

THE CRITICAL RECEPTION OF GEORGE ELIOT IN COMMUNIST ROMANIA

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Abstract Drawing on the premise that Communist Romania was the space of a culture deeply loaded with the assertive Marxist ideology, the present study aims to establish the reception of George Eliot during that period. In addition, building on Edmund Husserl's claim that the actual object of philosophical investigation is not the object itself but the contents of our consciousness, I shall argue that the way in which the Victorian writer was received in Romania is highly dependent on and influenced by the social and political context. It is hoped that by looking at the criticism of that time, this study will support the claim that Eliot's works had been used to promote literary tendencies and movements such as ruralism and socialist realism, which suited the communist agenda.

Keywords Reception, translation, ideology, communism, censorship, Victorian novel.

The history of George Eliot's reception in Romania began in 1884, when her prominence was first acknowledged by Alexandru Grigore Şuţu in the September issue of *Convorbiri Literare* (*Literary Dialogues*), in an article entitled "Studii asupra romanului realist în zilele noastre" ("On the realist novel of our time"). Şuţu's aim was to offer his perspective on the key considerations for a skilled novelist when writing fiction and presented several notable writers as exemplars.¹ Among the esteemed writers, Eliot ranked the highest.

Eliot's fiction was introduced to the Romanian public for the first time in 1893, when a short fragment from *The Mill on the Floss* was published in the newspaper *Adevărul* (The Truth). However, the presence of the Victorian author in Romania can be traced back to the 1860s and '70s, when writers and critics alike resorted to Western literature in search of a model to follow in the creation of the new national culture. Her novels were read either in the original or in translations into French and German by an educated few. None of Eliot's novels was translated

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¹ All translations from Romanian sources are my own; original Romanian excerpts are included in footnotes for reference.

into Romanian until the 1940s. *The Mill on the Floss* was translated in 1942 by G. Dem Curteanu, followed by *Silas Marner* in 1943.

The most important period for George Eliot's reception in Romania was from the 1960s to the 1980s. This is the period of the communist regime, which is a particularly interesting time to examine how the works of an author were translated and interpreted. The different stages of ideological domination influenced how Eliot's texts were read by the public, primarily because the direction of interpretation was given by the leading discourse of the time. The scholars who introduced the novels to the public and wrote about them had, under the pressure of the regime, to bow down to Marxist ideology and look at the world of the texts through this restrictive lens. Whether truly convinced by or compelled to do so, critics had to write according to the domineering Marxist doctrine.

Catinca Ralea and Eugenia Cîncea translated *The Mill on the Floss* in 1964. The novel was published in an esteemed literary series called "Classics of World Literature" ("Clasicii Literaturii Universale") under the title *Moara de pe Floss*. This novel includes a preface by Sorin Alexandrescu. In 1969, Mihai Rădulescu provided a new translation of *Silas Marner*, followed by the translation of *Felix Holt, the Radical* in 1973 by Al. Pascu, and St. Avădanei, under the title *Felix Holt, Radicalul*. Additionally, in 1977, *Adam Bede* and *Middlemarch* were translated into Romanian, with Dana Crivăţ translating the former and Eugen Marian translating the latter.

In her extensive analysis of George Eliot's reception in Romania, Ciugureanu remarked that the translated editions exhibited remarkable fidelity to the original text, adhering closely to its content and style:

"The language used corresponds to literary and spoken Romanian at the turn of the twentieth century, with its various registers indicative of the characters' social status. The major focus of the translators was to preserve the Englishness of the texts as much as possible; the names and place names are in the original, and footnotes to explain historical or cultural information are used. However, to make the novels easier to read and understand, the translators also at times used Romanian phrases and sayings as the equivalent of English ones."²

This could indicate a desire to maintain a separation between the textual world and the Romanian public.

George Eliot's works, like those of any other writer, were inevitably subjected, at least in part, to a reading public whose worldviews were largely influenced by the leading ideology of that time. As expected, some writers proved to be particularly problematic in this regime and, as a result, many books were not translated. Those who posed a lesser threat to the established order of things were received, yet not without placing significant emphasis on specific aspects that agreed with the party's objectives.

The object of reception studies is to shift the focus from the hegemony of the author and text to the reader. This theoretical approach stresses the reader's active role in the act of interpretation. Thus, a text is not a fixed entity endowed by its author with meaning, but a mobile

² Adina Ciugureanu, "George Eliot in Romania," in *The Reception of George Eliot in Europe*, ed. Elinor Shaffer (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016), 358.

one, changing its coordinates according to the reader. The reader also changes, and its interpretation depends on both the text (object) and context (the world outside it).

In Romania, George Eliot qualified as an eligible candidate for the Communist literary agenda even before the formation of the Romanian People's Republic. In "Studii asupra romanului realist în zilele noastre" ("On the realist novel of our time"), Alexandru Șuțu introduces Eliot as a writer who prioritized people over art, as she shows "great sympathy for the miseries and sufferings of mankind."³ Naturally, for Eliot, being a realist extended beyond mere intellectual necessity, it was an emotion and a deeply held belief embodying her artistic creed. She opposed the decadent slogan of art for art's sake, and this pleased the Eastern European political systems.

The critical texts analysed in this study largely encompass the majority of criticism that had been written during this specific period in Romania's literary history. In 1964, Sorin Alexandrescu prefaced the translated version of *The Mill on the Floss* (*Moara de pe Floss*).⁴ His thorough examination of Eliot's life and work is also illustrative of the writer's Marxist perspective. Another text examined in this study is Ana Cartianu's *Istoria Literaturii Engleze: Secolul al XIX-lea, Romanul și Poezia* (*The History of English Literature: The Novel and Poetry of the 19th Century*).⁵ Often called "the great lady of Romanian Anglicism," Cartianu granted the Romanian public a thirty-five-page analysis of Eliot's biography, ideas, and critically acclaimed novels.

Dictionar al Literaturii Engleze (*Dictionary of English Literature*) was published in 1970. This initiative belonged to Ana Cartianu, who supervised and coordinated the dictionary's development. The two-page entry dedicated to George Eliot was written by Liana Stănculescu and focused mostly on aspects of the then-emerging psychological novel, of which Eliot was a precursor. The 1977 translation of *Middlemarch* by Eugen Marian contains a preface authored by the translator. Compared to Alexandrescu, Marian's perspective is characterized by a smaller degree of ideological influence. Like his predecessors, Marian begins by presenting the details of Eliot's life. He then deals with Eliot's literary works. Finally, this study also addresses Sanda Berce's 1986 article "George Eliot: Character as Plot (A Study in Narrative)," which is an analysis of Maggie Tulliver, the protagonist of *The Mill on the Floss*, in relation to the plot. Unlike the previously mentioned texts of criticism, Berce's analysis is no longer concerned with the social significance of Eliot's novel but rather with the ways in which the narrative structure of *The Mill on the Floss* influences the reader's perception. This marked a shift in critical thinking and brought new instruments of literary analysis to the forefront.

First, Sorin Alexandrescu's preface to the 1964 translation of *The Mill on the Floss* serves as a decided affirmation of Marxism as the primary framework for assessing the artistic merit of literary works. Both Eliot's life and work are subject to a narrow and prejudiced perspective tainted with an

³ Alexandru Șuțu, "Studii asupra romanului realist în zilele noastre," *Convorbiri Literare* (1886): 234. "[...] o mare simpatie pentru nefericirile și suferințele oamenilor."

⁴ Sorin Alexandrescu, preface to *Moara de pe Floss*, by George Eliot, trans. Catinca Ralea and Eugenia Cîncea (Bucharest: Editura pentru Literatură Universală, 1964), 5–28.

⁵ Ana Cartianu, *Istoria Literaturii Engleze: Secolul al XIX-lea, Romanul și Poezia* (Bucharest: Universitatea București, 1967).

ideology that appears to be ubiquitous. Although he esteems Eliot for her masculine intelligence, quoting Herbert Spencer's portrait of the writer, "[...] the virality which characterized her intellectually,"⁶ her devotion to the understanding of the lower classes, her choice of a pure and utter realistic aesthetic, and most importantly, for her breaking with religion, this highly intellectual woman is found wanting. According to Alexandrescu, the benchmark for any remarkable writer is its revolutionary spirit. Adina Ciugureanu points out that in order for Eliot to qualify as someone exceptional and ahead of their time, she had to illustrate the belief that the only solution to any social conflict was revolution. Alexandrescu regarded any perspective falling short of this viewpoint as moderate and confined in scope.

In Alexandrescu's view, although Eliot was seen as a free thinker and non-religious woman (a highly positive thing for the Marxists), she failed to be prophetic and revolutionary. In other words, she only partially fitted the pattern of Socialist Realism: her heroes are positive and idealistic but lack a convincing rebellious drive.⁷

As previously mentioned, the first part of the preface is dedicated to Eliot's life and her position as a Victorian thinker. Alexandrescu begins by offering factual details about her childhood and early adulthood, without giving away too much of his own judgement on the matter. However, once he reaches the moment of Eliot's split from the church, more specifically the Methodist denomination, he begins elaborating on the positive aspects derived from this decision. The critic associates the tenderness of her character, her need for affection cultivated by religion, with her adherence to Positivism: "This philosophical trend fused, for Eliot, the certainty of an understanding based on the objective data of science with a fascinating ethical formula for her inner struggles."⁸

However, Alexandrescu's discontent with the prevailing intellectual climate of the Victorian era becomes evident as he diverts his attention from George Eliot and instead directs it towards the sociopolitical context, momentarily side-lining her for a span of two pages. Alexandrescu adopted a contradictory attitude towards the social manifestation of Victorian England, as it is clear that he simultaneously expresses both approval and disapproval. This position stems from his dissatisfaction with the deeply ingrained tradition of moderation among English people, which consequently hampered their revolutionary zeal.

After the 1832 Reform Bill, the bourgeoisie was better represented in Parliament and tried to convince the masses that they had fought and won a great victory in the name of all. The development of capitalism brings prosperity to a few, but the bourgeoisie asserts that this prosperity extends to the entire nation. According to Alexandrescu, Positivism brings to the people the trend of an infatuated optimism which, in fact, masks the vices of the Victorian society.

⁶ Sorin Alexandrescu, preface to *Moara de pe Floss*, by George Eliot, trans. Catinca Ralea and Eugenia Cîncea (Bucharest: Editura pentru Literatură Universală, 1964), 6. "[...] viralitatea care-o caracterizează intelectualmente."

⁷ Adina Ciugureanu, "George Eliot in Romania," in *The Reception of George Eliot in Europe*, ed. Elinor Shaffer (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 358–59.

⁸ Sorin Alexandrescu, preface to *Moara de pe Floss*, 8. "Acest curent îmbina, pentru Eliot, certitudinea unei gândiri bazate pe datele obiective ale științei cu o seducătoare formulă etică pentru frământările ei interioare."

Still, the Chartist movement brought about the kind of social manifestation he upholds: "The decade of 1840-1850 encompasses the tumultuous history of the great struggles of the proletariat. A new progressive force emerges now in public life and in the arena of ideological struggles, fearlessly exposing the contradictions of English capitalist life."⁹ Alexandrescu applauds the initiative but is bitterly disappointed by the lack of engagement in the literary world. He concedes that while the literature of the time does not endorse the ideals of struggle embraced by the working class, a number of writers try to reflect this state of the nation, criticising the exploitation, misery, and humiliation of the people.

Another polarizing attitude appears in his illustration of Positivism in Victorian England. On the one hand, the critic views this empiricist philosophical theory as an ally of great scientific discoveries in physics, biology, etc. As a result of this alliance, the dogmas of religion are diminished, while human capacity for knowledge is exalted. George Eliot's intellectual development coincides with her reading of Bentham, Mill, and Macaulay, who gave her the theoretical foundation for English liberalism, and her novels are marked by positivist ideals. On the other hand, Alexandrescu denounces the influence of positivism as a theory "directed towards a non-revolutionary vision of societal change."¹⁰ The critic points out that the Utilitarian doctrine of Bentham and Mill turned into a eulogy for an order based on the private initiative of capitalism: "This social moderation characterizes the realist writers of the second half of the nineteenth century, such as George Eliot, and constitutes the main limitation of their work."¹¹

Although Eliot's depiction of character is utterly realistic, she never attempts to delve deeply into the social conflicts of her era, let alone capture their underlying causes. However, the question remains: Why should George Eliot be expected to have a specific political agenda permeating her novels? Eliot excels at exploring her characters' psychological conflicts, where the external world's transformative impact on their internal world is the focus of her interest. Thus, the psychological realm takes precedence over social aspects of life. In literature, there is no single direction or purpose to adhere to. A writer's responsibility does not perfectly conform to every political or philosophical trend of a particular age.

The second part of the preface deals with the problem of Eliot's novels and the two phases of her literary creation. The interpretation remains consistent in the subsequent section, as each novel is analysed from a Marxist perspective, regardless of its specific thematic focus. Alexandrescu begins his study chronologically with *Scenes of Clerical Life*, George Eliot's first published work of fiction. Although he provides many details about realism, character construction, and plot, he focuses on the swift and gradual intrusion of capitalism into English rural

⁹ Ibid. "Deceniul 1840-1850 cuprinde istoria furtunoasă a marilor lupte ale proletariatului. Apare acum în viața publică și în arena luptelor de idei o forță nouă, progresivă, care demască fără menajamente contradicțiile vieții capitaliste engleze."

¹⁰ Alexandrescu, preface to *Moara de pe Floss*, 9. "[care] conduce spre o viziune nerevoluționară a schimbărilor în societate."

¹¹ Alexandrescu, preface to *Moara de pe Floss*, 9–10. "Această moderație socială caracterizează și pe scriitorii realiști din a doua jumătate a secolului al XIX-lea, precum Eliot, și constituie principala limită a operei lor."

life. In Eliot's collection of short stories, the backdrop is pre-Victorian provincial England, a setting that diverged from the preference of many writers during that period, who favoured the rapidly expanding industrial cities of the north.

According to Alexandrescu, the beginning of the nineteenth century was a time still free from the corrupting efforts of capitalism, and the relationships between people "were not yet altered by malevolent forces of capital."¹² Nevertheless, the seemingly perfect social harmony of that time was disturbed by the outright power wielded by certain local nobles, leading to the emergence of class conflicts. What the critic tries to emphasise here is that although the social dynamics of the pre-Victorian age are hardly ideal, it still provides a more reassuring setting for Eliot's stories: "Faced with the complexities of the new industrial and capitalist world, Victorian writers tended to perceive the pre-Victorian era, especially the rural side, as a patriarchal period in which sufferings and conflicts were seen as purely personal and did not disturb public life."¹³

However, Sorin Alexandrescu identifies a few instances in which this economic system prevails upon the "harmony" of the pre-industrial world: "Some farmers expand their interests into the realm of commodity exchange. Small local enterprises have developed into capitalist ventures. The miller, Tulliver, is not satisfied solely by grinding grains and ventures to invest money in various commercial transactions."¹⁴ The limited spectrum of his interpretation prompted Alexandrescu to mistake the intentions of some characters for something that better suited his repertoire. For instance, he identified the figure of the preacher in Dinah Morris, *Adam Bede*, Savonarola, *Romola*. Although they speak from a religious perspective, they emphasize the ethical aspects of the parables rather than biblical narratives. Gilfil, Irwine (*Adam Bede*), doctor Kenn (*The Mill on the Floss*), Debarry (*Felix Holt*), Gascoigne (*Daniel Deronda*) and Farebrother (*Middlemarch*) are all, according to Alexandrescu, sceptics, tolerant but they possess that "religion of the heart,"¹⁵ eager to help anyone in need but not out of a religious fervour but from a moral stance.

Alexandrescu uses the same analytical tool in his comments on *The Mill on the Floss*. This section focuses on the economic situation and its effect on characters' lives. Undoubtedly, when approaching a novel such as this, there are multiple perspectives that can be explored. However, he decided to devote this comprehensive study to a single perspective. Mr. Tulliver, the father of Maggie and Tom, is seen as the embodiment of pre-capitalism and is placed against the Dodsons, his wife's family. Out of Mrs. Tulliver's three sisters and their husbands, Dean represents "a more advanced stage of capitalism."¹⁶

¹² Alexandrescu, preface to *Moara de pe Floss*, 14. "[relațiile dintre oameni] nu erau încă alterate de forța malefică a banului."

¹³ Ibid. "În fața complexității noii lumi industriale și capitaliste, scriitorii victorienii sunt înclinați să considere epoca previctoriană, mai ales cea rurală, ca o epocă patriarhală, în care suferințele și conflictele erau doar personale și nu tulburau viața publică."

¹⁴ Alexandrescu, preface to *Moara de pe Floss*, 15. "Unii fermieri își largesc preocupările pe linia schimbului de mărfuri. Mica industrie locală ia amploare și se dezvoltă ca o întreprindere capitalistă. Morarul, Tulliver, nu se mulțumește numai cu măcinatul grânelor, ci își investește banii în diferite tranzacții comerciale."

¹⁵ Ibid. "religie a sufletului."

¹⁶ Alexandrescu, preface to *Moara de pe Floss*, 18. "[Deane reprezintă] o fază mai înaintată a capitalismului."

For Alexandrescu, this opposition between Tulliver and Dean exemplifies the manifestations of capitalism in a world that retains its innocence.

“Generosity is replaced by a cold calculation of profit within the Dodson family. Despite proclaiming familial solidarity, they refuse to assist Tulliver in his time of need, considering the investment of money to be uncertain. Spontaneity gives way to hypocrisy, and the pride of independent judgement is overshadowed by the ridiculous vanity of the newly wealthy.”¹⁷

Through these examples, Alexandrescu also criticises the strong sense of tradition and Englishness embedded in their personalities. To him, moral values such as dignity, respect for tradition, and familial obedience are the only false names given to solutions dictated by blind egotism.

According to Alexandrescu, the previously explained opposition between Tulliver and Dean extends to Maggie and Tom. Through Maggie, George Eliot portrays the enchanting world of childhood and reverts it to a state of apolitical purity. On the other hand, Tom possesses an innate sense of justice, yet he has a narrow-minded way of applying it. The Dodson vein is present, as all of these manifestations are rooted in a specific egoism inherited from his mother's family. As anticipated, Tom became the embodiment of Dean, reflecting similar traits and characteristics.

The author of the preface demonstrates the hypocrisy of St. Ogg's respectable bourgeoisie. When Tom drives Maggie away because of her “sins,” he replicates the attitude of the Dodsons in the face of troubles, in the name of a holy moral cause. Poor Bob Jakin showed humanity and compassion towards Maggie. According to Alexandrescu, Eliot used this character as a clear example of the dogmatic Dodsons. However, his indulgence for Eliot ends here as he yet again condemns her cautious approach to social criticism. He clarifies this through Maggie's suffering, which is only partially due to the stifling atmosphere in a philistine environment. Instead, the focus is on her own internal scruples and dilemmas. This is disappointing to Alexandrescu, as, in his view, Eliot should have been more radical in her social protest and therefore constructed all of Maggie's miseries around the toxic environment and a newly emerging social system. His conclusions are as follows:

“By criticizing the bourgeoisie for their hypocrisy and selfishness, Maggie, Philip, and to some extent Stephen, do not necessarily attack the social and moral principles defended by Dodson, Tom, and Wakem. Here, we undoubtedly encounter a limitation in Eliot's thinking. Her revolt against society lacks a consistent social direction but is primarily moral in nature. She is indignant about everything that degrades humanity and restricts happiness, but she believes that the main reason for this condition is the ethical imperfection of individuals, which leads to mutual misunderstanding.

¹⁷Ibid. “[g]enerozitatea este înlocuită la Dodsoni cu un calcul rece al câştigului. Deşi fac caz de solidaritatea familiei, ei refuză să ajute pe Tulliveri la nevoie, deoarece socotesc plasamentul banilor nesigur. Spontaneitatea este înlocuită cu ipocrizia, mândria unei judecăţi libere cu vanitatea ridicolă a îmbogăţiţilor.”

George Eliot thus becomes a prisoner of her own concepts and, despite being labelled as a free thinker, remains a product of Victorian society, albeit not its apologist.”¹⁸

For contemporary audiences, Alexandrescu's perspective may seem limited, but from his standpoint, anything that deviates from Marxism appears as a constraint.

Romola and *Daniel Deronda* are briefly discussed and dismissed as unrealistic, overly schematic, and confusing in their narratives. In the former, George Eliot exposes Victorian anti-Semitism and shows a great deal of sympathy towards the Jewish community in Britain. This made her a controversial figure for the reader of her own time, but even more so for the Romanian critic. As expected, the communist regime did not defend or support Zionism, and as a result, Alexandrescu complied. Thus, his unfavorable attitude and succinct description of the novel should come as no surprise given that he willingly avoided considering the subject. On the other hand, *Felix Holt, the Radical* presents a certain level of interest. From a literary standpoint, Alexandrescu finds that this novel is not particularly valuable. It has been criticised for being abounding in impossible situations and for having an unnecessarily complicated plot. Yet, its significance springs from George Eliot's attitude towards the great social problems of her age – the detrimental consequences of the 1832 Reform Bill.

He continued to condemn Eliot for her lack of in-depth exploration of proletariat ideology and utopian socialism: “George Eliot was not familiar with the ideology of the proletariat, and it does not appear that she extensively explored the ideas of the Chartists. Although she had personal acquaintances with figures like Owen in 1843 and Pierre Leroux in 1852, the utopian socialism does not leave deep traces in her work.”¹⁹ Felix Holt is described as a moderate radical, whose beliefs are lost in abstract humanism.

Despite being outraged by the indifference of the aristocracy and hypocrisy of the bourgeoisie, Felix Holt fears a determined popular movement that would disrupt the existential order. In this way, both George Eliot and her characters fail to represent the kind of radicalism the critic was looking for. In her essay titled “George Eliot and Politics,” Nancy Henry points out that “George Eliot's anxieties about such violence are traceable to the English legacy of fear about the French Revolution of 1789, and, within her own memory, to election day violence in Nuneaton in

¹⁸ Alexandrescu, *preface to Moara de pe Floss*, 22-23. “Reproșând burgheziei ipocrizia și egoismul, Maggie nu atacă chiar principiile sociale și morale pe care le apără Dodson, Tom și Wakem. Întâlnim aici, indiscutabil, o limită a gândirii lui Eliot. Revolta ei împotriva societății nu are o direcție socială consecventă, ci mai mult una morală. Ea este indignată de tot ceea ce slujește omul și-i îngrădește fericirea, dar crede că motivul principal pentru această stare de fapt este imperfecțiunea etică a oamenilor, care generează un misunderstanding, o neînțelegere reciprocă. George Eliot este prizoniera propriilor sale concepții și, în ciuda etichetei de liber-cugetător, un produs al societății victoriene, deși nu un apologet al ei.”

¹⁹ Alexandrescu, *preface to Moara de pe Floss*, 26. “George Eliot nu cunoștea ideologia proletariatului și nici nu pare a fi aprofundat ideile cartiștilor. Cunoșcuse personal pe Owen în 1843 și pe Pierre Leroux în 1852 dar nici socialismul utopic nu lasă urme adânci în opera ei.”

1832, the Chartist demonstrations of the 1840s, and the European revolutions of 1848.”²⁰ As a result, it is not expected of the writer to go against the fear and belief rooted in her as an English person, however progressive and liberal in thinking she might have been.

As it can be noted, the texts that provide a foundation for discussing social and economic issues are addressed, even though they may not be considered particularly successful. This is why novels like *Felix Holt* are examined, while *Romola* and *Daniel Deronda* are given less attention.

Ana Cartianu’s 1967 comprehensive study on George Eliot in *Istoria Literaturii Engleze, Secolul al XIX-lea (The History of English Literature, Nineteenth Century)* presents a contrasting approach to Sorin Alexandrescu’s detailed preface to *The Mill on the Floss*. To begin with, it is much less aggressive and more nuanced in its claim to Marxism, while also being much less limited in perspective. Cartianu’s critical comments, although often aligned with the Western perspective, also reflect her own context and the prevailing spirit of the time. Her study of George Eliot begins with the novelist’s biography and continues with an examination of her literary work, specifically her novels.

George Eliot’s biography is presented factually, with many details of her life as a child and a young adult. Cartianu emphasises the pivotal moments that shaped Eliot’s evolution as a writer: the Romanian academic highlights the influence of George Eliot’s ideological trajectory, indicating that the writer was partially swayed by French utopian socialism. This is evident in the letter Eliot wrote to her friend Sibry in 1848, where she expressed her delight regarding the February Revolution. According to Cartianu, the idea of fraternity in a class-divided society does not seem beyond the bounds of possibility. Though the case be such, Eliot “does not perceive the economic and social basis of human relationships, concentrating only on the moral and ethical problems.”²¹

Cartianu also delves into the aspect of religion, recognizing its paramount importance in comprehending the works of George Eliot: “In the field of personal ethics she begins with God and ends with duty. God is gradually superseded in her conception by Humanity, faith is superseded by love and sympathy.”²² However, Cartianu, unlike Sorin Alexandrescu, feels at ease to mention, without a trace of reproach, Eliot’s tolerance of all religious forms that help the human heart. The writer retains a strong sense of optimism in the human spirit and moral compass that she derives from her life as a devoted Christian.

Among the peculiarities of George Eliot’s intellectual development, Cartianu clarifies the former’s stance as an artist: To the question “What is her [Eliot’s] position among the novelists of her period and what is her specific contribution English letters?” Cartianu provides the following answer: “The function of the artist is to surprise the reader into attention; [...] The moral mission of art is to destroy self-absorption, to attach our feelings to imagine and feel what is unlike himself, thus cultivating that faculty of sympathizing.”²³ This perspective becomes evident in Eliot’s aversion to

²⁰ Nancy Henry, “George Eliot and Politics,” in *A Companion to George Eliot*, ed. Amanda Anderson (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 145.

²¹ Ana Cartianu, *Istoria Literaturii Engleze: Secolul al XIX-lea, Romanul și Poezia* (Bucharest: Editura Didactică și Pedagogică, 1967), 149.

²² Cartianu, *Istoria Literaturii Engleze*, 150.

²³ *Ibid.*, 152.

French Satanic poets and her disagreement with Walter Pater's views on art, the role of the artist, and the entire aesthetic movement of the 1870s. In her assessment of Pater's notion of "art for art's sake" as depicted in *Renaissance*, Cartianu openly expresses her viewpoint, labelling the book as "quite poisonous in its false principles of criticism and false conceptions of life."²⁴ The critic praises Eliot's unceasing enthusiasm for and commitment to humble folks—an attitude inspired by her deep understanding of sympathy and love.

George Eliot's novels are examined by following the chronological order of her two distinct periods of creation. The critic stresses the excitement of her novels' reception because of the freshness of the depiction of rural life. As Cartianu pertinently points out, both Dickens and Thackeray are "superlative townsmen,"²⁵ portraying the life of the city while neglecting the rural aspects of English society.

The first novel she discusses is *Adam Bede* (1859). After a lengthy and detailed summary of the novel, Cartianu decides that the conflict of the novel ceases to be social, shifting towards the mental drama of Hetty Sorrel. Additionally, Cartianu acknowledges that for Eliot, moral perfection achieved through suffering and inner turmoil holds greater significance than the pursuit of human rights. From Eliot's perspective, men and women should prioritize their responsibilities and obligations over their entitlements and claims to rights.

Adam Bede is portrayed by Eliot as the embodiment of her philosophical beliefs, representing an individual who achieves personal growth and self-realization through honest labour. Through this character, Eliot expresses her admiration for those who find satisfaction in their assigned roles and contribute to social harmony by fulfilling their duties. This demonstrates George Eliot's non-revolutionary approach to the construction of her characters. However, Ana Cartianu presents her conclusion in an objective and factual manner: "Socially, the novel ends in compromise. Ethically, it is exacting."²⁶

The critic proposes a comparison between *Adam Bede* and Walter Scott's *The Hearts of Midlothian*. She claims that, while the two novels share many aspects, a careful examination reveals profound differences in their conception and treatment of a similar subject:

"Like Hetty Sorrel, Effie Deans in Scott's novel has borne an illegitimate child and is tried for child murder. Her sister Jeanie Deans — far from fulfilling the passive religious function of Dinah Morris — actively strives and finally obtains a pardon for her sister, a pardon that means life and freedom. Tense situations and rapid action form the essence of Scott's novel, while G. Eliot's analyses, speculations, and didactic moralizing spoil the dramatism of her work which becomes slow and loses in dramatic force."²⁷

In comparing the two authors, Cartianu praises Scott's interest in national and social conflicts in his novels and criticises Eliot for the sole focus on internal individual conflicts.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid., 156.

²⁶ Ibid., 160.

²⁷ Ibid.

Silas Marner (1861), George Eliot's third novel, received more critical treatment from Ana Cartianu, who emphasized the infiltration of capitalism into the rural world and pointed out Eliot's perceived shortcomings as a non-revolutionary thinker. Cartianu appreciates the writer's sympathy for the poor and simple Silas Marner and her denouncement of the aristocracy as "parasites deprived of scruples and humanity"²⁸ and of religious bigotry. These are, in the critic's eye, George Eliot's greatest achievements in the novel. However, as previously mentioned, the social intention in *Silas Marner* is less overt, with emphasis shifting towards psychological and moral aspects. George Eliot consistently explored ethical themes throughout the novel, such as the consequences of actions and the concept of retribution. For instance, Squire Cass is punished for his misdeeds by being denied children. However, the larger social conflict remains unresolved.

The critique of capitalism was more acute in *The Mill on the Floss* (1860). According to Cartianu, the novel focuses on Mr. Tulliver's loss of property at an auction, which represents the penetration of capital into rural areas—a widespread process that took place during the nineteenth century. This event serves as a reflection of the larger socioeconomic changes that occurred during that period.

While in the previous two novels the negative aspects of society circled around the aristocracy, it is the bourgeoisie that bears this sin in *The Mill on the Floss*. Cartianu insists that opposition is the main narrative tool used by Eliot: the Tullivers and the Dodsons, Maggie, and Tom.

"Hard-working and practical-minded, the Dodsons are prosperous and successful, steadfastly treading the bourgeoisie way of selfishness and meanness, of self-satisfaction and callousness. Impulsive and impractical, imaginative, and generous, the Tullivers are less reliable, less successful, representing an older, pre-capitalist mentality. [...] There are two children in the Tulliver family: stodgy Tom who takes after his Dodson mother and vivacious, passionate Maggie, who is the very image of her father."²⁹

Cartianu's disappointment regarding the way this opposition is treated by George Eliot stems from the latter's mild approach to Maggie's rebellion. Although Eliot shows deep sympathy for Maggie's inability to "fit into the narrow pattern of petty bourgeoisie life,"³⁰ she does not endorse the character's disobedient and rebellious nature, constantly showing her the repercussions faced by individuals who are discontented with their circumstances. In essence, George Eliot's profound moral sensibility is challenged by her artistic conviction. She constructs a character who yearns for freedom and nonconformity, which captivates her as a writer. However, she struggles to grant this character the opportunity to fully embrace and live out these innate desires.

Cartianu singles out *Felix Hold, the Radical* and *Middlemarch* as being her "two great social novels and the climax of her realistic creation."³¹ Given that Social Realism was the predominant artistic trend of the age, it is unsurprising that Cartianu highlighted the social and

²⁸ Ibid., 162.

²⁹ Ibid., 163.

³⁰ Ibid., 165.

³¹ Ibid., 166.

realist aspects of these two novels. Chronologically, the former novel is *Felix Holt, the Radical*. The critic dedicates a significant portion of her analysis to this novel despite being perceived as a marginal work by the general public. Perhaps, and this is most certainly not a matter of coincidence, the answer to this query is to be found in the title of the novel.

Cartianu informs the reader that this novel deals with life in England from 1840 to 1850 and the modifications brought about by the progress of capitalist industrialization. Felix Holt is a direct product of society characterised by discontent, uncertainty, and political agitation. According to Cartianu, the tensions that are at the core of the novel are, on the one hand, between the new materialist-scientific point of view and the old idealistic mentality and, on the other hand, between the advanced social and political views of a superannuated electoral and parliamentary system.³²

The two characters that epitomise these tensions are Harold Transome and Felix Holt. The former is distinguished by the critic as someone who profits from the spoils of the empire and seeks to restore the family's fortune, despite their questionable claim to the property, as representatives of a secondary genealogical branch. This is where a critique of English fixation on social hierarchy is also hinted at. As a means of securing his position in society, Harold Transome tries to get into parliament as a radical candidate. In fact, it turns out that he is a typical bourgeois politician, a demagogue, and profiteer.

Felix Holt, on the other hand, represents the authentic radical candidate. As Transome's counterpart, his political interests align with the needs of the people: "his love for the working people, however, his socialist aspirations have prompted him to give up the intended career to remain among the people of his own class."³³ Cartianu continues to praise this character, as he stands for the ordinary man in search of a better world: "He is a watchmaker, lives in austere poverty with his mother, and is an inveterate enemy of fraud under all its aspects, whether religious, superstitious, intentional, etc."³⁴, "[h]e is an enemy of social inequality and exploitation and sincerely attached to the people [...]"³⁵ Judging by this description, Ana Cartianu holds this character in high esteem, portrayed up until this point, as a perfect example of political ambition.

Yet, the frustration with George Eliot's predictable character treatment is certain to take its toll on the critic. She condemns Felix Holt's weakening and ineffective position as a politician. Despite of his positive intentions towards his fellow men, he is unable to fully support the political struggles of the working class. Although he is a declared enemy of the rich, he is also an enemy of the revolutionary enterprise of the proletariat. Cartianu points out that Felix's primary conviction is the gradual amelioration of the living conditions of the working class rather than advocating for revolution.

In Cartianu's view, Felix Holt serves as a perfect representation of George Eliot's contradictory political beliefs.

³² Ibid., 166–67.

³³ Ibid., 167–68.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

"On the one hand, she manifests an aversion for the practices of the bourgeoisie; yet, on the other hand, she remains on the positions of abstract humanism, disapproves of revolutionary measures and giving priority to the moral over the political element she is for a gradual formation of the workers' conscience by means of education."³⁶

Felix also embodies her Comte-ist principle that men and women should find contentment in their lot. When comparing Felix Holt with Dickens's Stephen Blackpool or Gaskell's John Barton, Cartianu characterizes him as "a deluded theorist and a utopian dreamer."³⁷

In *Middlemarch* (1871-72), although a highly praised novel renowned as Eliot's greatest creation, Ana Cartianu's analysis takes a different standpoint. Albeit she acknowledges the novel's numerous merits, she discredits both its structure and its content. In addition, the analysis of this particular novel, apart from the presentation of the plot, is quite brief, especially when compared to *Felix Holt*. In the introductory part, the critic concedes that, because of its wide range of characters (the Brooks, the Chettams, the Vincys, the Bulstrodes, and the Garths) and its multiplicity of problems, the novel is often associated with Tolstoy's achievements. Naturally, this had ideological implications for that time. By comparing Eliot to a Russian novelist, Cartianu deliberately attempts to testify to the former's suitability for communist ideology. However, she also points out the contradiction residing at the heart of this text, namely, the divergence between the novel's individual successes and its overall failure, due to its mechanistic undialectical way of dealing with society. Yet again, in the critic's conception, George Eliot's deficiency is made evident by her lack of commitment to the social consequences of the political system of her time and her devotion to the ethical and psychological aspects of the characters.

The novel is redeemed according to Ana Cartianu by its fair exposure of religious hypocrisy, marriage, and family life in a bourgeois society. The critic views these aspects positively, as they shed light on the contradictions and challenges faced by individuals in such social contexts. The psychological mastery of George Eliot is also appreciated by Cartianu, as it skilfully portrays the restrictive and corruptive influence of bourgeois conditions on human personality. The concluding line of this examination is: "Her characters do not rebel, but acquiesce,"³⁸ meaning that the bourgeois society does not nurture heroes, a conclusion which Thackeray came to before Eliot.

Romola (1963) and *Daniel Deronda* (1876) are characterised by Cartianu as representing "the descending line of her creation."³⁹ Just like Alexandrescu before her, the author's attitude towards these two novels springs from the unfitness of their subject to the discourse of the age. On the one hand, the former stages a key conflict in the history of the bourgeoisie between the Medici and Savonarola – that is, between worldly power and asceticism. According to the critic, Eliot succeeds in providing her readers with a detailed and scholarly presentation of the historical background of fifteenth-century Italy, yet she fails to distance herself from her previous methods of plot and character construction: "she uses history as a means of diffusing her ethical

³⁶ Ibid., 168.

³⁷ Ibid., 169.

³⁸ Ibid., 172.

³⁹ Ibid., 166.

convictions.”⁴⁰ For Cartianu “[t]he political aspect of the conflict is ignored; the situation is treated as a moral problem, as a personal debate between selfishness and selflessness, between happiness and duty.”⁴¹ The question for us is why Eliot should have used the context of fifteenth-century Italy to represent political conflicts in the novel? I do not believe that any writer should limit their exploration of character to the facade of a certain sociopolitical context, nor that it necessarily guarantees the novel’s success. Cartianu continues to show discontent with the novel, as, despite its scientific precision, it does not mirror the spirit of the age.

The people’s vexation with the authority of the Medici does not concern Eliot and the novel appears, to Cartianu, “as an artificial reconstruction of a historical period.”⁴² Thus, the critic’s perspective suggests a preference for a more radical approach, in which anything that falls short of a revolutionary stance is subject to criticism. The critic concludes that Eliot’s design for *Romola* was purely a translation of the writer’s moral and ethical convictions into the past, while the Italian conflict was dealt with in much the same English puritanical and moralizing manner.

Cartianu’s attitude towards *Daniel Deronda* is also quite diverging. She presents the novel as an attack against the institution of marriage in bourgeois society and as a display of Jewish customs. She concedes that the manner in which these aspects are depicted in the novel is liberal yet in the bourgeoisie spirit. The words *Jewish* and *bourgeoisie* are particularly problematic for Cartianu, as she often creates derogatory associations between them. For instance, “she [Eliot] gives a detailed and coloured picture of Hebrew customs – presents the domestic life, family feeling, belief and religious practices of the Jewish petty bourgeoisie.”⁴³ The tone is not only dismissive but also ironic. On the one hand, the critic acknowledges the importance the novel played in the struggle against antisemitism, but on the other hand, she denounces the fact that this struggle is presented from a bourgeoisie perspective:

“Considering British chauvinism and racial prejudices, George Eliot’s last book assumes a militant and democratic character, postulating for the equality of all men, without racial distinction. [...] The struggle of the Jews – however – is considered from a bourgeoisie nationalist standpoint. Artistically speaking, the character of Daniel Deronda is artificial. The mysterious and melodramatic effects abound, creating the impression of a false, fictitious romanticism.”⁴⁴

Nonetheless, unlike Sorin Alexandrescu, Ana Cartianu clarifies the reality represented in the two novels to the public and attempts to offer a more balanced perspective. Although her objections are clear and in accordance with the prevailing ideology of her time, she is less aggressive and arbitrary when discussing these two novels.

Dicționar al Literaturii Engleze (Dictionary of English Literature) was published in 1970 under the coordination of Ana Cartianu, by Editura Științifică (The Scientific Press). Written by

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid., 174.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid., 175.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

Liana Stănculescu, the entry on George Eliot is two pages long and encompasses a short biographical section and critical comments on her literary work. The preface of the dictionary is particularly relevant for the present study as it offers insight into the direction of examination. Ioan Aurel Preda's preface clarifies that the selection of authors included in the dictionary was made based on the hierarchy that "the passing of time, this supreme judge of literary values, has determined,"⁴⁵ yet he concedes that the time and place of reception has also contributed to the evaluation of the chosen writers. Preda highlights the subjective character of this choice, which, in his view, accentuates the dictionary's relative nature. However, he reassures the public of the *neutral* attitude adopted by critics towards the selected writers, limiting themselves to a strictly factual presentation of life and literary work.

This hierarchy of importance also dictated the amount of space dedicated to each writer; thus, the length of the articles was considered crucial in conveying the perceived significance or meaningfulness of the writers. The poles of reference in this literary hierarchy are represented by William Shakespeare, who is at the top of the pyramid, and Christopher Anstey, who is situated at the bottom. Given that Shakespeare is granted four and a half pages in the dictionary, while Anstey is a scarce seven-line passage, George Eliot's place in the dictionary's hierarchy is considered upper-middle.

Regarding Eliot's biography, Liana Stănculescu stresses a few key events in the author's life. First, it is the childhood spent in the austere environment of the Calvinist tradition that Stănculescu criticises, while praising the influence of Charles Bray and Charles Hennel on Eliot's breaking with the narrow ideas of religion.

In her characterisation of Eliot, Stănculescu highlights the duality of the writer, as she is "[e]ndowed with a vast culture and a vigorous masculine intelligence but has a feminine temperament."⁴⁶ The association between intelligence and masculinity was unsurprising in the 1970s. In his article, "Receptarea critică a Literaturii feminine" ("The critical reception of feminine literature"), Marin Bălan points out the hostility of critics towards female writers:

There has always been a sense of distance from critics in the face of such works, a feeling of reluctance driven by the following "certainty": women write creations that are either too sentimental or constructed around female characters who exhibit a sexuality far beyond the limit that male prejudices can accept.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Ioan Aurel Preda, preface to *Dicționar al Literaturii Engleze*, coord. Ana Cartianu (Bucharest: Editura Științifică, 1970), 7. "[...] timpul, acest suprem judecător al valorilor literare, a statornicit-o."

⁴⁶ Liana Stănculescu, "George Eliot," in *Dicționar al Literaturii Engleze*, coord. Ana Cartianu (Bucharest: Editura Științifică, 1970), 124. "Dotată cu o vastă cultură și cu o inteligență masculină, dar având un temperament extrem de feminin."

⁴⁷ Marin Bălan, "Receptarea critică a Literaturii feminine," in *Caietele Criticii*, vol. 3 (Bucharest: Editura pentru Literatură, 1974), 75. "Întotdeauna s-a simțit o atitudine de distanțare a criticilor în fața acestora, un sentiment de reticență determinat de următoarea 'certitudine': femeile scriu creații ori prea sentimentale, ori construite în jurul unor personaje feminine ce manifestă o sexualitate cu mult peste limita pe care prejudecățile masculine o pot accepta."

The presentation of these novels is concise and aligns with Western criticism. Eliot is declared the precursor of the modern novel, marking the shift in focus from action to the psychology of the character.

In 1977, the Romanian readership met George Eliot's greatest novel, *Middlemarch*, translated by Eugen B. Marian. The translator also provides the Minerva edition with a thirty-one-page preface and a chronological table of the main events in the writer's life. Marian's preface appears to bring a more progressive perspective than the previously discussed critical texts. Criticisms of the author and her work are remarkably similar in relation to the Western context of that decade. Critical comments on the novels revolve around the construction of characters and anticipate Eliot's ability to foresee the modern novel.

The focus of his preface is mostly related to Eliot's position as a woman and non-believer. Marian calls her rational and unsentimental, a woman conscious of the flaws of her age and the precarious place women occupied even in a matriarchal society: "[s]he begins to feel the burden of the degrading inferiority imposed on the weaker sex, compelled by a subtle network of prejudices to truly remain weak."⁴⁸ According to Marian, G. Eliot creates the first remarkable female character of English literature, Milly, from "The Sad Fortunes of the Rev. Amos Barton." In Marian's words, Eliot is a writer "convinced of the complete and natural equality between women and men."⁴⁹

In addition, her transformation from devout Christian to non-believer is of particular importance to the translator. He describes her as someone who transitions from Anglicanism to Evangelism, and then to Baptism, and ultimately finds solace in the haven of the few and bold, that is, the free thinker.

Sanda Berce's 1986 study entitled "George Eliot: Character as Plot" is part of a collection of 14 academic articles in *Studies in Eighteenth – and Nineteenth – Century English Novel*, coordinated by Ileana Galea, Virgil Stanciu, and Liviu Cotrău.⁵⁰ Berce focuses her analysis on Maggie Tulliver from *The Mill on the Floss*, in relation to the plot generated by her. The author's examination is highly theoretical, as it relies on multiple foreign critical works, such as Jonathan Culler's *Structuralist Poetics*, Philippe Sollers's *Logique*, Roland Barthes's *Le Plaisir du texte*, F.R. Leavis's *The Great Tradition*. Berce's comprehensive examination of character and plot may contain an excessive number of theories. The transition from a highly social analysis of Eliot's novels to a narratological exploration of characters and plot may be due to the penetration of Western works of criticism in Romania. During the 1980s, deconstructionist reading became more and more popular. As a result, readers of literature were encouraged to abandon the practice of assessing a work by its historical and biographical significance. Additionally, one must not overlook the fact that addressing a literary text from a single social standpoint might have become

⁴⁸ Eugen B. Marian, preface to *Middlemarch*, by George Eliot, trans. Eugen B. Marian (Bucharest: Editura Minerva, 1977), VII. "Începe să simtă apăsarea condiției de jignitoare inferioritate la care e supus sexul slab, silit printr-o fină rețea de prejudecăți să rămână într-adevăr 'slab'."

⁴⁹ Marian, preface to *Middlemarch*, XIII. "[...] convinsă de egalitatea naturală completă dintre cele două sexe."

⁵⁰ Sanda Berce, "George Eliot: Character as Plot," in *Studies in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century English Novel*, ed. Ileana Galea, Virgil Stanciu, and Liviu Cotrău (Cluj-Napoca: Universitatea din Cluj, 1986), 124–137.

redundant. I believe that Berce understood the banality of an overly used perspective and began a more relevant and evolved critical discussion.

The reception of George Eliot within the communist period of Romania's history exhibits a series of distinct phases. Initially, Sorin Alexandrescu's preface to *The Mill on the Floss* in 1964 reflected a predominantly Marxist viewpoint. Cartianu's 1967 work presents a more nuanced perspective in *Istoria Literaturii Engleze, Secolul al XIX-lea* (The History of English Literature, Nineteenth Century). Furthermore, the 1970 *Dicționar al Literaturii Engleze* (Dictionary of English Literature) presents a biased portrayal, displaying prejudice against Eliot's intellectual prowess due to her gender. However, a more progressive and gender-oriented discussion arose in Marian's 1977 preface to *Middlemarch*. It is important to note that these texts must be evaluated within the socio-political context of their time, as our present time is likewise characterized by its own biases, prejudices, and interpretive limitations. No context can make a claim to complete innocence, objectivity, or impartiality. Although there is a crucial difference between the bias of a totalitarian system that dictates people's understanding of the world through political pressures and the inherent subjectivity of human beings, I am aware of the inevitable partiality of our own contemporary milieu, and hereby I acknowledge the reception of the reception of George Eliot in Communist Romania.