

A Dialogue of Forms: The Display of Thinking in George Eliot's 'Poetry and Prose, From the Notebook of an Eccentric' and *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*

Hazel Mackenzie

“It is my habit to give an account to myself of the characters I meet with: can I give any true account of my own?” (*Theophrastus Such* 3). Literary criticism has never really known what to do with *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* (1879), George Eliot's last published work, a compilation of character sketches, essays and autobiography unified by the voice of failed author and bachelor Theophrastus. As Nancy Henry, one of the few critics to pay the work any serious attention, writes, confusion is understandable, for if “there is no plot, or development of the characters from chapter to chapter, where is the coherence and how do these seemingly random and puzzling elements fit into the whole of the work?” (ix).¹ Generally speaking, this peculiar work has been ignored, except for the occasional use as an autobiographical source on Eliot's early childhood and the odd pairing with Eliot's earliest published prose work, a series of short articles that appeared in the *Coventry Herald and Observer* entitled “Poetry and Prose, From the Notebook of an Eccentric” (1846-47). However, this pairing, although often made, has never been properly explored. Rather, it has been used as a means to re-affirm the individual relegation of the texts from the canon of Eliot's works. The reasons for this are apparent: unsuccessful on publication, connected by an undoubtedly inadvertent symmetry, the similarities of form that link them have been viewed as nothing more than failed experimentations and as such have been treated as aberrations that criticism can safely set aside without much exploration. The question of what Eliot was attempting to achieve with such experiments and in what way these

experiments relate to her other works have never really been properly asked, let alone answered. The difficulty of answering such questions has been deemed to be not worth the effort. However, as we shall see, it is the very difficulty in dealing with these texts that make them of prime interest, not just to our understanding of these admittedly minor works in the Eliot canon, but to our comprehension of her better-known, narrative fiction, such as *The Lifted Veil* (1859), *Silas Marner* (1861) and *Daniel Deronda* (1876).

The difficulty is primarily a matter of form. Both texts suppose an “editor” and an “author” whose voices unite a series of theories, sketches and reflections. Both begin with sections relating to the character of the author, but end abruptly, without any concluding reference by the editor, or self-reference by the author. Each section within the texts stand almost wholly independent from the other sections, and while the sections are connected thematically, this connection is not always overt, but depends rather upon a subtle by-play of ideas. The label of journalism goes some way to resolving such difficulties in “Poetry and Prose”, but not in the case of *Theophrastus Such*, which was published in the form of a book. Moreover, the teleological expectations raised by the introductory sections remain a persistent problem in the interpretation of both. The label of journalism provides some explanation but cannot give to the series the coherence of a whole. Without such coherence, the questions regarding what Eliot was trying achieve in these texts and regarding the relation between these and her other texts are difficult to resolve.

Because these texts have been so uniformly regarded as aberrant, as experimental deviations, the first place one tends to look for a resolution is in that deviation. This, however, by

implication makes narrative claims upon Eliot's life and career that one might be hesitant about making. It leads to an over-writing of her work with the idea of the return. The regrettable lack of source material regarding the composition of *Theophrastus Such* casts doubt on the viability of such an approach. If, however, one looks at the texts, not as aberrant, but as part of the larger pattern of Eliot's oeuvre, possible resolutions appear. The particular difficulties of form that 'Poetry and Prose' and *Theophrastus Such* present tend to obscure the fact that "difficulty" and "form" have been words associated with virtually every work Eliot ever produced. Far from making the texts aberrant, it in fact unites them with works to which they apparently bear no resemblance. It is in this unity that the possibilities of what Eliot was trying to achieve and the related nature of the texts finally appears.

For Eliot form should be judged by its complexity, and the more highly differentiated, diverse and varied the form the higher she valued it. She related it to both the organic and experiential, and bound unity to difference. She held the highest form as akin to the highest organism. The unity of her works is the unity of the human. In this light, the answer to the question of what she was trying to achieve in these works becomes obvious, and is provided in the opening line of the text. It is simply the true account of an individual, which, for Eliot, can only be provided through a form both complex and highly differentiated. Referencing F. D. Maurice, Andrew Miller writes that the central preoccupation of the Victorian age was "How, exactly, do I come face to face with my internal life?" ("Reading Thoughts" 86; Maurice 18). This is reflected in Eliot's work, most particularly in her experiments with form, and most definitely in the particular mode she adopts in "Poetry and Prose" and *Theophrastus Such*. The display of thinking is what Eliot can be seen as trying to achieve or alternatively as what results

from the conjunction of variety of highly differenced forms held together only through the relation of voice. As such what “Poetry and Prose” and *Theophrastus Such* present is a dialogue of form, that is not so much about what is thought or said but ways of thinking and speaking. It is in the idea of dialogue that the texts finally gain coherence.

I. Thought

Andrew Miller’s case for the Victorian obsession with the display of thinking is a convincing one; moreover, it is particularly pertinent in relation to *Theophrastus Such* and “Poetry and Prose”. It coincides with the fundamentals of Eliot’s conception of form as outlined in “Notes on Form in Art” and with the dominant concerns of the texts, such as sympathy and perfectionism. Importantly, it links in with Feuerbachian ideas about the basis of consciousness which can be seen to underlie much of Eliot’s work.

Miller holds that for Victorians the primary condition of their modernity was their isolation. The thinking of others was viewed not only as naturally obscure but possibly inaccessible. As a result, they became preoccupied with the idea of the mind of the other. Their fear of isolation resulted in a desire, even a need, to reveal themselves thinking and to watch others reveal their thinking. At the same time, Miller argues, the watching of others’ thinking was held to be formative of the self. He links it to the perfectionist narrative of the perfection of our humanity through the imitation of “exemplary others” (“Reading Thoughts” 90). He relates this to Feuerbach’s conception that consciousness, and therefore humanity, is intrinsically based on the recognition of the other, “where there is no thou, there is no I” (Feuerbach 92). One of the

primary figures in Miller's argument is Eliot, which might explain the heavy emphasis given to perfectionism, sympathy and Feuerbach. However, despite being one of the few critics to have dealt in any depths with *Theophrastus Such*, neither *Theophrastus Such* nor "Poetry and Prose" feature in his argument.²

Both "Poetry and Prose" and *Theophrastus Such* focus on figures of isolation: the author figure in "Poetry and Prose", Macarthy, is a bachelor, intellectual and eccentric, as is Theophrastus. They are failures in a materialistic sense and live a life apart from "the weary labourers in the treadmill of society" ("Poetry and Prose" 16). Both have found it difficult to bond with their fellow man. Macarthy, because "his sensibility was too acute for special friendship" ("Poetry and Prose" 16), and Theophrastus, because 'my awkward feet are against me' (*Theophrastus Such* 7). While Macarthy has a "bleeding compassion" for his fellows, their thinking is clearly obscure to him, for it is something entirely distinct from his own. His friend and editor writes that "his sympathy with mankind was that of a being of analogous, rather than of identical race", that "he seemed to have a preternaturally sharpened vision, which saw knots and blemishes, where all was smoothness to others" ("Poetry and Prose" 15-16). For Macarthy, reaching out to another being required an effort and a struggle: "I have known him to walk back a hundred yards to give a consolatory pat on the head to an ugly cur, which he thought the had repulsed too unkindly; though all the while feeling the direst aversion to the ill-favoured brute" ("Poetry and Prose" 16). This is Macarthy, at least as his editor portrays him.

Equally, for Theophrastus establishing connections with others is fraught with difficulty:

I occasionally, in the glow of sympathy which embraced me and my confiding friend on the subject of his satisfaction or resentment, was urged to hit at a corresponding experience in my own case; but the signs of a rapidly lowering pulse and spreading nervous depression in my previously vivacious interlocutor, warned me that I was acting on that dangerous misreading “Do as you are done by” (*Theophrastus Such* 11).

Try as he might, Theophrastus cannot establish an equal and reciprocal relationship with another human being. Rather, he gets caught up in a self-destructive parody of sympathy, in which he is “at the point of finding that this world would be worth living in without any lot of one’s own” (*Theophrastus Such* 11). He has become isolated to the point of non-existence. What Miller terms the Victorian fear of isolation can find no better embodiment than in Theophrastus’s bachelor state, nor, as has been seen, a better example of how that fear results in a “desire to explain myself” (*Theophrastus Such* 11).

The pertinence of Miller’s framework to these texts, however, does not end there. The idea that the thinking of the other is formative in the creation of self-identity is of central importance to the texts. Beginning first with “Poetry and Prose”, the concern with the relationship between the self and the other in relation to thought is immediately apparent. The series consists of five short prose sketches, for want of better terminology. The first sketch, entitled simply “Introductory”, features the reflections of a mourner at a graveyard on his recently deceased friend Macarthy. The next four sketches are fragments chosen by the mourner

from Macarthy's notebooks, which he left to his friend to do with as he liked. At the heart of the series then is the relationship of the two voices, the mourner and the deceased, the apparently worldly friend and eccentric recluse, the editor and the author. The question of where one voice ends and the other begins is central to the text. On one level, the series seems to comment on the gap between how our friends think of us and how we think of ourselves, in the distinction between how the narrator/editor views Macarthy and how Macarthy reveals himself in his own words. On another level, it seems to speak to the position of the other and his thinking in the composition of the self, in the manner in which the narrator/editor is constructed through Macarthy, both through his introductory sketch of Macarthy and his editorship of the pieces that follow. At both levels, the relation to Miller's framework is evident.

Similarly, the positing of an editor and an author in *Theophrastus Such* connects the text to the revelation of thinking in the self and the other. The editorial voice in *Theophrastus Such*, however, is a silent one, creating a different dynamic from that explored in "Poetry and Prose". Like Macarthy, however, Theophrastus resigns all power to this editor, charging him with the posthumous publication of his sketches:

I leave my manuscripts to a judgment outside my imagination, but
I will not ask to hear it, or request my friend to pronounce, before I
have been buried decently, what he really thinks of my parts, and
to state candidly whether my paper would be most usefully applied
in lighting the cheerful domestic fire [...] will only ask my friend

to use his judgment in insuring me against posthumous mistake

(*Theophrastus Such* 12-13).

Both Theophrastus and Macarthy demonstrate a deep-seated desire to reveal their thinking to the world, a desire which is as much proved by the fear that accompanies it as it is counter-acted by that fear. But what they reveal in the end is not their thinking alone, but also the thinking of their editor.

The question of the editor's relationship to the text is an interesting one. In "Poetry and Prose", the editor not only reveals his own thinking but attempts to merge it with Macarthy's, claiming that their hearts "had formed one stem" ("Poetry and Prose" 16). He sinks himself into the revelation of another's thought, and displays that sinking. In *Theophrastus Such* the editor's willingness to reveal Theophrastus's thinking is testified by the presence of the text, but the editor's voice remains silent. It is through Theophrastus alone that the reader knows of his presence. For the reader the editor is constituted from Theophrastus and his thinking, and equally, Theophrastus's thinking as it comes to the reader is constituted in the editor's thinking. This, after all, is the role of the editor. The points of his censorship cannot be identified. In both cases, the author-editor dynamic demonstrates the reciprocal cycle of thought between self and other, bearing witness to the idea that "where there is no thou, there is no I", for one is necessarily constituted in the other. We as readers cannot separate them.

Miller's "exemplary other" is perhaps harder to locate in the texts, at least in *Theophrastus Such*. In "Poetry and Prose", it is introduced in the form of the artist in the article

“How to Avoid Disappointment”, and then again in the form of the idealized child in the third article in the series, “The Wisdom of a Child”. In the fourth article in the series, it is embodied in the nymph Hieria. In the fifth and last article, it disappears. The character sketches that constitute the bulk of *Theophrastus Such*, however, tend to focus on the less than exemplary. The exemplary other is located not in Theophrastus’s present day social acquaintances, but in the past, in the future and within. Theophrastus, and Macarthy as well to a certain extent, hold themselves up as exemplary others in the revelation of their thinking processes. In regards to Macarthy, it is questionable whether it is he or his editor friend that is motivated by this desire, but the idea of exemplarity and its deconstruction is evident nevertheless. In Theophrastus, the desire to be exemplary is clear. The need to “make out that I preferred cutting a bad figure, and that I liked to be despised, because in this way I was getting more virtuous” (*Theophrastus Such* 9) can be seen to be clearly related to the desire for a “multitudinous assemblage, as in a picture of Paradise, making an approving chorus to the sentences and paragraphs of which I myself particularly enjoy the writing” (*Theophrastus Such* 12). Moreover, it is coupled to the belief that “there is a 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 neighbours” (*Theophrastus Such* 13).

This brings us to the most evident relation of Miller’s theory to the texts, the manner in which they display the thinking of their speakers. At the conclusion of his first chapter, “Looking Inward”, Theophrastus writes “I make myself a charter to write, and keep the pleasing, inspiring illusion of being listened to, though I may sometimes write about myself” (*Theophrastus Such* 13). As Nancy Henry has suggested, however, though the chapters that follow are mostly

dedicated to the delineation of the characters of authors, what in fact emerges is the author character, for the delineation of the characters reveals far more about Theophrastus and his manner of thinking than it does about the individual characters: “Criticism comes from within and without in the form of a double-sided mirror held up to those around him, but ruthlessly reflecting his own image back to him” (xviii). Similarly, in “Poetry and Prose”, when the articles are taken as a series, the questions asked tend to relate to the definition of Macarthy’s character, not to his subjects of discourse. It is not the thought but the thinking that is of significance in these texts. The display of thought is readily achieved; it is the display of thinking that takes something more. Thus, Andrew Miller argues, the pervasive utilisation of casuistry by characters in Victorian novels, which actively demonstrates the thinking of the characters rather than their thoughts (“Reading Thoughts” 91). In “Poetry and Prose” and *Theophrastus Such*, that demonstration is created by the complex and diverse configuration of form in the texts.

II. Form

“Poetry and Prose” is, in terms of form, a complex and varied series of texts. So, too is *Theophrastus Such*. For Eliot, this was the highest accolade a text could receive: “Forms of art can be called higher or lower only on the same principle as that on which we apply these words to organisms; viz. in proportion to the complexity of the parts bound up into one indissoluble whole” (“Notes” 435). The highest organism known to man is, of course, man himself. The greatest achievement one could aspire to in form then was the approximation of man, the semblance of a thinking being. This can be seen in Eliot’s conception of form, which unites it to

consciousness, through the homage it pays to Feuerbachian conceptions of consciousness as the simultaneous recognition of thou and I, and more importantly, in its conception of form as “an element of human experience” rather than as quality inherent in the object itself (“Notes” 432). For Eliot, form and thought are necessarily united, but what unites them is ideas of diversity, complexity and differentiation. It is thus that Eliot’s varied and differentiated use of form can be seen as attempt to capture and display human thinking processes.

Throughout her career, Eliot struggled with her disappointment at what she saw as a critical misunderstanding of her works. She resented the manner in which, as James Benson puts it, “they fragmented the unity of her works” (429). To Madame Bodichon she complained that she meant everything in *Daniel Deronda* to relate to everything else (Haight 6: 290); F. R. Leavis’s divorce of what he termed the Gwendolen Harleth section from the *Deronda* section would have been unlikely to have pleased her (122). Virtually all of her works, at one point or another, have been subject to critical comments on their lack of unity, their fragmentation and the strange and incomprehensible nature of their form. Even *Middlemarch*, which is now generally regarded in terms of the density of its relatedness, was held to be “a treasure-house of details, but [...] an indifferent whole” when first issued (James 358). Those who praised it in its serialisation speculated that “the arrangements of the groups, their mutual connexion, and their relation in perspective, may provoke criticism which we who are under the immediate influence of gradually progressive story can hardly appreciate” (*Edinburgh Review* 246). The problem was that the critics often had a different understanding of form from Eliot. She herself recognized this, and it seems to have been a large part of her motivation in writing an outline of her ideas on the subject.

In “Notes on Form in Art”, Eliot writes that “it must be more fruitful to ask, what relations of things can be properly included under the word Form as applied to artistic composition, than to decide without any such previous inquiry that a particular work is wanting in form” (“Notes” 432). As James Benson has shown, it was the discussion of her work, without any attempt to establish such an inquiry that frustrated Eliot, for she believed that if her critics took the time to consider, as she had, the nature of form, the unity of her works would soon become clear to them. Eliot wrote that “Fundamentally, form is unlikeness, as is seen in the philosophic use of the word Form in distinction from Matter; & in consistency with this fundamental meaning, every difference is form” (“Notes” 432-33). Or, in other words, form is the recognition of difference, for our apprehension of it is based in our ability to conceive of identity and non-identity, of likeness and unlikeness. For Eliot, we cannot conceive of one without the other, for as she goes on to write, “with this fundamental discrimination is born in necessary antithesis the sense of wholeness” (“Notes” 433). The point to note here is not just the manner in which Eliot formulates likeness in unlikeness, unity in difference, but the general conception of form as a method of thinking about matter, rather than as an attribute of the matter itself. The words that Eliot uses, such as “sense” and “discrimination” and “antithesis”, pertain to ways of thinking and to the human experience, which is why she can bind likeness and unlikeness as part of the same cognitive movement:

As knowledge continues to grow by its alternating processes of distinction & combination, seeing smaller & smaller unlikenesses & grouping or associating these under a common likeness, it

arrives at the conception of wholes composed of parts more & more multiplied & highly differenced, yet more & more absolutely bound together by various conditions of common likeness or mutual dependence (“Notes” 433).

What Eliot describes here is a process of thought in which the awareness to similarity or likeness is proportionate to the understanding of difference to the extent that it comes to be seen as an effect or result of that difference. In this view, Eliot seems to be following Feuerbach, the German philosopher whose *The Essence of Christianity* she translated in 1854, and whose work has long been held as among Eliot’s greatest influences.

Miller quotes Feuerbach’s statement that “where there is no thou, there is no I”, but the quote is taken out of context, and in the original text refers to the distinction between the sexes. Moreover, it is a sound bite, and does not explain Feuerbach’s reasoning. Feuerbach begins by questioning the distinction between man and brute. The essential difference between the two, he finds, is consciousness. However, he argues, and this is the key point, this difference is neither in the consciousness of the self as an individual nor in the discrimination of the senses, nor in the perception and judgment of outward things. Feuerbach attributes these forms of consciousness to animal as well as man. The difference for Feuerbach is man’s consciousness of himself both as an individual and as part of a species: “Man is himself at once I and thou; he can put himself in the place of another, for this reason, that to him his species, his essential nature, and not merely his individuality, is an object of thought” (2). It is man’s ability to see himself as a differentiation

of a single base principle, to understand his own difference, and therefore his place in a larger whole, that raises him above the level of beasts.

Put another way, Feuerbach writes, “I am a subject, I exist, whether I be wise or unwise, good or bad. To exist is to man the first datum; it constitutes the very idea of the subject”, but “thou art a subject only in so far as thou art a human subject; the certainty and reality of thy existence lie only in the certainty and reality of thy human attributes” (18). The point being that the subject is both the self and the human, each of which can be conceived of separately but are at the same time indivisible. That which distinguishes man from brute is his awareness of this, that the human, in other words the conception of others, is an indivisible part of the self, thus the sound bite, “where there is no thou, there is no I”. From this recognition, in the Feuerbachian conception, follows all human thought. It is his contention that, whether we know it or not, this recognition of the mutual dependence of likeness and unlikeness underlies all our ideas.

In holding form as an element of human experience, as a way of thinking, it is unsurprising then that Eliot, for whom Feuerbach was such a guiding influence, should basis her conception of form on the indivisibility of likeness and unlikeness. Moreover, in studying Feuerbach’s ideas in greater detail, Eliot’s formulation of form as a mode of perception and a way of thinking becomes more apparent. The primacy of the human in her conception of form also becomes obvious. While the perception of form is given as a specific means of thinking about an object, the creation of form is held akin to a display of that thinking, or of the being who thinks.

The human organism comprises things as diverse as the finger-nails & tooth-ache [...] but all its different elements or parts of experience are bound together in a more necessary wholeness or more inseparable group of common conditions than can be found in any other existence known to us. The highest Form, then, is the highest organism (“Notes” 433).

The highest organism in Eliot’s view is clearly the human. In aspiring to the highest form then, the artist is aspiring to the human, and in Eliot’s definition the human is “the most varied group of relations bound together in a wholeness which again has the most varied relations with all other phenomena” (“Notes” 433). It is under the sway of such definitions that the unity Eliot was so adamant about can be seen in her works.

For example, Henry James’s criticism of *Middlemarch* as diffuse can be countered by contemporary criticism’s praise of Eliot’s use of running images such as the labyrinth or the web (358).³ The two parts of *Daniel Deronda* can be reunited in a narrative of perfectionism, or in the simple acknowledgement of the interconnected motifs, images and parallels that unite the book. Realism and fable can be seen to compliment rather than contradict each other in *Silas Marner*. And most importantly for our purposes, *Theophrastus Such* and “Poetry and Prose” can find a place within the Eliot canon. The varied nature of their parts and their relation to the whole, the nature of that whole, and its relations to other texts are rendered at one with the voicing of the first person. Under Eliot’s criteria, formally speaking, they may even considered to be higher

works than the critically acclaimed and more easily reconcilable novels for which she is more generally known.

III. Dialogue

Perhaps the greatest problem that faces the reader when attempting to find meaning in “Poetry and Prose” is the lack of an ending. A comparatively weighty introduction leads the reader to expect an approximately symmetrical conclusion. Instead, the texts seem simply to cease. Originally a journalistic series, this may well have been the case. The four articles that follow the first introductory article are entirely capable of standing alone. When bound together, however, the asymmetrical nature of the series becomes clear. What the texts say to the reader as a series is naturally affected by this. The unification of the articles through the characters of Macarthy and the editor demand something more from them than their individual statements. The reader seeks a meaning in the whole and not just in the parts, and as has been seen, Eliot maintained that all her works were wholes even if this was not recognized by her critics. Given the lack of an ending, and the nature of the individual parts, which seem to obstruct linear understanding, meaning and coherence seems only possible through the idea of dialogue, in which each article is part of an unending flow of conversation with the other parts. Viewed in this way, the interconnectedness of the texts seems obvious. They simply constitute different ways of thinking about the same things. Taken this way, the series’ lack of a formal conclusion becomes meaningful in itself, referring the texts back upon themselves and each other, orientating them towards their conversation, rather than towards a final statement or a judgment.

Similarly, on first reading *Theophrastus Such* seems a rather unbalanced text. Foreworded by two introductory sections, “Looking Inward” and “Looking Backward”, it too seems to lack an overt conclusion. At least, the text does not return to the self-examination and autobiographical reminiscences with which it begins—although it does not finish with the character sketches that constitute its main body either. Rather it finishes with two essays on the future of the human race, “Shadow of the Coming Race” and “The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!”. Thus, it can be read as a perfectionist narrative, in which we move from the individual concerns in autobiography, to a consideration of friends and acquaintances in the character descriptions, to national and universal human consciousness in the last two essays. I would suggest however that Eliot seeks a more active participation in this process than just outlining it. While “Poetry and Prose” instigates a dialogue between forms, *Theophrastus Such* creates a dialogue of form. Alongside this arc, which moves from self to society to species, from autobiography to character sketch to essay, there is another movement, for such easy decompartmentalising is belied by the real and equivocal nature of the texts.

Though taking the name of Theophrastus, the character-writing of this modern Theophrastus is quite different from that of the classical original. It could with equal merit be termed *moralia*, as it is by Thomas Pinney (13). The introductory sections are autobiographical in two senses but these two senses seem to contradict each other. It is both the fictionalized autobiography of Theophrastus and the fictionalized autobiography of George Eliot. They also contain passages that are simply historical. “Essay” in itself is a debatable and amorphous term, and the last two chapters could be designated other ways. “Shadow of the Coming Race” in particular could be held akin to several other genres, including fable, fantasy, and science fiction.

These different forms live in dialogue with each other. By this point in her career, Eliot had formulated her idea of form as an element of human experience. The dialogue, rather than being between the different sections, is conducted within each section, and within the text as a whole. It does not just display Theophrastus's thinking through the continuance of a theme through a series of different encounters and forms, it also displays the reader's own thinking, reflects it back to them, by continually forcing them to ask "what is this?"

Let us take an example. One of the main themes in "Poetry and Prose" is the relation of man to those around him. In one article, this is explored through the reminiscences of one man upon the death of another. In another, it is explored through "A Little Fable with A Great Moral". In another entitled "Hints on Snubbing", it opens up through the listing and categorisation of society and its habits. In the first, this relation of one man to another is personal: "With me thou wilt still live: my thought will seem to be spoken to thee, my actions all performed in thy presence; for ours was a love passing the love of women" ("Poetry and Prose" 14). All the different parts of the texts, all the varied images that are used by the one man to capture the other, all impress upon the reader the personal nature of the editor's conception of MacCarthy. In "A Little Fable with A Great Moral", this concern for the relation of man to his world is translated into the language of myth and fable. As such, the text follow a certain formulaic structures, codes its meaning within certain given images and markers, and adopts a certain kind of language. The subject, however, remains the same. It is only the way of discussing it that has changed. Similarly, "Hints on Snubbing" adopts a scientific approach but its subject is again the relation of man to those around him. It creates a numbered list of hints, and uses scientific terminology to categorize the different varieties of snubbing. "Snubbing is a

generic term, comprehending many species; as the snub monarchical, the snub political, the snub social, the snub religious, and the snub domestic” (“Poetry and Prose” 23). Taken together, these three texts form an interchange of possible ways of looking at and discussing man’s relation with those around him. Looked at in terms of form alone, there is little connection, the links are created by subject and the foregrounding of the distinctiveness of their adopted form but also, importantly, by the fact that they are presented as being born of the same source, moulded by the same thinking being or beings. The Romanticism of the introduction is as overt as the adoption of a mythological structure in the later article, and the utilisation of science to think about society in the last article. This overt presentation of difference and likeness when linked to one or two over-riding personalities transform the texts from a discourse of thought on the relation of man to his world to a display of thinking on that relation. The dialogue created by the conjunction of a variety of forms treating with the same subject becomes through the uniting principle of the persona a formulation of the thinking process.

Eliot goes further than this, however, in *Theophrastus Such*. A dialogue is not only established between the various chapters of the book through their adoption of different formulations to discuss the same basic theme, but within each chapter as well. The problem of labeling the work has highlighted this. It is generally considered as a contribution to the tradition of character-writing but is seen as deviating somewhat from that tradition. The characters of the original Theophrastus in reality bear little resemblance to the characters of Eliot’s Theophrastus. The original Theophrastus presents thirty numbered types of men. Each section is named after the type it outlines, such as “The Ironical man” or “The Boor”, and begins with a definition of the quality named in the title, thus “boorishness I would define as uncivilized ignorance” (29).

Theophrastus then goes through a series of examples of behaviour that come under this definition. These examples are never pinned to any one man, or attributed to a fully-realized character; they exist only as examples of the type. In contrast, Eliot's chapters bear titles such as "How We Encourage Research" and "The Wasp Credited with Honey". They begin not with a definition drawn from the title, but with an introduction to a named character, whose life story bears out the implied moral of the title. Labels other than character-writing thus come to mind when reading the text. The pretension to autobiography in the opening two chapters, and the subtle winding of the narrator's personality throughout his discussion of those he has met with over the course of his life, suggest that the text bears some resemblance to the more general form of reminiscence. At the same time, the similarity of the text to "Poetry and Prose", the social nature of the subject material, and the fragmented and often essayistic nature of the text, suggests a certain kinship to the journalistic mode. Then again, as mentioned previously, Thomas Pinney has referred to both "Poetry and Prose" and *Theophrastus Such* as examples of moralia. This dialogue displays not only the complexity of Theophrastus' thinking, but makes the reader aware of his own thinking as a reader. It emphasizes the idea of form as an element of human experience, a matter of the perception of where differences lie and their relation to each other and to the whole. Whether it is journalistic, or autobiographical, whether it is moralia or character-writing, is in part a matter of how the reader experiences it, and in which unlikenesses and likenesses the reader sees unity.

The highest organism for Eliot is the most complex, the one in whom "the most varied group of relations bound together in a wholeness which again has the most varied relations with all other phenomena". The thinking of such an organism is equally complex, his experiences and

perceptions constituted of a variety of parts with varied relations, seen yet as a whole. In the dialogic nature of these texts, both within and without themselves then, Eliot is presenting quite simply a display of thinking.

The diversity of form abundant in Eliot's works has proven troubling for scholars because it resists the critical impulse towards the abstract, i.e., our desire to generalize, sum up, *simplify* and thereby draw conclusions. But simplification, for Eliot, was the lowest form of art. Rather she set out to mirror nature in the complexity of her literature—specifically she sought to mirror human nature in all its asymmetrical abundance. This has significance for how we view works such as 'Poetry and Prose' and *Theophrastus Such* in that it allows us to reconcile apparent contradictions: acknowledging their complexity allows us finally to simplify them, to categorise, and reinsert them into the canon. It also points to new ways of reading some of Eliot's other texts, also considered aberrant, for example, *The Lifted Veil*, and its oscillation between realism and the gothic, *Silas Marner* and its similar prevarication between realism and the fable and the "two halves" of *Daniel Deronda*. More significantly, however, it suggests once again that there is more to the narrative practices of the archetypal Victorian realist than may initially appear, incorporating within it not just naturalistic depictions and a web-like omniscience, but the dialogic nature of human thinking, and that the occasionally 'difficult' nature of the form of her texts, rather than something to be excused or brushed under the carpet, is an intrinsic part of her project as an artist and her conception of human consciousness.

Notes

¹ Robert Macfarlane is another critic whose work on *Theophrastus Such* stands out (92-129).

² Miller's "Bruising, Laceration and Life-long Maiming" focuses on perfectionism's relation to ethics and pain in *Theophrastus Such* rather than the display of thinking (301-319).

³ Discussions of Eliot's use of the image of the labyrinth or the web can be found in a number of works, see Ermarth, Hillis Miller, and Shuttleworth.

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Annex: Acceptance Information

From: Simmons, Clare <simmons.9@osu.edu>
Sent: 20 May 2014 20:15
To: Hazel Mackenzie
Subject: RE: Prose Studies Submission
Attachments: PS article-details.doc

Dear Dr. Mackenzie:

I am pleased to accept your essay on Eliot's Impressions of Theophrastus Such for publication in Prose Studies. You make strong and original points about the relationship of this final work with the early work and with Eliot's writing as a whole. I would suggest, though, that you bolster up the beginning and the ending. I'd encourage you to make a bolder claim about the connections between Poetry and Prose, Theophrastus Such and the rest of Eliot's works, even though their form is apparently non-narrative. And perhaps the ending could point out what this means for Eliot scholarship as a whole. If this is agreeable to you, please could you make what revisions you wish and return the revised essay to me? Ideally I'd like to receive it within a month but if given the time of year you need longer, just let me know. I will also need from you an abstract and keywords for electronic searching. I'm attaching the required article details questionnaire from our publisher. Finally, Prose Studies uses MLA style (parenthetical documentation with works cited). If you've further questions about any of this, do let me know. And again, my apologies for how long this has taken.

Sincerely,
Clare
Clare A. Simmons
Editor, Prose Studies
Professor of English
The Ohio State University