

## GEORGE ELIOT'S POETRY OF THE SOUL

By Gregory Tate

The poetic epigraph to *Daniel Deronda*, written by George Eliot herself, anticipates and encapsulates the novel's interest in the complex processes that make up human psychology:

Let thy chief terror be of thine own soul:  
There, 'mid the throngs of hurrying desires  
That trample on the dead to seize their spoil,  
Lurks vengeance, footless, irresistible  
As exhalations laden with slow death,  
And o'er the fairest troop of captured joys  
Breathes pallid pestilence.<sup>1</sup>

The epigraph describes psychological phenomena that will feature prominently throughout *Daniel Deronda*: the multiple and contradictory elements of individual character; the often self-defeating nature of human thought and action; and the inescapable power of unconscious and therefore uncontrollable mental processes. However, the epigraph approaches these phenomena in a manner very different from that of the novel itself. Eschewing the realistic language of Eliot's prose, it relies for its effect both on its melodramatic diction and on its formal qualities. The declamatory admonition is driven by the forceful metre of the blank verse, and it is given conclusive emphasis in the final line through the use of alliteration and the abrupt termination of the verse. The melodramatic tone of the epigraph is accompanied by a metaphysical focus on the 'soul', and this is indicative of the psychological stance that Eliot adopts throughout her poetry: the author uses verse to emphasize the spiritual and numinous aspects of human nature that are of only secondary importance to the examinations of psychology undertaken in her fiction.

Eliot did not publish any of her poetry until her reputation as a novelist was well established. Her poetic chapter epigraphs first appeared in *Felix Holt* in 1866, and her first book of poetry, the narrative poem *The Spanish Gypsy*, was published in 1868. However, she had been writing poetry since childhood, and her views on poetic form influenced the composition of at least one of her novels. Writing to her publisher John Blackwood about *Silas Marner*, Eliot confided: 'I have felt all through as if the story would have lent itself best to metrical rather than prose fiction, especially in all that relates to the psychology of Silas'. However, she concluded that what she had originally conceived 'as a sort of legendary tale' would ultimately benefit from 'a more realistic treatment'.<sup>2</sup> The implication that 'metrical' form impedes 'realistic treatment' is a revealing indication of Eliot's views on the different functions of poetry and prose. Eliot also suggests that poetry, despite being essentially inimical to realistic representation, may still prove a suitable vehicle for the examination of psychology. This separation of realism and psychology is surprising coming from a novelist celebrated for her meticulous descriptions of the mental states of her characters, and suggests that Eliot saw poetry as enabling an approach to psychology whose emphasis differed from that of the realistic descriptions of mind which predominate in her novels.

Eliot certainly conceived of her poetry as fulfilling a different purpose from that of her prose.

Writing to a friend after the publication of *The Spanish Gypsy* she declared: 'I seem to have gained a new organ, a new medium that my soul had languished for.'<sup>3</sup> The invocation of the soul here is fitting, because Eliot uses this 'new medium' to describe a different type of psychology, an idealist account of identity which subsumes the mind beneath a transcendent soul, and which largely dispenses with the detailed analyses of mental processes that are central to Eliot's fiction. The psychological realism of Eliot's novels was underpinned by her engagement with the empiricist theories of contemporary psychologists such as her partner George Henry Lewes, who defined the mind as the ever-changing product of physiological and social experience. Conversely, the idealist model of identity presented in the poetry offered a means of evading contemporary psychologists' disturbing descriptions of the materially-derived and contingent nature of the mind. I wish to argue that, despite her commitment to materialist models of psychology in her novels, Eliot believed that such models could not fully explain the complex workings of thought and emotion, and so sought to fashion in her poetry an account of psychology that made room for the numinous and unknowable elements of identity. At the same time, however, her serious intellectual investment in materialist theories of mind meant that the language and concepts of contemporary psychologists continued to influence her approach to psychology in her poetry.

Eliot's conception of the distinct functions of poetry and prose is revealed in her periodical writing and in her notebooks. Realism was her essential criterion for prose fiction; in 'Silly Novels by Lady Novelists', an essay published in the *Westminster Review* in 1856, she declared that 'Great writers' must necessarily 'exhibit men and things as they are'.<sup>4</sup> Conversely, in an essay entitled 'Versification' written in her notebook in 1869, Eliot describes the purpose of poetry in affective rather than mimetic terms. She compares poetry to music: 'In both verse and music rhythmic and tonic relations are used as a means of moving men's souls'. This is achieved by employing 'the accumulated associations of certain modes of sound' that correspond to what Eliot calls 'the bias of passionate experience'.<sup>5</sup> This formulation identifies poetry as an affective medium that elicits an emotional response from the reader. In this essay Eliot presents poetry as a vehicle of emotional truth that bypasses the cognitive effort required by prose and instead directly affects the 'soul' of the reader.

Eliot's belief in the spiritual power of poetry, articulated in the essay on 'Versification', shaped her poetic career. Charles LaPorte argues that Eliot published her poetry because of a desire to participate in a poetic tradition 'which in the nineteenth century was accorded extraordinary status as a vessel of moral insight, a voice of sacred truth related to the sacred truths of scripture'.<sup>6</sup> This conception of poetry meant that Eliot turned to verse when she wished to fashion a less materialist and more spiritual model of psychology. Her adherence to this model in her poetry runs counter to the conceptual shift which took place over the course of the nineteenth century and which, in the words of Roger Smith, resulted in 'the reformulation of the soul as the mind'.<sup>7</sup> The contingent mind replaced the transcendent soul as the dominant model for understanding human nature in the Victorian period, and the materialist psychological theories with which Eliot was so familiar made a crucial contribution to this shift. However, the usurpation of the soul by the mind was not absolute. Eliot uses both terms throughout her work, and the frequency with which she uses them is telling. In her fiction, the word 'mind' appears roughly four times as often as 'soul', but in her poetry, this ratio is reversed: 'soul' is four times as common as 'mind'.<sup>8</sup> The emphasis on the 'soul' in Eliot's verse

implies a desire to reinstate the spiritual into representations of human psychology.

Eliot's conception of the different psychological emphases of poetry and prose is demonstrated by a quotation from Wordsworth that appears in *Silas Marner*. Towards the end of the novel the narrator describes the 'intensity of inward life' that Silas experiences after his gold is returned to him:

It is as if a new fineness of ear for all spiritual voices had sent wonderworking vibrations through the heavy mortal frame – as if 'beauty born of murmuring sound' had passed into the face of the listener.<sup>9</sup>

The reference to 'inward life' prepares the reader for an analysis of Silas's mental processes, but the text proceeds to move in two opposite directions. On the one hand it describes the physiological aspects of feeling through its references to the 'ear' and to 'the heavy mortal frame'. On the other hand it presents a mystical account of emotion, using terms such as 'spiritual' and 'wonderworking'. The latter movement is consummated by the use of the phrase 'beauty born of murmuring sound', taken from Wordsworth's 'Three years she grew in sun and shower', through which the voices that work on Silas become analogous to the numinous 'overseeing power' that guides the young girl in the poem.<sup>10</sup> The poetic quotation, with its metaphysical stance and language, allows Eliot to gesture towards a spiritual side of 'inward life' that the more realistic and physicalized language of the rest of the passage would otherwise occlude.

Wordsworth provides several of the chapter epigraphs in Eliot's later novels, and these epigraphs further indicate Eliot's interest in what she saw as the spiritual emphasis of poetry as it relates to psychology. Chapter 40 of *Daniel Deronda*, for example, is preceded by a quotation from *The Excursion* which proclaims that

Within the soul a faculty abides,  
That with interpositions, which would hide  
And darken, so can deal that they become  
Contingencies of pomp.<sup>11</sup>

The epigraph foreshadows the chapter's descriptions of Mordecai's inexhaustible religious faith and of the revelatory effect which that faith has on Daniel. It does so, however, using spiritual language that glosses over the complexity of Daniel's psychological responses to his encounter with Mordecai, and that approaches the psychological phenomenon it describes from a metaphysical point of view. Stephen Gill has shown that Wordsworth's poetry was a crucial influence on Eliot's writing, and the frequency with which Eliot quotes from his poetry is further testimony to the fact.<sup>12</sup> In Wordsworth's poetry the mind is always linked with and subordinate to a transcendent soul, and this model of poetic psychology was embraced by Eliot in her own poetry.

However, Eliot was also deeply interested in the empiricist theories, opposed to any metaphysical explanation of human nature, that formed an important strand of Victorian psychology, and this interest remains evident in her poetry despite its different approach to psychology. In *The Principles of Psychology*, first published in 1855, the psychologist Herbert

Spencer, with whom Eliot shared a close but difficult personal relationship, puts forward an evolutionary account of psychology which defines the mind as the product solely of material experience. Spencer presents the mind as the passive recipient of external sensations: the ‘adjustment of inner to outer relations in which intelligence of all degrees consists,’ he writes, ‘must in every case be initiated by the actions of things upon the outside of the organism.’<sup>13</sup> He resolves the question of the *a priori* mental capabilities with which idealist philosophies credit the mind by labelling them products of evolution: they ‘are determined by the experiences of the *race* of organisms’, which, ‘by infinite repetition in countless successive generations’, produce unconscious mental processes that are permanent features of the mind.<sup>14</sup> Spencer’s theory stresses the dependence of psychological development on experience, and it locates the origins of the mind’s inherent organization in the organic memory of racial experience rather than in a transcendent soul. The relationship between Eliot and Spencer was at its closest when Spencer was developing his psychological theories, and Gordon S. Haight suggests that Spencer’s conversations with Eliot were of great importance to the development of those theories.<sup>15</sup> Eliot would subsequently explore Spencer’s ideas throughout her work, including her poetry.

The psychological theories with which Eliot engaged most closely, however, were those of Lewes, and the exchange of ideas between the two writers is evident in the shared language and attitudes of their work. Lewes was acutely aware of the shortcomings inherent in any model of psychology, and he recognized that no theory could do more than convert the ‘mystery’ of the mind into an “‘orderly mystery’”.<sup>16</sup> In his psychological work *Problems of Life and Mind* Lewes frequently uses the word ‘soul’ as an inclusive label for psychological processes when no more precise term is available. A similar awareness of the limitations of rationalist enquiry and terminology is evident in Eliot’s fiction and, to an even greater extent, in the more metaphysical stance of her poetry.

Despite his willingness to admit of uncertainty, Lewes’s understanding of psychology was fundamentally empiricist; his keen interest in physiology led him to conceive of the mind in terms of the body, and to dismiss the notion of a transcendent soul:

we may now say that the biological attitude has replaced the metaphysical: mental phenomena are everywhere regarded as vital, and not as having a source which is independent of the living organism.<sup>17</sup>

Like Spencer, Lewes argues that the underlying organization of the individual mind is shaped by past collective experience. In the first volume of *Problems of Life and Mind*, he deliberately rejects the Lockean metaphor of the *tabula rasa*, and asserts that the mind ‘is not a blank sheet of paper, but a palimpsest.’ Just as Spencer does, Lewes claims that the mind’s pre-existing ideas depend on the inscriptions of organic memory: ‘There is thus what may be called an *a priori* condition in all Sensation, and in all Ideation. But this is *historical*, not *transcendental*’.<sup>18</sup> Lewes’s focus on the historical and physiological origins of human psychology affirms his antipathy to the concept of an unconditioned soul that controls mental processes.

Throughout Eliot’s poetry there is, despite the predominance of the word ‘soul’, a constant movement between the unchanging soul and the contingent mind, between Eliot’s belief in the spiritual essence of poetry and her knowledge of empiricist theories of psychology. *The*

*Spanish Gypsy* is primarily concerned with the relationship between racial memory and individual consciousness, a concern that parallels the importance of organic memory to the theories of Lewes and Spencer. The poem describes hereditary characteristics as 'treasure stored by generations past | In winding chambers of receptive sense' (p. 56).<sup>19</sup> The reference to 'sense', and to the specifically concrete 'chambers', implies that the constitution of the individual mind is shaped out of material experience. Moreover, the financial metaphor is strikingly similar to Lewes's statement that the inherited memories of collective experience constitute 'for each individual a fund of knowledge, an instrument of Power which magnifies his existence.'<sup>20</sup> This shared stance suggests that both authors conceived of the process in similar terms. Lewes certainly saw Eliot's poem as presenting an empirical and historical model of psychology similar to that of his own work. In the first volume of *Problems of Life and Mind*, he comments that 'Like the body, the Mind is shaped through its history', and proceeds to quote a passage from *The Spanish Gypsy* that describe the hereditary nature of the 'soul'.<sup>21</sup>

In the 'Notes on *The Spanish Gypsy*' published after her death, Eliot states that the poem addresses 'the part which is played in the human lot by hereditary conditions in the largest sense'.<sup>22</sup> While Eliot presents the mind as being directed by these 'hereditary conditions', the persistent interpolation of the word 'soul' into descriptions of character in *The Spanish Gypsy* simultaneously allows her to press the claims of a spiritual element of individual psychology. The simultaneous fragility and tenacity of this idea is shown through the eponymous character Fedalma, who frequently invokes her free and independent soul before undermining her own assertions, as when she declares: 'I can dare all things when my soul is moved | By something hidden that possesses me' (p. 113). The first line presents Fedalma as an active agent defined by her 'soul', but this idealist concept is immediately undercut as the second line repositions Fedalma not as a subject but as the object of an uncontrollable 'something'. She appeals to her transcendent soul but is forced to acknowledge the conditional and dependent nature of her identity. Similarly, when Fedalma laments that 'My soul is clogged with self' (p. 244), the opposition of the two terms describes a soul that should transcend the messy contingency of individual psychology, but that is instead uncomfortably caught up in the uncertain workings of the mind.

*The Spanish Gypsy* simultaneously presents two alternative accounts of human nature that are never reconciled. The poem examines the complex and changing nature of mental processes while also describing a spiritual essence that exists beyond the mind. This dual approach is evident in the descriptions of Don Silva, Fedalma's conflicted lover:

Thus Silva, inwardly debating, all his ear  
Turned into audience of a twofold mind;  
For even in tumult full-fraught consciousness  
Had plenteous being for a self aloof  
That gazed and listened, like a soul in dreams  
Weaving the wondrous tale it marvels at. (p. 295)

The proliferation of conflicting subjects in this passage, combined with the alliteration that is threaded through it, gives it a hurried and 'full-fraught' quality that reflects the instability of

Silva's mental processes. Although the 'self aloof' (which is likened to the 'soul') transcends this psychological muddle, it is unable to impose its will on the mind, and can only passively gaze and listen. This introspection threatens to heighten Silva's internal division, as the 'twofold mind' is further fragmented by the existence of another element of the self that is merely a spectator to the internal debate. This passage exemplifies the way in which the poem's tenacious adherence to the metaphysical concept of the soul is countered by its descriptions of the problematic functioning of the mind.

In 'The Legend of Jubal', written in 1869 and based on the biblical story of the discovery of music, the focus on a metaphysical account of human nature is more complete than in *The Spanish Gypsy*. The engagement with empiricist psychology is less overt, masked to a greater extent by self-consciously poetic diction. 'The Legend of Jubal' claims, in line with the essay on 'Versification' which was written in the same year, that poetry and music appeal directly to the soul. The poem states that music

To Jubal such enlargèd passion brought  
That love, hope, rage, and all experience,  
Were fused in vaster being, fetching thence  
Concords and discords, cadences and cries  
That seemed from some world-shrouded soul to  
rise,  
Some rapture more intense, some mightier rage,  
Some living sea that burst the bounds of man's brief age. (ll.261-67)

Music enables access to a 'world-shrouded soul', a collective unconscious that affirms the unity of the individual with humanity at large. This concept seems to conform to the idealist belief in a soul that transcends the confines of the individual mind, but the details of the passage complicate this reading. There is, ironically, little harmony in this account of the soul that is revealed through music. The description of violent and conflicting emotions, particularly in the fourth line, with its conspicuously inverted metre and its reference to 'Concords and discords', is more suggestive of a complex fusion of mental states than of a harmonious spirit. The use of metaphysical language gives these lines mystical overtones, but the description of the conflicted nature of the 'vaster being' suggests that this passage is, like *The Spanish Gypsy*, both highlighting the spiritual aspect of human experience and engaging with contemporary psychological theories. These lines can be read as a reformulation of the materialist theory that humans share an unconscious mental organisation founded on the organic memory of collective experience.

'The Legend of Jubal' presents an account of psychology that emphasizes the permanence and stability of an individual identity that is founded on a transcendent soul, but the language of the poem simultaneously subverts this account. The poem's representation of memory is central to this ambivalence. 'The Legend of Jubal' figures memory as the infallible guarantor of fixed identity: Cain is unable to forget his past because the mark of disgrace that God has placed on him remains 'clear-edged to his unwearied eye, | Its secret firm in time-fraught memory' (ll.32-33). This couplet presents memory as a retentive rather than an interpretive process, which records and permanently stores past experiences. However, it also implies that the persistence

of memory may be dependent on sensory cues, an implication that is reinforced by the half-rhyme of 'eye' and 'memory'. While these lines appear to affirm the independence and infallibility of memory, their rhyme and diction suggest that mental processes such as memory are dependent on the body, a conception that was central to materialist theories of psychology.

The conclusion of the poem similarly presents memory as a function of both the transcendent soul and the contingent mind. As he lies dying Jubal sees a face which presents itself to him as "thy loved Past, | The soul that makes thee one from first to last" (ll.734-35). The soul here appears to consist of a permanent store of memories that underwrites the unity and permanence of individual identity. The couplet provides a formal stamp on this unity, as the rhyme of 'Past' and 'last' both yokes the sound of the first line to that of the second, and conjoins the beginning of Jubal's life to its end. Yet the confidence with which these lines proclaim the indivisibility of the soul, reinforced by the formal bulwark of rhyme, is undermined by the ambiguity inherent in their description of memory. The unity of Jubal's soul is guaranteed by the existence of a store of memories that have remained unconscious and inaccessible to him up to the moment of death, but the sudden surfacing of these memories necessarily affirms the psychological division between the conscious and the unconscious mind. As such, 'The Legend of Jubal' figures memory both as the glue that holds identity together and as a complex process that reveals the divisions within the mind. This model of memory reflects the broader account of psychology that Eliot presents throughout her poetry. In her poetry, as in her fiction, she engages with contemporary theories of psychology and examines the complex functioning of the mind. At the same time, the emphasis on the 'soul', and on an accompanying metaphysical frame of reference, allows Eliot to affirm the existence of a spiritual aspect of human psychology that resists scientific rationalization and that, in her view, finds its most apt expression in poetry.

#### Notes

- 1 This and all subsequent line references to Eliot's shorter poetry and unascribed epigraphs are from George Eliot, *The Complete Shorter Poetry*, ed. Antonie Gerard van den Broek, 2 vols (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2005).
- 2 George Eliot to John Blackwood, 24 February 1861, in *The George Eliot Letters*, ed. Gordon S. Haight, 9 vols (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954-78), III (1954), p. 382.
- 3 Eliot to François D'Albert Durade, July 1868, in *The George Eliot Letters*, IV (1956), p. 465.
- 4 Eliot, 'Silly Novels by Lady Novelists', *Westminster Review*, 66 (1856), in *Essays of George Eliot*, ed. Thomas Pinney (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963), p. 310.
- 5 Eliot, 'Versification', in *The Complete Shorter Poetry*, II, pp. 185-86.
- 6 Charles LaPorte, 'George Eliot, the Poetess as Prophet', in *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 31 (2003), pp. 171-72.
- 7 Roger Smith, *The Fontana History of the Human Sciences* (London: Fontana Press, 1997), pp. 158-59.

- 8 This information is from a search on *Literature Online* <<http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk>> [accessed 13 February 2007].
- 9 Eliot, *Silas Marner: The Weaver of Raveloe*, ed. Terence Cave (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 159-60.
- 10 William Wordsworth, 'Three years she grew in sun and shower', in *Lyrical Ballads and Other Poems, 1797-1800*, ed. James Butler and Karen Green (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992), l.11.
- 11 Wordsworth, *The Excursion*, in *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, vol. 5, ed. Ernest de Selincourt and Helen Darbishire (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1949), Book IV, ll.1058-61.
- 12 Stephen Gill, *Wordsworth and the Victorians* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), pp. 145-67.
- 13 Herbert Spencer, *The Principles of Psychology* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1855), p. 498.
- 14 Spencer, *Principles*, p. 526; author's italics.
- 15 Gordon S. Haight, *George Eliot: A Biography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), p. 116.
- 16 George Henry Lewes, *The Physiology of Common Life*, 2 vols (Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1859-60), II (1860), p. 78. Lewes is quoting T. H. Huxley.
- 17 Lewes, *Problems of Life and Mind*, 5 vols (London, Trübner and Co., 1874-9), IV, *The Study of Psychology* (1879), p. 78.
- 18 Lewes, *Problems*, I, *The Foundations of a Creed* (1874), p. 162; author's italics.
- 19 This and all subsequent page references to the poem are from Eliot, *The Spanish Gypsy* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1868).
- 20 Lewes, *Problems*, IV, p. 80.
- 21 Lewes, *Problems*, I, p. 219.
- 22 Eliot, 'Notes on *The Spanish Gypsy*', in *George Eliot's Life as Related in her Letters and Journals*, ed. J. W. Cross, 3 vols (Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1885), III, p. 35.



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