silas Marner, the Weaver of Raveloe* [~M] (1861), London, Penguin, 1996 – will appear in square brackets in the text.

The word that is repeated in this passage from *Deronda* is the word “repeating”: for reasons that I hope will become clear I want to start with this most thematically loaded instance, from Eliot’s last novel, at once her wildest and her savviest. In these pages, from chapter 35, half-way through the novel, Daniel is showing a group of people around the stately-home-of-England where he was raised, a mansion described as “a picturesque architectural outgrowth from an abbey, which had still remnants of the old monastic trunk” (DD 204); in the group is Grandcourt, the novel’s aristocratic villain, and Gwendolen, his recent bride, now beginning to regret her choice. They have reached a cloistered court:

It was a rare example of a northern cloister with arched and pillared openings not intended for glazing, and the delicately wrought foliage of the capitals seemed still to carry the very touches of the chisel.

Gwendolen had dropped her husband’s arm [hold onto that chisel and that dropped arm: we shall need them later, when we turn to *Felix Holt*] and joined the other ladies, to whom Deronda was noticing the delicate sense which had combined freedom with accuracy in the imitation of natural forms.

“I wonder whether one oftener learns to love real objects through their representations, or the representations through the real objects,” he said, after pointing out a lovely capital made by the curled leaves of greens, showing their reticulated under-side with the firm gradual swell of its central rib. “When I was a little fellow these capitals taught me to observe, and delight in, the structure of leaves.”

“I suppose you can see every line of them with your eyes shut,” said Juliet Fenn.

“Yes. I was always repeating them, because for a good many years this court stood for me as my only image of a convent, and whenever I read of monks and monasteries, this was my scenery for them.” (DD 475-76)

The narrative then turns back to considering Gwendolen’s despair as she takes the measure of her marriage to

Grandcourt, a marriage she had entered into despite the knowledge that he had children by a former mistress. She had begun to pay for that decision on her wedding-night, when she had received a letter from that former mistress that had sent her into a fit of hysterical shrieking: it is this moment that the narrative recalls, two pages after Daniel's comments on representations and real objects:

She had burnt Lydia Glasher's letter with an instantaneous terror lest other eyes should see it, and had tenaciously concealed from Grandcourt that there was any other cause of her violent hysterics than the excitement and fatigue of the day: she had been urged into an implied falsehood. "Don't ask me – it was my feeling about everything – it was the sudden change from home." The words of that letter kept repeating themselves, and hung on her consciousness with the weight of a prophetic doom. [And here much of the letter, printed in full earlier in the novel, is repeated, word for accusatory word]: "I am the grave in which your chance of happiness is buried as well as mine. You had your warning. You have chosen to injure me and my children. He had meant to marry me at last, if you had not broken your word. You will have your punishment. I desire it with all my soul..." [DD 478]

"I was always repeating them"; "the words of that letter kept repeating themselves": we may not be surprised to find the involuntary and dreaded return of the repressed letter described as a repeating, but to find the word attached to Daniel's acts of fond recollection is more arresting. It has the effect of enforcing the resemblance between these good and bad modes of repetition and of complicating Daniel's Ruskinian aesthetic. If movements of love are not natural responses to natural objects, but instead the repetitive process of learning "to love real objects through their representations," then the ways in which love and mimetic art are related cannot be neatly distinguished from the ways in which hysterical dread

such as Gwendolen's is bound up in compulsively repeated images.

The architectural details Daniel is so fond of are called "remnants" of the old monastery [DD 204, 469]; elsewhere, Daniel thinks of Grandcourt contemptuously, as "that remnant of a human being" [OD 456] and the narrator takes a moment to linger on his choice of that term, quoting it ("His notion of Grandcourt as a "remnant"...) and thus marking it. Fifteen years earlier, in *Silas Marner*, the word had been still more tellingly marked and with no traces of narrative self-consciousness. It appears twice in the novel's opening paragraph, first to describe people like Silas, itinerant weavers, "certain pallid undersized men who, by the side of the brawny country-folk, looked like the remnants of a disinherited race," then to note the "remnant of distrust" [SM 5] with which they, and all outsiders, continued to be viewed by the countryfolk. The word then disappears from the text for a hundred or so pages, then crops up twice in the same paragraph, in a puzzling phrase – "the black remnant" [SM 108] – at a crucial articulation of the novel's plot.

Silas Marner tells the story of the integration of a solitary pallid weaver into a community of brawny country-folk, an integration accomplished by his taking over the duties of raising an infant who had been abandoned by its mother and whose father refuses to acknowledge it. The plot must somehow contrive for the infant to change hands, unbeknownst to its natural mother and in a way that strikes Silas as miraculous and redemptive, for he comes to think of the child as a substitute for the sack of gold coins that had been stolen from him earlier in the story. How is this exchange to take place and how will it be motivated? The contrivance George Eliot chooses is a pairing of simultaneous and symmetrical lapses into unconscious-

ness: the baby's mother, an opium addict, gets lost in a snowstorm close to Silas's cottage, takes an overdose and falls asleep, freezing to death while her child crawls towards the lighted cottage and past Silas himself, who is shown holding open the cottage door and, in the narrative's figure, "arrested...by the invisible wand of catalepsy" [SM 110]. When he awakens from his trance the child is on his hearth and the process of his domestication as her surrogate father (or surrogate mother – it isn't clear which) has begun.

In providing further motivating details, the narrative tells us not only that Silas was subject to cataleptic fits (that would arrest him, but not invariably at the cottage door!), but also that "since he had lost his money, he had contracted the habit of opening his door and looking out from time to time, as if he thought that his money might be somehow coming back to him, or that some trace, some news of it, might be mysteriously on the road..." [SM 109]; his "habit" is further characterized as "this repetition of an act for which he could have assigned no definite purpose, and which can hardly be understood except by those who have undergone a bewildering separation from a supremely loved object." The "supremely loved object" is Silas's gold, which had itself become supremely loved through a process of compulsively repeated stackings and countings of a heap of coins. But that is not all. Silas's habit of counting his coins is, in its turn, the outgrowth of yet an earlier, more primordial habit, that of weaving: "he seemed to weave, like the spider, from pure impulse, without reflection" [SM 16]. It is possible to follow Eliot's rhetoric back down the line to this imaginary moment of pure impulse, then back up again, as she describes the process of attachment by which repetitive motion takes on meaning and impels desire. In the beginning there was weaving; then one of Silas's customers pays him in gold:

Now, for the first time in his life, he had five bright guineas put into his hand. [...] It was pleasant to him to feel them in his palm and to look at their bright faces, which were all his own: it was another element of life, like the weaving and the satisfaction of hunger. [SM 17]

“Their bright faces, which were all his own”: does that mean “the guineas all belong to him?” or “he sees his own face in their bright faces?” Is the point that the process of attachment begins in this moment of proprietary reflection, when a shrunken and rudimentary self, barely more than a pulsation, a locus of repetition, begins to see itself as a self in something outside itself? That’s a possible reading, and if it sounds strained at first it sounds less so a few pages later, where we learn that Silas “would on no account have exchanged those coins, which had become his familiars, for other coins with unknown faces” [SM 19].

But there would be no attachment, Eliot suggests, unless “repetition has bred a want which is incipient habit,” and the analogy she chooses to illustrate this point is both gratuitous and revealing:

Gradually the guineas, the crowns, and the half-crowns, grow in a heap. [...] Have not men, shut up in solitary imprisonment, found an interest in marking the moments by straight strokes of a certain length on the wall, until the growth of the sum of straight strokes, arranged in triangles, has become a mastering purpose? Do we not wile away moments of inanity or fatigued waiting by repeating some trivial movement or sound, until the repetition has bred a want, which is incipient habit? That will help us to understand how the love of accumulating money grows into an absorbing passion. [SM 19]

Hoarding, in Eliot’s account, turns out not to be based in greed or even need: it is stranger than that. It is based in idle repetition, something more like an impulse than a desire. And that repetition is aligned, oddly, with the marks made by a writer. Now, to compare hoarding and marking makes one kind of sense if the act of marking is seen from

the point of view of prisoners in solitary – they have an obvious interest in recording the passage of time, in toting up the days or counting them down. But it makes another, rather different kind of sense if taken from the point of view of an author as one who inscribes marks, an author who may appear to have been under no obligation to introduce anything so writerly at this moment in her text. For Eliot to mark the moment with an allusion to marking further entangles the thematics of exchange by suggesting that the unconscious origins of Silas’s attachments lie in a region where rudimentary writing, impulsive repetition, habit and want are hard to clearly distinguish from one another, where a self’s identity, its activity or passivity, its relation to exteriorized marks, its relation to objects, are all being negotiated for the first time and provisionally settled.

The upshot of this marking, and of the habits built upon it, is that Silas’s remembered coins come to serve as the representations of a loved object which will orient his first bewildered and near-sighted glimpse of the golden-haired child on his hearth. A habit, then, a repeating, and a prolonged moment of unconsciousness, make up Silas’s contribution to the exchange. Here are the equivalent lines describing the contribution of the child’s natural mother:

She needed comfort, and she knew but one comforter – the familiar demon in her bosom; [she is, the previous paragraph tells us, “enslaved” to “the demon Opium” and she is carrying a phial of it with her] but she hesitated a moment, after drawing out the black remnant, before she raised it to her lips. In that moment the mother’s love pleaded for painful consciousness rather than oblivion – pleaded to be left in aching weariness, rather than to have the encircling arms benumbed so that they could not feel the dear burden. In another moment Molly had flung something away, but it was not the black remnant – it was an empty phial. [SM 108]

It's the repetition of that odd periphrastic phrase that's striking here: what "the black remnant" denotes is the opiate, a small amount of dark liquid still left in the phial. But the figurative phrase would not seem to be repressing the literal expression – the word "opium" is not unspeakable in this novel. Rather the repetition of the figure serves to mark, as if in black ink, a turning-point in the novel, a fulcrum of implausibility upon which everything rests.

But why should implausibility of plotting be marked in this particular way? An answer is suggested by a scene a few pages later where the motif of the child leaving its natural for its adoptive parent is replayed, this time with the baby's natural father, the Squire's son Godfrey Cass. Godfrey, who, out of prudence or cowardice, cannot acknowledge that he is the child's father, is in Silas's cottage, looking down at the child on the weaver's lap:

The wide-open blue eyes looked up at Godfrey's without any uneasiness or sign of recognition: the child could make no visible audible claim on its father; and the father felt a strange mixture of feelings, a conflict of regret and joy, that the pulse of that little heart had no response for the half-jealous yearning in his own, when the blue eyes turned away from him slowly, and fixed themselves on the weaver's queer face, which was bent low to look at them, while the small hand began to pull Marner's withered cheek with loving disfiguration. [SM 118]

This process, by which Silas is being naturalized as a real, if not a biological father, is named a "loving disfiguration," the latter term an expression Paul de Man has taught us to take seriously – that is, both figuratively and literally – when we come across it in a text⁹⁰. The movement is from the man who is literally the child's father to the other man who is at first merely figuratively so, then

⁹⁰ See Paul de Man, « Autobiography as De-facement » and « Shelley Disfigured » in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1979, pp. 67-82 and 93-124.

on to the point where the figurativeness of his fatherhood disappears, through loving familiarity, and he is her “real” (though still not her biological) father. We cannot call that third state a literalization, but we can call it a reduction of the figure, a disfiguration. The process was already at work in the earlier scene of exchange: the signal of its operation there is Silas’s and Molly’s unconsciousness and the sign that we are not to read that unconsciousness mimetically but as a disfiguration is the reiterated phrase “the black remnant.” No exchange of objects of love, the text suggests, no transference, without baleful repetition, without unconsciousness and without some remnant to mark the unnaturalness, the implausibility, of the process, and to link that implausibility to the willed – or driven – marking activity of a writer.

Like Silas’s daughter, the heroine of *Felix Holt* – Esther Lyon – has been adopted by a kindly but poor man; again like her, Esther comes to learn the circumstances of her birth – that her natural father was a gentleman with a claim to a large estate – and eventually chooses not to press her claim – to “make no visible audible claim” [SM 118] – but to remain in decent poverty. As the novel’s plot unfolds, she might easily be referred to as the remnant of a disinherited race; in fact, a cognate, though unusual, noun is applied to her: she is, in legal terminology, technically a “remainder-man”, that is a “person who becomes entitled to [an] estate...on termination of [the] rights of [a] precedent estate”⁹¹. How that term figures in the text – both its condensed and peculiar local occurrence (three times in the opening paragraphs of chapter 36 and nowhere else) and the resonances it sets up throughout the novel – is what I want to turn to now.

⁹¹ See the entry for «Remainder man» in the standard American common-law glossary, *Words and Phrases*, St. Paul, Minnesota, West Publishing Co., 1962, Vol. 36A, pp. 512-13.

Several narrative strands thread through *Felix Holt*: there is a political plot, involving an election riot and the subsequent trial and conviction of the novel's hero for having killed a man in a scuffle; there is the explicitly tragic story of a woman who sins and suffers the consequences of her sin, Mrs. Transome's story; there is the story of Esther Lyon's conversion, by Felix Holt, to a life of altruism and service; and there is a tangled tale of inheritance, of claims on the Transome estate, in which Esther finds herself in the position of the remainder-man. This last element of the plot is sufficiently complicated to warrant an appendix in many editions of the novel: in one the editor patiently summarizes the workings-out and the legal underpinning of the story while insisting that "unlike the complexity of *Little Dorrit*, or *Bleak House*, the complexity of *Felix Holt* is unrelated to the central areas of what the novel is saying"⁹². I shall be arguing that the idea of contrivance – and the intricacies of plot that display that contrivance – are on the contrary very much to the point.

We know that George Eliot was particularly anxious to get the legal details right, anxious enough to consult a lawyer friend, with whom she exchanged a series of long, minutely particularized letters about probable legal scenarios. What she most wanted to be assured of was that her wish – to make an heiress of her heroine, but only after a long delay – was consistent with common law. "I should be glad of as large a slice of a century as you could give me", she writes to her friend, "but I should be resigned if I could get forty years"⁹³. She knew that there were statutes of limitation which stipulated that certain claims would become invalid after certain periods of time, and she needed her heroine's claim to remain in force. She needed,

⁹² *Felix Holt the Radical*, edited by Peter Coveney, London, Penguin, 1972.

⁹³ See Gordon S. Haight (ed.), *The George Eliot Letters*, 9 vols, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1954-74, IV, p. 216.

that is, for her heroine to be at once disinherited and a valid claimant. Her friend accommodated her by steering her away from the law of heirship towards a more recondite set of cases turning on questions of the settlement of an estate, what has come to be called the law of entail. It was through him that words like “entail” and “remainder-man” found their way into the text of the novel.

Readers of the works preceding *Felix Holt* can imagine how congenially these words must have struck the novelist’s ear: for if “remainder-man” echoes the “remnants” in *Silas Marner*, “entail” links itself at once with the notion of consequences, which had organized George Eliot’s moral psychology – and her plotting – from the first: “there is seldom any wrongdoing”, she writes in the opening pages of *Felix Holt*, “which does not carry along with it some downfall of blindly-climbing hopes, some hard entail of suffering...” [FH 10]. Still more helpfully, “entail” resonates with *intaglio*, an engraved gem, a word that figures significantly in *Romola* (1863): both derive from the Latin verb for cutting. And in *Felix Holt* imagery of cutting, incising, truncating and biting exfoliates across the pages of the novel, whose diction at moments seems to be governed by another law of entail: Thou shalt cut! Literal scissors, sabres and pen-knives turn up, a wild little boy periodically buries his teeth in various people’s arms, while related figures of speech proliferate – “cutting a figure” for example [PH 132], or “cutting [someone] short” [FH 41], or a tongue that cut “as cruelly as if it were a sharp-edged blade” [FH 30, 226]. The imagery reaches in one direction towards the notion of hardness, the resistant, bruising or wounding quality of steel, as in “some hard entail of suffering”; in another towards that of maiming, mutilation or castration: in a scene between Mrs. Transome and her former lover, we read that “every sentence was as pleasant to her as if it had been cut in her bared arm” [FH 94], then, a few lines later there is an innocuous

but awkwardly managed passage about taking the arm of one's companion: "Let me take your arm... For more than twenty years Mrs Transome had never chosen to take his arm... "Good god!" said Mrs. Transome, taking her hand from his arm... as she took away her hand, Jermyn let his arm fall...etc." [FH 115-16] (It was after reading this that the promixity of a chisel to a dropped arm in that earlier citation from *Deronda* began to sound strange!). A third mode of association around which these figures cluster is that of oral aggression – the bite of animals (or of that unpleasant child [FH 94]), the contrasted feebleness of an old man who must have his food cut for him by a servant [FH 32], but more particularly the vocalization of one's will as verbal aggression, the ways in which loud talk, clamor, even the most soft-spoken, the least clamant of claims of the most legitimate claimant, can come to stand for an aggressive intent – this, as we shall see, gets drawn into play [FH 154, 157-59, 217, 247].

With this rapidly evoked sense of the verbal texture of the novel in mind, we can return to our particular claimant, this woman who is a remainder-man. In chapter 36, the current tenant of the estate, Harold Transome, has just learned that a remainder-man who might legitimately dispossess him exists, but he does not yet know who that person is, and he is turning over the possibility of securing his interest by concealing the information he has just received, most particularly from the remainder-man himself.

Nobody would have said that Harold was bound to hunt out this alleged remainder-man and urge his rights upon him; on the contrary, all the world would have laughed at such conduct, and he would have been thought an interesting patient for a mad-doctor. The unconscious remainder-man was probably much better off left in his original station...

...[Harold] would not have been disgraced if, on a valid claim being urged, he had got his lawyers to fight it out for him on the chance of eluding the claim by some adroit technical management. Nobody off the stage

could be sentimental about these things, or pretend to shed tears of joy because an estate was handed over from a gentleman to a mendicant sailor with a wooden leg. And this chance remainder-man was perhaps some such specimen of inheritance...[FH 337-38]

The whimsical notion that the remainder-man might be a mendicant sailor with a wooden-leg has the effect of bringing to the surface one connotation that inheres in that legal term – that a remainder-man may be the remains of a man, both *déclassé* and dismembered. (Harold Transome, as it happens, has just tried, and failed, to become a member of Parliament, “the member for North Loamshire” [FH 200]). But still more interesting is the term’s silly iteration in these lines, both because of the adjectives that are attached to it – this alleged remainder-man, the unconscious remainder-man, this chance remainder-man – and because of the noticeably arch syntactical construction that is repeated along with the noun. No doubt this is the narrator’s irony, no doubt this is style indirect libre, but these recognitions don’t sufficiently account for the heavy-handedness of the repetition here. We can begin to see what’s happening if we look at two other points in the novel where the same note of arch irony prevails, sustained by the same syntactical structure. One is a scene of lumbering humor in the butler’s quarters of a great estate, the other a subsequent scene of practical joking – and the point in the novel where the mechanics of its plotting seem most tendentiously implausible.

Chapter 7 contains several pages of conversational sparring below stairs, the boastings and flightings of the butler and his friends, pages that allow George Eliot to entertain her readers with “impressions” of popular speech while advancing the plot with bits of the content of the exchanges. The narrator’s tone is amused and mock-heroic; the characters are given – it isn’t immediately clear why – slightly allegorized family names: the butler is

Mr. Scales, his great antagonist is a Mr. Christian, and the two are allowed to make knowing puns about these names (“What would justice be without Scales?” asks Christian; “...if you must talk about names”, replies Scales, “I’ve heard of a party before now calling himself a Christian, and being anything but it” [FH 103]). But what most sustains the mock-heroic cast of the scene is the narrator’s penchant for a formulaic use of epithet: “the great Scales,” “the reasonable Crowder,” “the too-ready Scales,” “the glib Christian,” “the amazing Christian,” “the questionable Christian” [FH 100-104]. It is all condensed into three or four pages, and it is chiefly Christian, as if he had migrated from *Pilgrim’s Progress*, who suffers this irony; and, although he appears frequently in the novel, he is never again – with the exception of the one page I want to examine now – named in this fashion.

But on that one page this parodic use of allegorical diction and syntax returns with a vengeance clustered around a bizarre bit of comic business – the mock castration of Christian by Scales. Some more information is needed here to take in the lines I’m about to quote. You must know that the discovery that Esther is a remainder-man, that she has a claim on the Transome estate, depends on the transfer of yet another “loved object” [as in SM 109]: a locket in the possession of Christian must somehow come before the eyes of Mr. Lyon, Esther’s adopted father. How is this exchange to take place, and how will it be motivated? The short answer is: implausibly. The editor I alluded to above, who found the novel’s complexity of plot unrewarding, had this to say about the scene in question: “The way in which the plot contrives the loss of the locket is entirely unsatisfactory and constitutes a major flaw of the work.” In fact, what is going on here is more interesting than it is unsatisfactory. This is the contrivance. Mr. Christian must be unaware that he is losing the locket: hence he, too – like the unfortunate Molly in *Silas*

Marnier – is made to enjoy nipping at the opium bottle from time to time. He does so now, while returning through the park of the estate, carrying in the hind-pocket of his coat the locket as well as some important documents; he sits down to rest and dozes off. Enter Mr. Scales, out for a walk with a lady's-maid, Mistress Cherry, and not averse to playing a trick on the person whom the narrative now refers to first as "the sleeping Christian", then, more tellingly, as the "unconscious Christian":

And lo! Here was the offensive, the exasperatingly cool and superior Christian caught comparatively helpless, with his head hanging on his shoulder, and one coat-tail hanging out heavily below the elbow of the rustic seat. It was this coat-tail which served as a suggestion to Mr. Scales's genius. Putting his finger up in warning to Mrs. Cherry, and saying, "Hush – be quiet – I see a fine bit of fun" – he took a knife from his pocket, stepped behind the unconscious Christian, and quickly cut off the pendant coat-tail. [FH 144]

And Scales goes off, delighted with himself, imagining the "figure that...the graceful well-appointed Mr. Christian...would cut" when he showed up at the manor with only one coat-tail. The severed tail he throws away, and the papers and locket are later retrieved – how isn't immediately relevant – and brought to Mr. Lyon.

So the locket passes from the person referred to as "the unconscious Christian" to, eventually, the person referred to as "the unconscious remainder-man," in an exchange that recapitulates the movement of the child Eppie from her opium-stupified mother to Silas, frozen in his cataleptic trance. Two things are worth remarking here: first, the way in which the characters' "unconsciousness," the suspension of all willed activity on their parts, is accompanied by the most intense (and patently willful) activity of contrivance on the part of the plotter of these novels; and second, how the plot asks to be taken as natu-

ral (as, in the words of the narrator, “a sequence as natural, that is to say, as legally-natural, as any in the world” [FH 358]) at the same time that the text is drawing attention to this process through the reiterated signs of disfiguration we have been dwelling on.

Finally, it is time to return to the matter of verbal aggression. The cutting of Mr. Christian’s coat-tail is the first stop in a series of moves that eventually brings Esther Lyon to the point where she can voice her claim to the Transome estate. The problem the novel faces is how the voicing of that claim can be made to appear not merely legal (that is, a consequence of the workings of the law of entail) but absolutely innocent, paradoxically at once voluntary and unwilling. This task is accomplished, not surprisingly, through a split or doubled act of violence. Two men are killed during the election riot: one, a constable, is knocked down by Felix Holt, who is thereupon tried for manslaughter; the other person killed is an illiterate bill-sticker, the poor relation of the Transomes whose death, according to the law of entail, activates Esther’s claim. Esther comes into her own because of this killing, but whatever aggression on her part that might hint at is neatly displaced from one corpse to another. Esther doesn’t have to kill the man who stands in the way of her inheriting; the bill-sticker is crushed by the crowd and the constable can then serve as a surrogate for the bill-sticker, when he is felled by Felix’s deadly “arm” [FH 285, 320], the “member” that stands in for Esther. In this way she is kept at two removes from the distant and unknown relative whose death she might well – but of course couldn’t and doesn’t – wish for. Furthermore, instead of proffering her claim, Esther gets to speak out in Felix’s behalf at his trial, and to speak in all innocence, with quiet power and predictable effectiveness. Her intervention, she later learns, had prompted a number of the county’s most influential gentry to act to have Felix’s sentence commuted. “You

made all the men wish what you wished" [FH 463], she is told, towards the end of the novel, and we can take that sentence, in its slight abstraction, as recording a working woman novelist's characteristic wish as well.

Wishfulness is what animates contrivance; the novelist, then, may be thought of as one more claimant or dispossessed remainder-man. But it is a commonplace that the realist novelist, loudly or softly, disclaims responsibility for the events she purports to record. In this respect she is less like the aggressive turkey-cock with whom we began than like the thief in the old joke who, caught hiding in the henhouse when the owner of the farm called out: "Anybody in there? Come out or I'll shoot!" answered "Nobody here but us chickens!" Nobody here but some characters and a narrator, is the novelist's disclaimer. And, oh, yes: some marks, too – just some black remnants or remainders.

It is time to ask, marks of what, remnants of what? What is it that the novelist's claim of innocence manages to not quite entirely conceal? What might she be thought to be guilty of? I want to propose three pertinent answers to that question, arranged in a graded series.

The first would read these oddities in Eliot's text as indicating, however obliquely, contradictions inherent in her ideological position, that of an apologist for the Victorian middle-classes. I'm thinking here of two of the best historical studies of her writings, Catherine Gallagher's account, which sees Eliot as caught up in what she calls "the politics of culture," a system of hegemonic interests and claims also referred to by Daniel Cottom as "the discourse of the liberal intellectual"⁹⁴. According to this

⁹⁴ See Catherine Gallagher, *The Industrial Reformation of English Fiction: Social Discourse and Narrative Form 1832-1867*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1985, pp. 219-67, and Daniel Cottom, *Social Figures: George Eliot Social History and Literary Representation*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1987, pp. 3-31.

reading, the novelist might not indeed herself experience feelings of guilt; the “crimes,” and hence the bad conscience, would be society’s, but her repeated claims of disinterestedness or idealism would signal her own and her society’s difficulties in maintaining the coherence of an ideological system.

We can accept these contextualizations of Eliot’s fiction and still wonder, first, what hold a society has on the individuals who make it up, and, second, how the nature and strength of that ideological grasp may get figured in fictions depicting the aggressions and altruisms, the guilt and innocence, of individual agents. Here, a second account, drawn from Freud’s essay “Some Character-Types Met With in Psycho-analytic Work”⁹⁵, may prove useful. The final pages of that essay are devoted to those whom Freud calls “criminals from a sense of guilt,” people who either commit crimes or imagine that they have done so, out of an “oppressive feeling of guilt.” Freud maintains that, “paradoxical as it may sound, ...the sense of guilt was present before the misdeed,” that in fact “the misdeed arose from the sense of guilt” and indeed provided some relief by attaching what had been experienced as a pervasive and indeterminate guiltiness to a particular, namable crime. When Freud goes on to ask what the origin of “this obscure sense of guilt might be, he claims that the invariable outcome of analytic work was to show that [it] derived from the Oedipus complex and was a reaction to the two great criminal intentions of killing the father and having sexual relations with the mother.” That the plot of *Felix Holt* should turn on the castration of Mr. Christian’s coattails, that the mysterious remainder-man should be momentarily imagined as “a mendicant sailor with a wooden leg” and then discovered to be in fact a woman, these details, gratuitous in their unpredictability, suggest

⁹⁵ In *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 24 vols, London, Hogarth Press, 1955, 14.332-33.

that an oedipal thematics may indeed be at work shaping the play of guilt and innocence in the novel.

Finally, consider a third possibility, this one raised by the work of the post-Freudian analyst Nicolas Abraham. For Abraham, the “invariable outcome of analytic work” was not the discovery in castration anxiety or in the oedipus complex of irreducible uncaused causes; rather he would see them as peculiarly recalcitrant myths, themselves capable of further analysis. In a talk entitled “The ‘Crime’ of Introjection”⁹⁶ Abraham proposes another scenario to account for the pervasiveness of feelings of guilt that are attached to no particular crime. He would trace the origins of guilt back to what he calls “the most archaic stage in the constitution of the Ego,” the moment when the symbiosis between an infant and its mother is broken, when the infant is obliged to take account of, as it were, two mothers, an external object and its internalized or introjected double. This splitting, Abraham believes, is the beginning of what he calls *la duplicité* and of *la duplicité’s* “acolyte, language.” He means duplicity in both its numerical and its moral senses – as two-ness and as deviousness, as a loss of the simplicity of an innocent relation to the mother. (The similarly equivocal term in Victorian English, a term frequently encountered in Eliot’s novels, is “doubleness.”) For Abraham, a guilty awareness of doubleness is the inevitable result of every child’s accession to consciousness, to mental representation and to language, and it precedes and prompts, rather than conceals, oedipal fantasies of parricide and incest.

Need we choose among these stories – for they are stories – of where guilt comes from, when we turn back to Eliot’s fiction? I think not. Each can serve as a lens to bring aspects of her language and plotting into focus. The particular strength of Nicolas Abraham’s story – and the

⁹⁶ « Le “crime” de l’introjection » in Nicolas Abraham et Maria Torok, *L’Ecorce et le noyau*, Paris, Aubier Montaigne, 1978, p. 126.

reason I chose to place it last in the series – is that it seems to me to resonate with the passages I have been directing my attention to in *Silas Marner* and *Felix Holt*. For these are novels that bring the question of the responsibilities of authorship – the guilt or innocence of the novelist, the aggressive willfulness, or perhaps only the will, inherent in plotting a story – into touch with a thematics of marking or incising that so reframes that question that we are obliged, like Abraham, to put words like “guilt” or “innocence” within quotation marks. Silas’s weaving, “like the spider, from pure impulse, without reflection,” comes to serve as an emblem not for the innocence of authorship but for its roots in a form of motion or agency to which words like activity or passivity, guilt or innocence cannot do justice. That is not the only thing George Eliot has to say about authorship, but it is nevertheless there to be read in her fiction.

Neil Hertz