

## *Out of England: George Eliot's Experience of the Foreign*

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### *Özet*

Bu makale George Eliot'un özel hayatında yaşamış olduğu "yabancı" ile ilgili olarak tecrübelerinin yazarlık kariyerine ne tür bir etkisinin olduğunu araştırmaktadır. Yazarın mektuplarından ve hatıralarından görüleceği üzere Eliot hayatının önemli devrelerinde örneğin ya bir romanı bitirdiğinde ya da yeni bir romana başlamadan önce Avrupa'nın çeşitli yerlerine seyahat etmiştir. Fransa'ya, Almanya'ya, İtalya'ya, Avusturya'ya, İsviçre'ye defalarca yapmış olduğu gezilerinde Avrupa şehirlerini, yaşamını, kültürünü, tarihini detaylarıyla gözlemlemiş, ve bunları romanlarında yansıtmıştır. Eliot'un "yabancı'ya" olan ilgisi basit bir hayranlık ya da karşıtlıktan çok komplike bir nitelik taşır ve Eliot'un yazarlığı için olumlu etkileri olmuştur.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** İngiliz Edebiyatı, George Eliot, Avrupa, yabancı

### *Abstract*

This article examines the ways in which George Eliot's experience of the foreign in her personal life was crucial for her development as a writer. The biographical evidence shows that she discovered and strengthened her own sense of self through her experience of difference and foreignness in Europe. Significantly, she travelled to different places in Europe, mostly after finishing a novel or before starting a new one. During her visits to France, Germany, Italy, Austria, and Switzerland, Eliot observed European cities, life, culture and history, and reflected her experiences into her novels. Eliot's interest in the "foreign" can not be limited to simple admiration or rejection. Her reaction was a complex one, and influenced her literary creativity positively in the long term.

**Key words:** English Literature, George Eliot, Europe, foreign

The biographical evidence shows that Eliot's experience of the foreign in her personal life was crucial for her development as a writer.<sup>1</sup> As can be seen from her letters, she discovered and strengthened her own sense of self through her experience of difference, and foreignness in Europe. In addition to reading widely in foreign literature and doing important work as a translator, she made several journeys to Europe at crucial times of her life. Eliot travelled to France, Germany, Spain, Italy and Switzerland, and about Austria and Spain, mostly after she had finished a novel or to collect material and seek inspiration for a new one. What is aimed in this paper is to investigate how Eliot observed new forms of life, and collected materials abroad, and in general, the ways in which she was inspired by the life she encountered there.

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<sup>1</sup> This article is partly based on my Ph.D thesis, written for the University of Warwick in 2002.

Eliot's letters and journals written during her visits are full of observation of the cities, landscapes, buildings she saw or people she encountered. She sometimes generalises national stereotypical features, but sometimes marks individual features. A letter to John Sibree, almost a year before she herself went abroad, expresses her own dream of travelling, and anticipates her actual experience.

O the bliss of having a very high attic in a *romantic continental town*, such as Geneva - far away from morning callers dinners and decencies; and then to pause for a year and think 'de omnibus rebus et quibusdam aliis,' and then *to return to life*, and work for poor stricken humanity and *never think of self again*. (Haight, I: 260)

She seems to be articulating in this letter which also implies how tired she is of her home environment and how she would like to be part of a wider humanity than that of Nuneaton and Coventry. Her image of Geneva is almost a retreat from the world, in which the self would be free to develop through reading and reflection. It would provide an opportunity for indulging and enlarging the self before commitment to a life of selfless activity.

Eliot's bid for independence can be said to have begun with her first trip abroad in 1849 after her father died. This period was crucial in her life in that she was left alone by her father's death, experienced the loss of familial connections, shortage of money, and anxiety about a possible vocation. Significantly, it was with her friends Charles and Clara Bray, who had been instrumental in helping to widen her social and intellectual horizons when she first moved to Coventry, that she undertook this first journey abroad. Eliot decided to stay in Geneva for longer and breathed European air for nine months. On her return she decided to move to London and she started to write for the Westminster Review, which loosened her ties with her family.

Eliot's letters written to her friends in England during her stay in Geneva give us details of her life in the Swiss town and her interest in the varied forms of human life and personality she witnesses, which seems to hint at the novelist to come. During her experience of the foreign, it seems that she started to consider the relationship not only between Coventry and Geneva, but also between her old and her new life, her family and others, home and abroad, England and Europe. Even though she frequently complained about her headaches, and her cold feet, she seemed happy getting to know foreign people, speaking a foreign language, and living in a foreign culture at probably the most problematic period in her life. The cosmopolitan nature of Genevan society appears to have been a particular source of fascination, and her letters are full of names of the different people from various countries that she met, as in the description below:

The St. Germaines are gone - alas! - and the charming Frankfort people whom I liked almost as well. There is no one here of much interest now. M. De Herder, the two Prussians Mm. De Pfuel, 2 English old maids, and an Irish family who came yesterday, Mlle. Rosa, Mlle. de Phaisan and Mrs. Locke who are the 3 oldest

inhabitants. Madame de Ludwigsdorff, the cousin of Mlle. Rosa and the wife of an Austrian Baron, has been here for two days, and is coming again. She is handsome, spirited and clever, pure English by birth, but quite foreign in manners and appearance (Haight, I: 300-301).

She introduces the term 'foreign' juxtaposed to 'English' in her description of Madame de Ludwigsdorff, and the foreignness she observes in this lady indicates what Eliot will create in her fiction: complicated identities, some of them involving this kind of synthesis of English and the foreign.

In her observation of life, people, culture and other things in Geneva, Eliot seems generally to favour Geneva rather than England. In some letters she directly compares Geneva to Coventry, as in a letter to the Brays, where she assures them that the cholera is affecting Coventry "it is not at Geneva - the medical men say it is cholera-proof. The place is crowded with *foreigners*, the Hotels quite full" (Haight, I: 310, my italics). Apart from the implied technical and scientific superiority of Geneva, in some other letters, she contrasts it with Coventry in terms of beauty and richness of life. "Good-bye, dear loves - shan't I kiss you when I am in *England again - in England!* I already begin to think of the journey as impossibility. *Geneva is so beautiful now the trees have their richest colouring. Coventry is a fool to it* - but then you are at Coventry and you are better than lake trees and mountains to your affectionate Mary Ann" (Haight: I, 319, my italics). The Swiss City harbours foreigners from different countries and origins, whereas her hometown Coventry is insular and inferior in everything except intimate friendship.

After Eliot returned to England on 25 March 1850, her personal unhappiness back at home is obvious in her letters. In a letter to Martha Jackson the enduring attraction of Geneva is still in evidence:

I am not yet decided as to my future plans - whether I shall remain in England or return to Geneva. [...] My return to England is anything but joyous to me, for old associations are rather painful than otherwise to me (Haight, I: 234).

In another letter written to Sara Sophia Hennell, her regret at ever returning to England is clearly connected to problems at home:

O the *dismal weather* and the *dismal country* and the *dismal people*. It was some envious demon that drove me across the Jura to come and see people who don't want me. However I am determined to sell everything *I possess except a portmanteau* and carpet-bag and the necessary contents and be *a stranger and a foreigner* on the earth for ever more (Haight, I: 335, my italics).

With her criticism of certain aspects of English life, such as weather, country and people, Eliot's determination to leave England "to be a stranger and foreigner on the earth for ever more" indicates a degree of discontent with Englishness that may be taken to imply a "need for foreignness" in her life as Barbara Hardy has termed it (1993: 1).

Her ties with her family were loosened after her decision to move London, and this progress towards a larger world was later to be confirmed by her travels abroad.

Eliot visited the Continent for the second time immediately after she set out to live with George Henry Lewes in 1854. The couple's travel to Germany provided a sort of escape from the gossip that would have plagued them in England. This visit to the foreign country is also crucially important in so far as in Weimer was more liberal and open to different cultures and lifestyles, so that her relation with a "married" man Lewes was accepted without question. Significantly again, it was in Berlin in the winter of 1854-55 that George Eliot took a first tentative step towards writing fiction, when one evening she read to George Henry Lewes a sketch of an introductory chapter that she had written in the past. Perhaps the stimulus of her new foreign surroundings, as well as the new intimacy with Lewes, played a part in opening up the possibility of a new departure in her life as a writer. It was only later, eighteen months after her return to England, that she actually embarked on her first story "The Sad Fortunes of the Rev. Amos Barton", and the result was more than satisfactory for her personal critic, Lewes.

Eliot started to work on her first novel "a country story - full of the breath of cows and the scent of hay" in Richmond on 22 October 1857 (Haight, II: 381). She finished the first volume in England, wrote the second in Germany, and completed the novel back in England. She explained the aim of her trip to Germany in a letter to Sara Sophia Hennell, emphasising the educative potential of foreign travel by claiming that "we lay in much more capital in the shape of knowledge and experience by going abroad" (Haight, II: 423). Lewes and Eliot stopped in Nürnberg on their way to Munich, and although she did not write a "Nürnberg novel", as Lewes had thought she might, as a product of her experience of this "town of towns", but she expressed her admiration in her private notes for the architectural and social structure of the town (Haight, II: 451). Here the foreign experience crystallizes a central feature of her thinking about community and culture, the architectural style of Nürnberg is marked by a distinct and enlivening individuality. "Every house has a physiognomy - there is no end to the *varieties* which the vista of every street presents - but it is a variety like Nature's, showing general unity presiding over *an endless play of individual variety*" (Haight, II: 451, my italics). For her, individuality is a goal for each character to aspire to, and such individuality makes society richer and more tolerant. Eliot's devotion to individuality, both in social and architectural matters, is obvious in her observation of Nürnberg, which delighted her for presenting a spectacle of both diversity and individuality. Variety, reached through a gradual process of evolution, is necessary and does not interrupt the overall form of unity. She repeats similar opinions on Nürnberg in her journal, referring, in particular, to the variety of the houses, "though a beautiful family likeness ran through them all" (Harris, 1998: 307). This combination of variety and homogeneity is the mark of a richly organic community in which individuality can flourish, and it shows Eliot's historical consciousness at work. On the other hand, Eliot's experience of the Bavarian city of Munich was rather different. In her letters and journals she expresses a dislike of the weather and the architecture in Munich whose "huge, expensive, ugly buildings", are compared unfavourably with Nürnberg, which had "no uniform barrack-like lines of houses" (Haight, II: 452). The same principle can be extended to social, cultural, racial and national issues, where a type of synthesis between various groups is achieved

through interaction and encounter with one another. The opposite of this leads either to mass homogeneity, which excludes every form of otherness, or marginal fractions which disturb the harmony of the whole. Eliot believes that variety and sameness can coexist fruitfully in the gradual development of things - whether individual beings, architectural structures, or nations and Nürnberg is the finest model of this kind of gradual development.

Variety and individuality are qualities that Eliot valued highly, and, in her novels as in real life, she is critical of uniformity. For her, individuality is a goal for each character to aspire to, and such individuality makes society richer and more tolerant. These views can be seen to play a part in the novel she was writing as a “country story” of English life. The impact of her experience of Germany seems to have been beneficial in the writing of her novel of rural English life. The details of rural life in *Adam Bede* show Eliot’s commitment to binding individuals into a complex relationship with the picturesque and social landscape, and in this process traces of her foreign experience can be discerned. Eliot opens the novel by adopting the approach of “the Egyptian sorcerer”: “[w]ith a single drop of ink for a mirror, the Egyptian sorcerer undertakes to reveal to any chance comer far-reaching visions of the past. This is what I undertake to do for you, reader” (Eliot, 1996 : 5). In the first drop of the ink, Eliot shows Adam Bede, a carpenter in the middle of a hard-working day in his workshop. English rural life and its representative character, Adam, are introduced through the mirror of a foreign sorcerer, and thus, with playful self-consciousness, variety of a foreign element is brought into English life at the beginning. Her picture of the English scene conjured up from the drop of ink is vividly drawn to make her characters as real as in life. She dramatises the interaction of living and breathing people in the rural world rather than presenting artificial and idyllic pictures of artisans such as she had criticized in her essay “The Natural History of German Life” where she complains about the prevailing lack of sympathy and understanding for marginal groups, and aims her art to awaken social sympathies for uninteresting figures as well as for the alien and the foreign.

Similarly, the coach journey in the introduction of *Felix Holt* emphasises the variety behind the apparent sameness of the midland landscape, presenting different prospects on the same journey, and the differing opinions of the passenger and the spectator. The variety of English life is observed by the passenger, who is observing different phases of English life through the coach’s window. None of the phases, seen through the passenger’s eyes, as he “passed rapidly from one phase of English life to another” (Eliot, 1995a: 7) can represent Englishness on its own. Englishness, Eliot aims to show, is a combination of different classes, cultural backgrounds, economic means and geographical areas. Conflicting approaches within English life function to eliminate the single perspective, and to emphasise the multi-dimensionality of social life. Therefore the emphasis shifts from the unified and homogeneous nature of English life to the differentiated and heterogeneous details presented in each phase. The journey ends by insisting on differences. Individuality and variety, Eliot admired in Nürnberg, is noticeable in each of her work, and will be recalled in my examination of *Daniel Deronda* later in this article.

Encountering the new elements in a foreign country brings new directions and wholeness to Eliot, and leads her to feel the existence of a wider world. After she

finished *The Mill on the Floss*, Eliot, this time, set off to Paris and then to Italy together with Lewes. This journey to Italy in 1860 provoked conflicting feelings for her: travelling was important for enlarging life in the long term, no matter if it brought disappointment at first. When, for instance, she describes a sunset ride in a gondola in Venice, she maintains that “it is the sort of scene in which I could most readily forget my own existence and feel *melted into the general life*” (Cross, I: 314). She goes on to write in the same pages of her journal her wish to “go and absorb some new life and gather fresh ideas”, nevertheless her first impressions of Rome was nothing more than disappointment: “at last we came in sight of Rome, but there was nothing imposing to be seen” (Cross, I: 314). Rome, both for Eliot, and for her heroine Dorothea in *Middlemarch*, is a historical and sensuous place, which will inspire her imagination in the long term rather than satisfying immediate desire for happiness. This is how she sums up her first experience of Italy:

We have finished our journey to Italy - the journey I had looked forward to for years, rather with the hope of the *new elements* it would bring to *my culture*, than with the hope of immediate pleasure. Travelling can hardly be without a continual current of disappointment if the main object is not the *enlargement of one's general life*, so as to make even weariness and annoyances enter into the sum of benefit. One great deduction to me from the delight of seeing *world-famous objects* is the frequent double consciousness which tells me that I am not enjoying the actual vision enough, and that when higher enjoyment comes with the reproduction of the scenes in my imagination, I shall have lost some of the details, which impress me too feebly in the present because the faculties are not wrought up into energetic action (Cross, I: 305).

It is precisely this feeling of the “enlargement of one's general life” that Eliot tries to depict in her novels in order to extend the views of her readers, and in that process of enlargement the encounter with foreign people, places and cultures plays a crucial role as it did in her own life. Enlargement of the self from narrowness towards a “general life” is a target set by George Eliot in her own experience of Rome. In *Middlemarch* Dorothea's honeymoon visit to Rome broadens the minds, and particularly awakens Dorothea's to a deep, wide and even troubling awareness of the “other”, no matter if it brings disappointment at first in the short time.

As many of her critics agree,<sup>2</sup> Europe was important for Eliot in a number of ways, and her reaction towards it was various, for she was filled both with admiration

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<sup>2</sup> To name but a few are Gisela Argyle. (1979). *German Elements in the Fiction of George Eliot, Gissing and Meredith*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter D. Lang., Andrew Thompson. (1998). *George Eliot and Italy: Literary, Cultural and Political Influences from Dante to the Risorgimento*. London: Macmillan., John Rignall. ed. (1997). *George Eliot and Europe*. Aldershot: Scolar Press., and John Philip. (1967). *George Eliot in France: A French Appraisal of George Eliot's Writing, 1858-1960*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

and dislike for different aspects of life abroad, but in the long term, travel and the encounter with foreign life that it afforded had a stimulating effect on her productivity. Europe for her is what England still has to become, culturally rich and tolerant. Besides, Eliot desired to see other parts of the world, particularly the East, and the West (America), but either financial or other conditions such as health did not allow her to fulfil her wish. Before starting her writing career she wrote in a letter: “I have a great mind to elope to Constantinople and never see any one any more!” (Haight, I: 331). Her idea of escaping to Constantinople, though it is mentioned only as a joke, suggests Eliot’s curiosity about Eastern cities. She not only sends Harold Transome to Constantinople and then to Smyrna in *Felix Holt*, her letters during her writing of this novel touch on the question of making a career abroad in relation to Lewes’s sons. Like many young Englishmen, they were sent abroad to make a career in the colonies on the assumption that they would have better prospects there than at home. In her journal (22-23 July 1865), Eliot records news of Lewes’ son Thornie who has gone to live in Natal: “There has been a *monetary crisis in the Colony*, which has made his trading expedition of doubtful result. He [...] discourages the prospect of farming in Natal, so that we must think of Bertie’s being a trader” (Harris, 1998: 125). In another letter in the same year, Eliot mentions Thornton’s experience in Natal to François D’Albert-Durade stating

Thornton had some calamities to *encounter in Natal*, owing to a monetary crisis in the colony and a war with the natives. [...] These conditions in Natal cause us to waver in our intention of sending out the youngest who [...] *is better fitted for colonial life than for English life*, at least as far as the means of pushing his fortune are concerned. He is a fine fellow physically, [...] but he is not suited to any other life than that of a farmer, and in England farming has become a business that requires not only great capital but great skill to render it otherwise than hazardous (Haight, V: 212, my italics).

Eliot’s comments show that they had been considering sending the younger Lewes, Bertie, to Natal like his brother, both of whom had been educated in Switzerland. These letters reveal Eliot’s indirect acquaintance with the nature of life in colonies. Colonial life is harsh unlike English life, but offers opportunities for those without capital or intellectual endowment. In a later letter she contrasts living conditions in England and in the colony, when she says of Bertie on his visit to Warwickshire that he is “much pleased to see a country less black, and people a little less harsh than he has been used to in Scotland. Yet Scotland was a better preparation for *roughing it in a colony*” (Haight, IV: 233). Interestingly, Eliot is clearly aware of the problematic nature of colonial existence from Thornie’s letters, yet does not seem sceptical about the idea of the “colony” or even “a war with the natives”. It can be interpreted that some features of colonialism have been internalised by Eliot, as she appears to be expressing conventional views of colonial life unquestioningly. The natives in Natal are seen as the “other” and the colonial territory almost as an empty space, which can afford a vocation to the young Lewes. Similarly, Scotland is regarded as in some sense the other to England, and thus can prepare Bertie for the colony better than any English environment can do.

Eliot, who, most of the time, wished England to be more cosmopolitan, plays with the ambiguous nature of cosmopolitanism towards the end of her career. Eliot's last novel *Daniel Deronda* begins in a foreign setting, and significantly concludes with a prospect of a foreign ideal. The germ of the novel is planted by her experience of a German casino. She wrote to Blackwood from Bad Homburg where she sadly witnessed a young lady, Byron's grand niece gambling. "Kursaal is to me a Hell not only for gambling, but for the light and heat of the gas, and we have seen enough of this monotonous hideousness" (Haight, V: 314-316). Eliot's narrator, likewise, opens the novel by observing different nationalities caught up in the monotonous action of gambling, which kills individuality. Ironically enough, while Eliot's novels of English life represent the variety and richness of provincial life, the most cosmopolitan opening of any of her novels lays stress on monetary issues, sameness and the elimination of all individuality in the pursuit of money. People from a variety of different backgrounds are taking pleasure in either losing or gaining money, and their individuality is reduced by the sameness and monotony of their action.

Those who were taking their pleasure at a higher strength, and were absorbed in play, showed very distant varieties of European type: Livonian and Spanish, Graeco-Italian and miscellaneous German, English aristocratic and English plebeian. Here certainly was a striking admission of human equality (Eliot, 1995b: 8).

"Human equality" is only ironically achieved at the gambling table, where interests are of a primitive and selfish kind.<sup>3</sup> It is as if all these people are from the same roots, their brains fed by the same values.<sup>4</sup> They are not individuals, but seem to wear masks in different colours to hide their commonness. Eliot seeks individuality and variety - the kind of individuality and variety she admired in Nürnberg - and is critical of sameness and featureless homogeneity. Nevertheless attention at the gambling table is locked onto the narrow, materialistic and primitive passion for gambling, which narrows the human spirit, instead of illuminating and enlarging individual identity, which is the main aim of travelling for Eliot.

As *Daniel Deronda* shows the widening of horizons involved in the contact with foreign life and culture marks her fiction with increasing intensity as she draws towards the end of her creative life, and in the conclusion of her last novel, Eliot's hero turns his back on England to encounter the uncertainties of a future made more unknowable by its foreign location. The juxtaposition of the familiar and the foreign is both a characteristic mark of her cosmopolitan mind and a recurrent indication of her persistent attempt "to widen the English vision a little" (Haight, VI: 304). "Intellectual narrowness" in England is changed to a more tolerant outlook, and the hostility of provincial people to those

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<sup>3</sup> Bryan Cheyette evaluates this scene as an "embodiment of 'denationality' and the false universalism of 'cosmopolitan' materialism", p. 49. (1993). *Construction of the Jew in English Literature and Society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>4</sup> James Harrison says that *Daniel Deronda* with its cosmopolitan assemblage of persons is a distillation "of a sense of life cut off at the roots". p. 510. (1989). "The Root of the Matter with *Daniel Deronda*" *PHILOLOGICAL QUARTERLY*. 68:4. 509-523.

“who differ from them in customs and beliefs” is converted into a degree of cultural relativism in the last novel (Haight, VI: 301). The foreign setting here enables her to cast a critical eye on the cosmopolitan and materialist culture of modernity, and the scene in the casino foreshadows the complexities of the coming age which is to be represented in her last novel.

To conclude it can be said that there are clear parallels between Eliot’s own travels from the familiar to the strange and her fiction. Journeys in her fiction mainly involve three areas geographically and culturally distinct from England: Europe, Colonial Territories and the Orient. Only Continental Europe, well-known to George Eliot from her own journeys, is depicted visibly for the experiences of the characters. There are references to the West Indies, India, and America as scenes of England’s geographical, cultural and national encounters with the “other”. Defined in individual, cultural or geographical terms, the “other” represents a potential means of progress, stimulating wider connections and leading to a synthesis of conflicting elements in the long term. The Orient, exemplified both in *Felix Holt* and in *Daniel Deronda*, offers enlargement towards a world different both from England and from Europe. Enlargement as a form is also a feature of her last novels, which reaches further and attains wider horizons than her earlier fiction, and it presents her modernity and her cultural relativism in their most developed form. Her characters, settings and atmosphere shift from small English towns in her first novels to the metropolitan cities of the world in the last ones. In other words, Eliot’s writing career runs from the homogeneous, closely knit community to a more encompassing, heterogeneous world and a troubling awareness of international themes, what makes her one of the great female writers of the world.

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