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GEORGE ELIOT'S LAST STAND: *IMPRESSIONS OF THEOPHRASTUS SUCH*

By Rosemarie Bodenheimer

LET'S FACE IT: *IMPRESSIONS of Theophrastus Such* can be a pretty dreary book. It's all too easy to put it down, especially if you happen to be in the middle of a particularly heavy-handed passage in "The Watch-Dog of Knowledge" or "Debasing the Moral Currency." Some early readers felt that the real George Eliot had abandoned them in her final publication by ceasing to write fiction, while recent critics have gone to some lengths to show that the narrator, allegedly a minimally published bachelor named Theophrastus Such, is a self-reflexive fictional character whose failings and contradictions are the real subject of the book.[1] Who is Theophrastus Such? What is his ethical, political, or scientific orientation? How does his character emerge during the course of the volume? These are questions that have occupied recent critical dialogue. In response, I find myself harboring some sympathy for George Saintsbury, who reviewed *Impressions* in the *Academy* of 28 June 1879:

> . . . we feel that there is either too much or too little of Mr Such. The essayist who wishes to utter his opinions through the mouth of a feigned personage must give him at least something of a body for our thoughts to take hold of. Mr Such is little more than a disembodied shadow with a name attached to it, and this being the case we feel that we could do without his shadow and his name altogether. (qtd. in Hutchinson 429–30)

Considering Theophrastus Such as a carefully contrived character-narrator may be a way to stimulate contemporary attention to this long-neglected book, but I am not sure that it helps us to read the essays collected under his name. In fact, the struggle to define Theophrastus in an interestingly modern way makes it more rather than less difficult to appreciate the narrative dynamics of the essays in their own terms, which vary widely from essay to essay. I would like to simplify the discussion, in the hope of going on to complicate it in other ways. Theophrastus Such is no different from George Eliot. Both are fictional male names for narrators who display a variety of styles, roles, and attitudes. At their best, these voices can create a dazzling array of perspective shifts within short passages of prose; at their worst, they turn into bludgeoning moralizers. What they share is an unleashed satirical power that the novelist George Eliot had always commanded, though she had muffled it in appeals to sympathy and the cultivation of vision beyond the ego. Rooted in anger, dismay, indignation, and disgust, the undisguised negativity of *Impressions* has always put readers off. Though

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I sometimes share that reaction, it is part of my mission to suggest that George Eliot's uncompromising last stand on the delusions of the human race deserves a fuller hearing, perhaps even a celebration. The satisfactions of producing unapologetic satire are, after all, quite well known to most of us.

Of the eighteen essays in the volume, only a few have received any sustained critical attention. Often discussed as stand-alone pieces, they tend to be the volume's bookends: the two fictional autobiographical sketches that open the collection, "Looking Inward" and "Looking Backward," and, placed at the end, the science fiction fantasy "Shadows of the Coming Race," and the attack on British anti-Semitism, "A Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!" In between are fourteen pieces conceived very roughly in the Theophrastan character sketch tradition.[2] Nine of them center on a named character that represents a certain behavioral syndrome; in the other five, the narrator mounts more general and wandering attacks on the decline of the present age. Tendencies toward literary burlesque, plagiarism, slothful work, and a collective blindness to ethical failure are indicators of that decline. The narrator – call him Theophrastus Such – places himself at different angles to his material in different essays, but he is always there to be the observer and responder whose presence is essential to the representation of a character or a cultural habit. In his account of *Impressions*, James Buzard writes, "as Eliot's narrator insists, we need each other as a means of knowing ourselves, and ourselves as means of knowing each other" (Anderson and Shaw 208). Theophrastus Such is a personified means of knowing, present as a shadowy figure in each scene.

In effect, *Impressions* is a miscellany shaped by no overall plan, no idea of development. Nonetheless, it reveals its themes and its typical concerns, which are often recognizable as distilled versions of characters and situations in George Eliot's novels. In the absence of a created fictional world, these last essays make it possible to think again about continuities and discontinuities in her vision of character and consciousness, as they are shaped by a world of others and the wear of temporal change. To give the book its own context, I begin with a sketch of the biographical conditions that shaped its composition. This section is followed by an exploration of recurring ideas and strategies in the fourteen central essays. Finally, I return to "Looking Inward," to see how it functions as a prelude to the collection as a whole.

How She Came to Write Character Sketches

THE PROBLEM OF THE THEOPHRASTUS-NARRATOR may, to begin with, be tied to the biographical context from which it emerged. We know little about the composition of *Impressions*. Biographers have agreed that most of it was written during the summer of 1878, while George Eliot and George Henry Lewes were spending their second and final summer together in the relative seclusion of their new Surrey house, The Heights at Witley.[3] Unusually, there is no George Eliot diary for 1878, the year of Lewes's acute illness and death, and no record of beginning a new book.[4] The biographers' dating is based on Lewes's note to George Eliot's publisher John Blackwood, sent with the manuscript in late November 1878. Lewes writes, "Of the parcel itself I say nothing except that it is the work of the last few months and is *not* a story" (*GE Letters* 7: 78). "The last few months" is vague enough, and may have been Lewes's indirect way of apologizing to Blackwood, who had remained in the dark about the project until the manuscript arrived on his desk. If the book is pointedly *not* a story, Lewes gives no indication of what it is instead, or what he thinks of it.

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Lewes had been the medium for George Eliot's work for twenty years. He praised every installment, took charge of the business angles, and served as her primary audience. During the summer of 1878 he knew how serious his illness was, but he did not stop his good offices, knowing he had to keep his partner occupied with work, if only to allay her anxiety about his health. The decision to concentrate on brief essays, rather than commit to another long project requiring sustained research and concentration over time, may well have been George Eliot's response to the severe stress that both Lewes's illness and her own were placing on the couple's lives. When Lewes shipped the manuscript to Blackwood on 21 November 1878, he had only nine days to live. He urged quick publication, even though the book was considered unfinished: "There is more to come, but we should be glad to know how many pages you estimate the present instalment would make, and we wish the volume to be out before the opening of Parliament" (*GE Letters* 7: 78). He had given up on doing his own work, but here he sounds like a man determined to complete one last thing before he died. Though George Eliot did consider writing a "Second Series" after the book came out, the essays Lewes sent to Blackwood in November completed the volume as it stands – a volume that might easily have included more, or different, essays (*GE Letters* 7: 126).

After Lewes died, George Eliot's feelings about publishing "Theophrastus" (as she called the book) fluctuated between normal authorial ambition for its success, and fear that her audiences would condemn her for paying attention to her own writing in the face of Lewes's mortal illness. Its publication had to be delayed so that it would not come out too soon after Lewes's death. On 13 January 1879 she wrote Blackwood: "To me now the writing seems all trivial stuff, but since he wished it to be printed, and you seem to concur, I will correct the sheets . . . and they can be struck off and laid by for a future time" (*GE Letters* 7: 93).[5] In late February and March of 1879, George Eliot read proofs and made revisions in a few days stolen from her primary preoccupation, which was preparing Lewes's unfinished *Problems of Life and Mind* for publication.[6] She still did not want to take the responsibility for publishing, and kept trying to delay or suppress the work until Blackwood reminded her again that Lewes would want it done (*GE Letters* 7: 122, 125). Yet she corrected proofs with her usual eagle eye, demanded a "revise" so she could check them again, and even suggested that a line on the title page be moved slightly to make a better visual impression (*GE Letters* 7: 110–11).

After giving her final assent to a publication date in May 1879, her worry about what others would think of her did not abate. "Do not be surprised if you hear that a book of mine is coming out," she wrote to Harriet Beecher Stowe in April. "It was sent to the publisher last year by my Dear Husband's own hand. You will believe that since he went from me I have been occupied solely with His writing and have been far aloof from other authorship" (*GE Letters* 7: 133). Eventually Blackwood, impatient with her "morbid notions about poor Lewes' memory" appeased her with a Publisher's Note on the title page: "The Manuscript of this Work was put into our hands towards the close of last year, but the publication has been delayed owing to the domestic affliction of the Author" (*GE Letters* 7: 121 and 136n).

George Eliot's final title for the book of essays was still in play until very late in the game. According to Blackwood's correspondence, it was first called "'Characters and Characteristics', from the remains of 'Theophrastus Such,'" a title which implied that the essays had been selected for posthumous publication by an executor or editor (*GE Letters* 7: 82). In her March 1879 correspondence with Blackwood, George Eliot dithered with "Characters and Characteristics or Impressions of Theoph[rastu]s Such" *GE Letters* 7: 111).

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She was not sure whether the title page should read "'By George Eliot' or 'Edited by George Eliot'" (*GE Letters* 7: 119). The later choice of "Impressions" over "Characters" acknowledges that she had not really written "Characters" in the typological sketch tradition of the Greek Theophrastus and his later followers. The final elision of "Edited by" was, I like to imagine, simple common sense: no one would have been fooled for a moment. If she wanted to appear, Carlyle-wise, as an "Editor" instead of in her usual pseudonymous glory, it was to place a distance between the public image of a divinely ethical George Eliot and the satirical, comic, and tendentiously moralistic voices at play in the essays. Of course, those voices had always been important parts of her repertoire, but the novels had managed to soften their edges by turning to the rhetoric of sympathy whenever cynicism or satire threatened to get out of hand.

However the final title came into being, the choice of "Such" as a surname for the doubled male pseudonym seems playful, even deliberately silly. Both adverb and pronoun, the word "such" has many uses that generally point to a likeness of some sort, but it is essentially a grammatical placeholder. In itself, "such" is an empty word; said aloud, it has a comic sound. It cuts through the learned allusion to Greek literature without ceremony.[7] When Theophrastus of Eresus, the father of the character sketch tradition, makes his single appearance in George Eliot's text, he plays a similar role. In "Looking Backward," he is there to debunk the delusions of British nostalgia for the golden age of Greek culture. "I gather, too, from the undeniable testimony of [Aristotle's] disciple Theophrastus that there were bores, ill-bred persons, and detractors even in Athens, of species remarkably corresponding to the English, and not yet made endurable by being classic" (*ITS* 16). The voice, pure George Eliot in her comic-satirical mode, asserts its right to take on the British scene without constraint. "Theophrastus Such" is a George Eliot who has (supposedly) not held the public stage for twenty years as a great novelist and ethical teacher, and who is consequently given license to elaborate on human self-delusion and cruelty without the mitigations of fictional form.[8]

As for the text itself, some quite basic questions remain unanswered. We do not know the order in which the essays were originally written. Did one or two trial essays lead to a determination to make a whole book? How and when was the final order decided? At what point in the planning and writing did a named narrator appear? Considering that the name Theophrastus Such never appears within the texts of the essays, it is perfectly possible that the narrative "I," which plays different roles in different essays, did not have a name until George Eliot began to worry about a title. She needed something to indicate that her new book was not a story, and that it was formally related to the character sketch tradition, if only to signal that it was composed of short, discrete studies of human nature. As she put it to Blackwood on 23 November, a week before Lewes's death, "I have thought that a good form of advertisement to save people from disappointment in a book of mine not being a story, would be to print the list of Contents which, with the title, would give all but the very stupid a notice to what form of writing the work belongs" (*Letters* 7: 81). Her irritability about having to manage her reading audience comes through all too clearly. Her insistence that the book does not tell a story might also give pause to critics who want to make the narrator's character "the real story" of *Impressions*.

Among the unanswered questions raised by the collection, there is the puzzle of what its long final essay, "The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!" has to do with anything else in the volume. Its attack on British anti-Semitism, its critique of the arrogantly imperialist elements in British nationalism, and its attempt to get readers to understand the heroic cohesiveness of

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Jewish national memory as a historically besieged counterpart of British national feeling – all of this attests to George Eliot's sense that *Daniel Deronda* was not her final word on the Jewish Question. It is well known that she rejoiced in the praise she heard from Jewish readers, but she was also deeply bothered by critics who dismissed or objected to the Jewish parts of the novel. The heat this raised is evident in a letter to Harriet Beecher Stowe written on 29 October 1876, two months after *Deronda*'s final volume appeared in print. To this distant American correspondent George Eliot showed her hand, as if she were writing a prospectus for "The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!" She began by acknowledging that she had expected resistance to "the Jewish element" in her novel:

> But precisely because I felt that the usual attitude of Christians toward Jews is – I hardly know whether to say more impious or more stupid when viewed in the light of their professed principles, I therefore felt urged to treat Jews with such sympathy and understanding as my nature and knowledge could attain to. Moreover, not only towards the Jews, but towards all oriental peoples with whom we English come in contact, a spirit of arrogance and contemptuous dictatorialness is observable which has become a national disgrace to us. There is nothing I should care more to do, if it were possible, that to rouse the imagination of men and women to a vision of human claims in those races of their fellow-men who most differ from them in customs and beliefs. But towards the Hebrews we western people who have been reared in Christianity, have a peculiar debt and, whether we acknowledge it or not, a peculiar thoroughness of fellowship in religion and moral sentiment. Can anything be more disgusting than to hear people called "educated" making small jokes about eating ham, and showing themselves empty of any real knowledge as to the relation of their own social and religious life to the history of the people they think themselves witty in insulting? They hardly know that Christ was a Jew. (*GE Letters* 6: 301–02)

"If it were possible," then, George Eliot wanted to combat public ignorance by writing something just like "The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!" as early as the fall of 1876. But why would it not be possible? An indirect answer appears in another letter written earlier that same month to a Jewish man, Haim Guedalla, who had written to admire her representations of Jews in *Deronda*. Having received a few lines of thanks from the author, Guedalla wrote again to ask whether he might publish her brief sympathetic note in the *Jewish Chronicle,* along with an extract from his Hebrew translation of the Hand and Banner dialogue in chapter 42 of *Deronda*. George Eliot's refusal was couched in somewhat agonistic terms. "I have a repugnance to anything like an introduction of my own personality to the public which only an urgent sense of duty could overcome," she wrote. "But over and above this feeling I have a conviction founded on dispassionate judgment, that any influence I may have as an author would be injured by the presentation of myself in print through any other medium than that of my books" (*GE Letters* 6: 289).

Appearing as herself in a journal would be too dangerous: "when anyone who can be called a public person makes a casual speech or writes a letter that gets into print, his words are copied, served up in a work of commentary, misinterpreted, misquoted, and made matter for gossip for the emptiest minds." She had no desire to give occasion for "this frivolous (if not vitiating) kind of comment that already exists in sickening abundance" (*GE Letters* 6: 288–89). If she were to write about British anti-Semitism the way she wanted to, how and where could she publish? If the piece appeared in a journal, it would look like just what it was: an author's personal rebuke to her Christian readers' intolerant responses to *Deronda*. And, she knew, it would be treated accordingly. Her easy recourse to adjectives like "stupid,"

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"disgusting," "sickening," and "vitiating" in the letters of 1876–78 expressed both contempt and fear about her readership. Writing *Impressions* allowed her to engage those emotions in publishable form, at a time when "George Eliot" was getting ready to pass from the literary scene.

The intellectual and moral energy for the composition of "The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!" was all there in the fall of 1876, and it is not frivolous to speculate that the essay was written earlier than the summer of 1878. So far as we know, George Eliot composed no other new work in 1877, during the period of absorption in buying and furnishing the new house at Witley. But if the essay existed, it would need a book to shelter in, to avoid the vitiating gossip aroused by periodical publication. Better yet, the book might pretend to be by someone other than George Eliot, so that she could get around her "repugnance to anything like an introduction of my own personality to the public" (*Letters* 6: 289). Was *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* first imagined as a solution to that problem, a project designed to house and surround "The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!"? It's impossible to answer that question with any certainty. But if anything about my speculation were true, it would help to account for the rather anomalous placement of the essay in a book otherwise concerned with failures of knowledge and self-knowledge in contemporary life.

In a Country of the Old

IN GEORGE ELIOT'S NOVELS, idealism and hopes for ethical growth are vested in youthful protagonists who win the reader's identification and sympathy, but *Impressions* is entirely set in a deteriorating world. Characters have aged into rigidity, or into rigid denials of aging, and some of the more general essays are written from the perspective of a generation loth to give way to the novelties of the young. Ever since "Mr Gilfil's Love Story" (1857), George Eliot had been writing about the distortions of personality imposed by the events of a life. In Gilfil's case it is early sorrow that "crushed and maimed the nature just when it was expanding into plenteous beauty" (*Scenes* 194). In the case of Theophrastus Such's acquaintances, it is malleable human nature itself that becomes rigid or "fixed," unable to register the changes brought on by the warps of time and obsession. In several essays the narrator plays the role of an old friend who has known the subject since his youthful days, and who can chart the process of deterioration that neither the subject himself nor his current set of friends can see clearly.

"How We Encourage Research," describes the collision between Proteus Merman, who writes as an ambitious amateur, and the professional academics (figured wonderfully as a set of spouting whales) who casually tear his work to shreds in reviews designed to service their professional egos. In the face of universal belittlement, Merman digs in his heels and ends up with all his wide-ranging early energy petrified into monomania. This essay, in my view one of the best in the collection, draws from the genius of *Middlemarch*, calling up both the fixated academic paranoia of Casaubon and the stifling of Lydgate's professional hopes. More tellingly, it depicts the dense flotation of a hybrid organism (Merman) within a medium (the cetacean-filled ocean), where the interplay of contending points of view causes all parties to present themselves in their worst lights. As in the best of George Eliot's fiction, the sentences flow among perspectives, taking on the qualities of whichever character is currently in view. The result is a comically sad story, as well as a satire that administers some hilarious bites to academic discourse and behavior.

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The time-lapse interactive portrait George Eliot draws in "How We Encourage Research" is given first place in *Impressions*, appearing just after the introductory sketches "Looking Inward" and "Looking Backward." And for good reason: it establishes the model for her revision of the typological character sketch, which relies on a notion of predictable character.[9] Farebrother's words to Dorothea might have served as George Eliot's epigraph: "'But, my dear Mrs Casaubon,' said Mr Farebrother, smiling gently at her ardour, 'character is not cut in marble – it is not something solid and unalterable. It is something living and changing, and may become diseased as our bodies do'" (*Middlemarch* 692; vol. 8, ch. 72). Farebrother's vision is amplified in *Impressions*, though his kindly middle-aged wisdom is supplanted by a more acerbic sense of decline in George Eliot's last work.

Proteus Merman has several counterparts in the collection, though none of them is treated with quite the drama or wit evident in "How We Encourage Research." George Eliot's longstanding insistence that a person's identity is partly shaped by the ongoing pressure of others' opinions, reviews, or gossip comes up repeatedly.[10] Mixtus ("A Half-Breed") is a man whose early life resembles Silas Marner's: as part of a provincial religious society, he had practiced noble principles and generous intentions, until (in his case) moneymaking talents brought him commercial success in London. His story also resembles Lydgate's, charting the disintegration of a man's nature that results from marriage to the wrong woman. Much like Rosamond, Scintilla sees her husband's enthusiasms as signs of bad taste that need to be ignored and excised from their fashionable London life. As for Mixtus, "He is transplanted, and the sap within him has long been diverted into other than the old lines of vigorous growth" (*ITS* 78). In the medium of London commercial life, he loses his sense of identity, until "hardly any of his acquaintances know what Mixtus really is, considered as a whole – nor does Mixtus himself know it." (*ITS* 80). "The lot of Mixtus affects me pathetically," says the narrator (*ITS* 74), and indeed this tale carries another recognizable George Eliot anxiety: the abandonment of roots in provincial life for what looks (to ordinary but clueless observers) like a successful career in the capital.

Ganymede, "once a girlishly handsome precocious youth," is another of the narrator's old friends. His "sense of identity" is deeply tied to the way others see him, in his case as "surprisingly young" (*ITS* 99). His reliance on others' images is called "one form of a common moral disease: being strongly mirrored for himself in the remark of others, he was getting to see his real characteristics as a dramatic part, a type to which his doings were always in correspondence" (*ITS* 100). In this way Ganymede comes to act the character he imagines reflected in others' eyes, with the result that he can't let go of that self-image even when he's fat and forty: "Ganymede's inwrought sense of his surprising youthfulness had been stronger than the superficial reckoning of his years and the merely optical phenomena of the looking-glass" (*ITS* 101). His essay, "So Young!" has a lightness of touch that's missing in others – in particular "How We Come to Give Ourselves False Testimonials, and Believe in Them" – that deal more ponderously with the psychological phenomenon we would call denial.

"False Testimonials" is a complicated essay that touches on a series of George Eliot's major preoccupations. Placed well along in the volume as chapter thirteen, it begins with a brief return to Theophrastus himself, as if George Eliot wanted to remind herself and her readers that the self-critical narrator of the opening essay, "Looking Inward," was still on board. These introductory pages belabor the idea that Theophrastus sees in himself the faults he describes in others. Despite the narrator's reference to a "keen interest in the natural

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history of my inward self" (*ITS* 104), however, the introduction proves to be only a rhetorical setup for a critique of self-deluding denial in human nature: apparently no one else shares the narrator's tendency to compare others' faults with his own. Rather, the argument goes, most people are willing to condemn others, while giving verbal accounts of themselves that fail to take their own actual behavior into account. Thus, "long after a man has practically departed from a rule or principle, he continues innocently to state it as a true description of his practice – just as he has a long tradition that he is not an old gentleman, and is startled when he is seventy at overhearing himself called by an epithet which he has only applied to others" (*ITS* 107). For a few pages several thematic ideas converge: the distortions of character that accompany aging; the tendency to cling to a pathetic remnant of an earlier, more idealistic self by refusing to see oneself clearly in the present; and the discrepancy between the way people characterize themselves and the unacknowledged reality of their morally deficient natures. A similar gap between reputation and behavior is also central to "Only Temper" and "Moral Swindlers."

"False Testimonials" itself takes a quick turn in another direction, morphing into a defense of literary realism and the truly creative imagination. It's as if we were momentarily back in George Eliot's early essays, getting a rerun of "Silly Novels by Lady Novels by Lady Novelists," reviewing the distinction between irresponsible fantasy and realistic representation that occupies the opening pages of "The Natural History of German Life, " or reviving the painterly comparisons in chapter seventeen of *Adam Bede*. Dante emerges as the essay's final figure of value, as he does again in "Moral Swindlers." Indeed, the last refuge of idealism in this book can be found in moments of elevated rhetoric vesting supreme value in a few great literary artists of the past.[11] The narrator of "Looking Backward" mocks contemporaries who imagine they would have flourished in a Greek golden age, but in other essays he is similarly appalled by the degradation of value in contemporary life, and seeks his own consolation in the ancients. "Looking Backward," which evokes the narrator's childhood in terms that echo the more nostalgic passages in *Scenes of Clerical Life* and *The Mill on the Floss*, also finds consolation in re-inhabiting the voice of an earlier stage in George Eliot's career.

George Eliot's life-long irritability about other people's bad writing becomes another recurrent theme in the volume. Pepin, the lead character in "The Too Ready Writer," is treated with no tenderness, though he begins as an over-ambitious youth with whom the narrator claims to have identified in his own younger years. That is, until Pepin commits the unpardonable George Eliot sin of writing too much, too fast, and too ignorantly. Although Pepin makes his living and supports his family through journalism, the narrator goes at him with no holds barred and no humor. His "fixed habit of writing" is represented as a personal monomania; journalism is skewered as "an obligation to be skilled in various methods of seeming to know" (*ITS* 115). The narrator's contempt for Pepin is matched only by an equivalent contempt for "the public conscience, which is so lax and ill informed on the momentous bearings of authorship that it sanctions the total absence of scruple in undertaking and prosecuting what should be the best warranted of vocations" (*ITS* 119). George Eliot's persistent terror that she or others will commit "too much writing" is on full display here; there seems to be no perspective at all on that pompous pronouncement about "the momentous bearings of authorship" (*ITS* 119).

At such points in *Impressions*, George Eliot comes across as a grouchy, pedantic voice; her age, rather than that of her characters, comes to the fore. The same might be said of

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"Debasing the Moral Currency," a similarly monotonous rant about the evils of presenting classic works to youths in the form of entertaining burlesques or pantomimes. The germ for this piece was a pantomime to which George Eliot and George Henry Lewes invited Roland Stuart, the teenage son of George Eliot's admirer Elma Stuart, in January 1878. Roland enjoyed himself, but "I found it a melancholy business," George Eliot confided to her old friend Barbara Bodichon.

> The dear old story of Puss in Boots was mishandled in an exasperating way, and every incident as well as pretense of a character turned into a motive for the most vulgar kind of dancing. I came away with a sick headache from which I am only today recovered. It is too cruel that one can't get anything innocent as a spectacle for the children! (*GE Letters* 7: 6)

"Debasing the Moral Currency" is fretful about the education of the young generation in much the same way, although the narrative sets its sights on popular burlesque renditions of Shakespeare rather than belaboring poor old Puss in Boots. "This is what I call debasing the moral currency: lowering the value of every inspiring fact and tradition so that it will command less and less of the spiritual products, the generous motives which sustain the charm and elevation of our social existence," the narrator complains (*ITS* 84). At such moments, it is tempting to accuse George Eliot herself of "too much writing," or at least to feel grateful that "Theophrastus Such, Second Series" never materialized. The cultural "impoverishment that threatens our posterity" (*ITS* 85) is the all-too-familiar cry of an older generation put off by the entertainments of the young.

For George Eliot, writing too much is paired with knowing too little. *Impressions* is full of allusions to people who feign knowledge they don't have, proclaim opinions about books they haven't read, perform shoddy or inadequately researched work, and take pride in a sense of superiority that's entirely unearned. Sometimes a kind of peevishness about George Eliot's travails as an author comes through. "The Wasp Credited with the Honeycomb," for example, starts out as a byzantine account of plagiarism, but veers into the more personal territory of pseudonymity. The narrator's attack on the stupidity of ignorant guesses about authorship takes us back twenty years to the Liggins affair, when a provincial clergyman was credited with the authorship of George Eliot's novels. The essay begins to redeem itself on its last two pages, which present an amusing fable in which a "council of animals assembled to consider what sort of creature had constructed a honeycomb found and much tasted by Bruin and other epicures" (*ITS* 97). Back in storytelling mode, George Eliot's ironic wit returns, animating each species with its particular psychological foibles, and following the group dynamic of discussion until the assembly, foxed by the Fox, arrives at exactly the wrong conclusion. Once there's a cast of characters and a concrete story to tell, the moralizing narrator, who had worked so hard at drawing arcane distinctions among shades of plagiarism, goes happily offstage.

Although *Impressions* has most often been understood to center on matters of authorship, publication, and reception, the variety of characters and concerns I have already described suggests that George Eliot's targets cannot simply be confined to the literary or intellectual spheres.[12] Some characters are businessmen or simply people met at social gatherings; some essays are aimed at general trends in contemporary social behavior. The roles of Theophrastus Such are similarly various. Sometimes the moral scourge, sometimes "the one who knew him when," the narrator also plays more dramatic parts in certain essays. In "A Man Surprised at

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His Originality" he pretends to be one of those bemused by the silences that hide Lentulus's unfounded sense of superiority – until he suddenly erupts into a violent condemnation of Lentulus's "gaseous, illimitably expansive conceit" (*ITS* 46). In "Only Temper," the most pungent of the essays concerned with the gap between good reputation and bad behavior, the narrator plays the role of Touchwood's victim, calling up a psychological situation reminiscent of Mallinger Grandcourt's casual cruelty in *Daniel Deronda*.

The damage done by contemptuous human cruelty is never far from the surface of *Impressions*. The opening paragraph of "How We Encourage Research" introduces a stunning connection between crusading Truth and violence. In the modern age, the narrator asserts, "when the stake and the rack have ceased to form part of [Truth's] ritual, "personal sarcasm or slanderous ridicule" sanctioned by an uninformed public can be equally destructive. "The sufferings of its victims are often as little regarded as those of the sacrificial pig offered in old time, with what we now regard as a sad miscalculation of effects" (*ITS* 28). It's a familiar George Eliot move, mocking the modern tendency to feel morally superior to what they did back then. "A sad miscalculation of effects" sounds her bell of deflating ironic humor, but in this context it does more: the deliberately benign phrase suggests just how polite language covers up the interpersonal violence the narrator has already described as "bruising, laceration, and even lifelong maiming" (*ITS* 28).[13]

"Only Temper" explores that violence in the realm of domestic tyranny. It plays out the consequences of dismissing bad behavior as "only temper," as if it were disconnected from the character of the perpetrator. "If he kicks small animals, swears violently at a servant who mistakes orders, or is grossly rude to his wife, it is remarked apologetically that these things mean nothing – they are all temper" (*ITS* 56). To demonstrate the effects of intimacy with such a character, the narrator plays Touchwood's victim, caught between his domestic bullying and the world's insistence that he is a good fellow who would go far out of his way to help his friends. Protesting the double binds this puts him in, the narrator cries "I cannot submit to a chronic state of blue and green bruise as a form of insurance against an accident" (*ITS* 57). If you are sensitive to Touchwood's bearishness at breakfast, he suggests, it would be wise to break your leg during the day; in that emergency Touchwood will do everything in his power to help you until you recover, "when he will some fine morning insult you without provocation, and make you wish that his generous goodness to you had not closed your lips against retort" (*ITS* 58).

As is her habit, George Eliot complicates the initial dilemma with Touchwood's own moments of compunction, when he tries to make amends for his bad behavior. These moments are entirely unconvincing to his target: they "call up a keener memory of the wrong they atone for," because they are not "a spontaneous prompting of goodwill, but an elaborate compensation" (*ITS* 58–59). Attempts to make up for his behavior are just further evidence of Touchwood's refusal to understand his own outbursts as serious violations of human decency, rather than as momentary lapses in "a fundamentally good disposition" (*ITS* 61). His private violence to truth also makes him incapable of admirable or consistent public action; though the narrator indulges in a momentary fantasy that he might "compensate" for his temper by writing his best self into a great work, he is immediately deemed incapable of doing so, if only because everyone else assumes he could. And yet the essay ends on an odd note of contradiction. "If the bad-tempered man wants to apologize," the narrator says, "he had need to do it on a large public scale, make some beneficent discovery, produce some stimulating work of genius, invent some powerful process." Only in that case might "the

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discomfort he causes his friends and acquaintances" be brushed off as a trifle (*ITS* 62). The rift in tone suggests a sudden doubt about the bad temper on display in *Impressions* itself. Could the author be imagining the work of George Eliot as an apology for the private life and harsh opinions of Marian Evans, aka Theophrastus Such?

If so, "Shadows of the Coming Race" carries us into a quite different possible future, when no human compensations will suffice. Originally designed to stand as the final essay in the volume (Henry xxxiii), it imagines a time when even the longest-lasting effects of human consciousness have been erased, spinning out a science fiction fantasy in which machines evolve to displace human beings as the inheritors of the earth. This fantasy, elaborated in a dialogue between Theophrastus and the techie enthusiast Trost, is often read as a hysterical preview of dystopian horror, a view I do not share.[14] To begin with, the essay plays humorously with the notion of evolutionary theory, the "premises" from which the narrator derives his apparently logical suppositions (*ITS* 142). What would happen if non-living matter developed the "internal molecular movements" required for reproduction? In that case, "the process of natural selection must drive men altogether out of the field" (*ITS* 141). The erasure of human consciousness under such evolutionary conditions is represented, I would suggest, with a certain relish.[15] Consciousness has not fared well in the preceding essays; perhaps there is comic relief in the fantasy that it might be superseded by a more efficient species. And consciousness itself, rather than the narrator's vision, is depicted as hysterical: the reproducing machines are especially "potent for not carrying the futile cargo of a consciousness screeching irrelevantly, like a fowl tied head downmost to the saddle of a swift horseman" (*ITS* 141). Not realizing its own impotence in the face of larger uncontrollable fates, this "feebler [human] race, whose corporeal adjustments happened to be accompanied with a maniacal consciousness which imagined itself moving its mover, will have vanished, as all less adapted existences do before the fittest" (*ITS* 141).

If human consciousness is a maladaptive trait, the new race of machines will lack only the sensitivity to register its own existence. "Thus this planet may be filled with beings who will be blind and deaf as the inmost rock, yet will execute changes as delicate and complicated as those of human language and all the intricate web of what we call its effects, without sensitive impression, without sensitive impulse: there may be, let us say, mute orations, mute rhapsodies, mute discussions, and no consciousness there even to enjoy the silence" (*ITS* 142). For the space of that elegant sentence, I fancy that George Eliot is enjoying the non-human silence quite a bit. Sensitivity is always a double-edged capacity in her work: recall *Middlemarch*'s "other side of silence," the tortured mind of hypersensitive Latimer in *The Lifted Veil*, or even Theophrastus's sensitivity to Touchwood's temper. Entertaining the fantasy of a world stripped bare of frantic, self-deluding human discourse makes quite a fitting conclusion to the book of fools George Eliot wrote.[16]

Compensatory

I HAVE SAVED FOR LAST the autobiographical essay that opens *Impressions*, in order to integrate it more fully with the text as I have unfolded it so far. For all I know "Looking Inward" was written last; there is no way to ascertain the point at which George Eliot decided to dramatize a narrative "I" that hews so suggestively close to her own psychology. Considered strategically, the essay is a fictional autobiography meant to add the extra layer of pseudonymity that George Eliot desired for this project. It also serves as an apologia to

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the reader for the unrelieved judgments to follow. At regular intervals the narrator articulates variants of the phrase "Dear blunderers, I am one of you, " in an effort to assure the reader that he could not see the faults of others so clearly were they not recognizable parts of himself as well (*ITS* 4). Considered thematically, the essay introduces the general assumptions that will shape most of the volume. Character is a process that develops and changes through time. The formation of identity is a defensive and consolatory response to the judgments and opinions of external observers. Turned inward, these ideas structure Theophrastus's life story as a quest to find consolation, or compensation, for the sorry figure he imagines that he cuts in others' eyes.

Theophrastus has hardly set foot on the page before he is bemoaning the way his acquaintances fail to pay adequate attention to his life. But he is quick to admit the discomforting truth that they probably know things about him that he doesn't know about himself. The writing he is performing before our eyes is as vulnerable as Rousseau's *Confessions*: "Yet half our impression of his character come not from what he means to convey, but from what he unconsciously enable us to discern." Autobiographies are necessarily incomplete, he writes, but "the incompleteness which comes of self-ignorance may be compensated by self-betrayal" (*ITS* 5). Compensated? It's a fascinating term, suggesting that the discerning observer of ignorant or self-deceiving characters gets compensatory pleasure from his ability to read them against the grain of their self-representations – precisely as the narrator of *Impressions* will do with the characters he skewers in the essays to follow.

In "Only Temper," George Eliot had repeatedly returned to the notion of compensation, defining Touchwood's futile attempts to make amends to his victims as part and parcel of his (and others') illusions about his character. Theophrastus depicts the course of his own moral life as an attempt to strip away each stage of consolatory illusion about his superiority to the people who misjudge him, and whom he judges in return. "At one time I dwelt much on the idea of compensation, trying to believe that I was all the wiser for my bruised vanity, that I had the higher place in the true spiritual scale," he writes, "But I presently perceived that this was a very odious piece of self-cajolery" (*ITS* 8). The notion of compensation for his present suffering begins to seem unjustly egotistical: "I dropped a form of consolation which seemed to be encouraging me in the persuasion that my discontent was the chief evil in the world" (*ITS* 8–9). The narrative quickly begins to look like a very familiar George Eliot tale of emergence from egoism into an awareness of the wider world and its sufferings. Like her favorite heroines, Theophrastus attempts to give up on the idea of finding personal consolation in the face of "the mighty volume of the world before me. Nay, I had the struggling action of a myriad lives around me, each single life as dear to itself as mine to me" (*ITS* 10).

Of course, the struggle to contain the ego can never rest. Finding himself in middle age the sympathetic recipient of confessions from his friends, Theophrastus learns that attempts to interject his own experiences are met with "signs of a rapidly lowering pulse and spreading nervous depression in my previously vivacious interlocutor" (*ITS* 11). He gives up on making himself an equal subject of confession. Even the ensuing fantasy that one might live in the world "without any lot of one's own" is reprimanded as "a disloyal attempt to be independent of the common lot" (*ITS* 11–12).[17]

By his own account, Theophrastus surpasses both Dorothea Brooke and Daniel Deronda in the race to strip away the ego's delusions. In this self-making process, his actual moral superiority to the fixedly self-deluded characters he's about to portray is made apparent. But

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Theophrastus is not a character in a George Eliot novel. He is a named narrative voice, an entity indeed "independent of the common lot." The final paragraphs of "Looking Inward" affirm that the final, cherished illusion resides in "the act of writing" (*ITS* 12). It's the illusion that somewhere out there, "a far-off, hazy, multitudinous assemblage" makes "an approving chorus to the sentences and paragraphs of which I myself particularly enjoy the writing" (*ITS* 12). In keeping with George Eliot's original subtitle, "from the remains of Theophrastus Such," this narrator will leave his manuscript for a friend to judge after his death. With that proviso, he can "make myself a charter to write, and keep the pleasing, inspiriting illusion of being listened to" (*ITS* 13).

Regardless of publication, then, writing is the ultimate compensation, the final resort of that sense of superiority Theophrastus/Evans/Eliot can never entirely disclaim. The penultimate sentence confesses to the pleasure of satirically reading other people behind their backs: "That a gratified sense of superiority is at the root of barbarous laughter may be at least half the truth." Making its amends, the last sentence attempts to recognize the "loving laughter, in which the only recognized superiority is that of the ideal self, the God within, holding the mirror and the scourge for our own pettiness as well as our neighbors'" (ITS 13). It's the old George Eliot dance: scorching discernment, followed closely on its heels by a compensatory identification.

"Looking Inward" lets us know that George Eliot was worried about the ego-satisfying satire she loosed in *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, and that she required the buffer of a second named male narrator as a way to muffle the impact, and to make her amends. Through its figure of confessional writing, "Looking Inward" also offers more pleasurable puzzles: we are happily teased by the multiple layering of identities throughout the essay. Marian Evans, George Eliot, Rousseau, Theophrastus Such, self-revealing and self-deluded autobiography – they all appear and disappear, offering tantalizing glimpses of an acute self-consciousness and the guises it adopts in order to write. Theophrastus need not be the central subject of *Impressions* as a whole, in order to play his part in a gathering of essays that illuminate the dangers and consolations of human illusion.

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NOTES

1. Henry's 1994 edition of *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* was a breakthrough: it ended the decades during which the book had simply been ignored. In her "Introduction," Henry makes the character of Theophrastus Such the unifying focus of the whole volume. Many subsequent critics have adopted some version of Henry's point of view: see Brilmyer, Dillane, Raterman, and Small. Fleishman, reading *Impressions* as a commentary on the decline of intellectual culture, compromises by calling the narrator "Eliot's persona" and a "meta-intellectual" (236–37).
2. For a helpful recent summary of the character sketch tradition, see Buzard's "*Impressions of Theophrastus Such*: Not a Story" in Anderson and Shaw 206–09.
3. See Ashton 360; Haight 521; Henry, *The Life* 247.
4. Eliot brought one journal to an end in 1877, noting that she planned to keep "a more business-like diary" in subsequent years. If there was an 1878 diary, it has disappeared. See *The Journals of George Eliot* 148–49.

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5. Eliot's fear that the book included "trivial stuff" was not unfounded. Examples include two essays I do not mention in the body of this essay. "A Political Molecule" belongs with Eliot's Reform Bill era fears about extending the franchise to ignorant voters. It takes on a cotton lord who considers himself a progressive but votes entirely in his own interest. In 1878, the piece was surely well beyond its sell-by date. "Diseases of Small Authorship" is the only essay that takes a woman as its chief target. Vorticella, even sillier than the silly ladies who write novels, makes herself a nuisance by thrusting fawning provincial reviews of her one and only publication at her friends. Although Proteus Merman is awarded a good (i.e., long-suffering) wife in "How We Encourage Research," *Impressions* in general is tainted by scorn for the triviality of women.
6. Henry has George Eliot correcting page proofs during January and February of 1879 ("Introduction" x). Harris and Johnston's edition of the journals suggests less sustained attention. Proofs and revisions of Theophrastus are mentioned only on a few days at the end of February, in early March, and again in late March. The phrase "Worked at MS" during January and February refers to Lewes's work, not her own (*GE Journals* 157, 160, 162, and 164).
7. Henry gives an ingenious explanation of "Such," connecting it to the Greek Theophrastus's formula, "Such a type who." Her idea has been productive for many subsequent critics, and I have built on her concept of the name as an act of pointing. I part company when Henry suggests that the narrator himself is the subject of "Such a type who," and that the book is "slowly revelatory of his own character as he describes the habits of other persons" ("Introduction" xviii).
8. For a parallel but differently inflected account of the creation of the Theophrastus narrator, see Dillane 169-73. She points out that GE "took particular pains to distance even her pseudonymous self from the handful of pieces produced for the periodical press" during her career (171).
9. As Buzard explains it, the Greek "Theophrastus's analysis focused on the way behavior, hardened by repetition into habit, yielded identifiable, predictable character" (Anderson and Shaw 206). The hardening of George Eliot's characters depends more fully on their reactions to social contexts and the eyes of others.
10. See also Plotz on "Looking Inward": "characters are constituted not just from the inward out, nor solely by their public appearance in the world, but by the internalization of the outward into the inner, so that what others think of us becomes a significant portion of our inner lives" (Anderson and Shaw 86).
11. Raterman studies Dante's importance in *Daniel Deronda* and *Impressions*. Small links *Impressions* with *The Lifted Veil* as "cynical reflections on cosmopolitanism" (89), arguing that that Eliot enjoyed the satirical voices of her age, and found "the contemplation of the cynic performance a kind of relief from the exacting standards of her own idealism" (92). I would agree with Small about the potential pleasure in the escape from idealism, though I find the pairing of these dissimilar narrators unconvincing.
12. In keeping with his central topic, Fleishman reads *Impressions* as "a systematic critique of the intellectual condition of England" (220). Dillane reads its satire as particularly aimed at Eliot's reading audience and the periodical press that determined their responses: "Evans's battle in particular in this final work is with the categorization and packaging of intellectual and cultural life, of authors and of readers as prosecuted by the periodical press" (168).
13. See Miller, "Bruising, Laceration, and Lifelong Maiming: Or, How We Encourage Research," for a searching study of the cruelty, pain and masochism inherent in the Victorian project of humanistic education and moral perfectionism. Miller focuses primarily on "Looking Inward."
14. Henry summarizes "Shadows of the Coming Race" as "the hysterical fear that 'consciousnesses' themselves will disappear and with them the 'race' of humans" ("Introduction" xxxiii). Dillane repeats the charge of hysteria, and calls the irony in Theophrastus's voice "shrill and panic-driven" (191). Matus, on the other hand, notes the "zest and enjoyment with which Eliot allows her narrator to play devil's advocate and to dilate lyrically on the demise of consciousness" (Anderson and Shaw 467–68).

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15. Brilmyer comes close to my sense of the anti-humanist shift in George Eliot's late imagination, when she discerns in *Impressions* "elements of the anti-anthropocentric thinking emergent in Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophy" (46–47).
16. The implicit yearning to be set free from human thought can also be found in Eliot's 1874 poem "A Symposium," later published as "A College Breakfast Party" (1878). The philosophical debate among opinionated young men leads the speaker to despair about the discourse of ideas: "Creation was reversed in human talk/None said 'Let Darkness be,' but Darkness was" (lines 50–51). The unpublished outtake from that poem, now in print as the fragment "I Grant You Ample Leave," is even more deeply skeptical, dissolving the human ego into a "Phantasmal flux of moments" (line 21). *The Complete Shorter Poetry of George Eliot* 2: 26, 119.
17. Miller gives a more agonistic account of George Eliot's skeptical uncertainty about whether moral perfectionism leads the subject toward or away from participating in humanity (306).

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