Women's Narrators Who Cross Gender:  

Uncle Tom's Cabin and Adam Bede

Engaging narrative strategies, when they work, make actual readers cry. Women novelists who had no personal access to public audiences could use direct address to accost the strangers represented by their narratees, persuade those strangers to identify with the novels' characters, convince them that the suffering depicted in the novels is "real," and goad them into succumbing to that most physical proof of "real" emotional response—tears. Through the first half of the nineteenth century, tears lost the privileged position they had held as the emblems of sensibility and degenerated into a "womanish" activity, a mark of sentimentality. To appreciate the role that emotional response was designed to play in engaging narrative texts, we must entertain the possibility—with Roland Barthes—of rehabilitating tears as a sign. Tears "prove to myself that my grief is not an illusion. . . . [B]y weeping, I give myself an emphatic interlocutor who receives the 'truest' of messages, that of my body, not that of my speech" (427–428). To transmit "the message of the body"—the visceral response that signals the mental movement from identification, to compassion, to pain—is one of the engaging narrator's primary goals. For women writers, evoking tears in an audience was one way to surmount the restrictions upon their public activity. If a reader weeps, the message of the body says that a real event has occurred; it is as though the writer has transcended language to assert her presence and to act directly upon her reader. Making a reader cry was a way for a woman to do something.
Testing the Model

Making a reader cry was also typically, if not exclusively, something for a woman to do.² Men could gain the same kind of access to an audience’s emotions in person by delivering speeches or sermons. When George Eliot and Harriet Beecher Stowe set out to make their readers cry, they relied upon a sermonic use of direct address to establish the same link with their readers that revivalist preachers maintained with their listeners. What men accomplished through speech, women could try to accomplish in writing. Direct address, in both oral and written language, is the trope that most vividly asserts the presence of the sender and the receiver of the message. While presence may be—as Derrida reminds us—illusory in either situation, the rhetoric of direct address contributes to that illusion and even, in engaging narrative, constitutes it. The engaging narrator strives to establish her own presence and her reader’s, in order to refashion the actual audience’s emotional relation to her subject matter.³

With their first novels, Eliot and Stowe achieved the response they sought. Uncle Tom’s Cabin has labored long under its popular and critical reputations for sentimentality, summed up in Hugh Kenner’s memorable dismissal of it as “an eleven-Kleenex tract.” For Eliot, whose stature as an intellect overshadows her reputation for sentimentality, response was equally important.⁴ When she was writing Scenes of Clerical Life in 1857, Eliot would read her new pages aloud in the evenings to George Lewes, who, by her own report, “laughed and cried alternately and then rushed to kiss me.” Of Lewes’s tears and laughter she wrote to a friend, “He is the prime blessing that has made all the rest possible to me—giving a response to everything I have written, a response that I could confide in as a proof that I had not mistaken my work” (Letters III 63). The physical manifestations of response were her “proof” that she could use her novel—her “work,” in the literal sense of her one available mode of labor—as a means of making something real happen within her audience.⁵

In Uncle Tom’s Cabin (1851–1852) and in Adam Bede (Eliot’s first full-length novel, 1859), both Stowe and Eliot exploit earnest direct address as a means of sparking actual readers’ emotion through appeals to narratees; both authors insisted, within and outside their fictional texts, that they wanted their novels to be accepted as “real.” Paradoxically, though, both novels are distancing as well as engaging in their strategies. At the same time that the texts try to establish a speaker’s and auditor’s presence, they
participate in the inevitable recognition that such presence can always only be a function of language. While the contents of both novels conform to conventions of verisimilitude to suggest their "reality," each of the narrators intervenes in the fiction to insist upon her story's veracity by overtly claiming that it is true. In the most extreme cases—the first chapter of the second volume of *Adam Bede*, "In Which the Story Pauses a Little" and the final chapter of *Uncle Tom*, "Concluding Remarks"—the narrators talk so candidly about the genesis of their stories as to contradict the claims of truth they are ostensibly making. When their narrators find themselves in this self-reflexive mode, the authors are treading the masculine territory of distancing narrative discourse; when they continue to insist upon establishing their own presence and the reader's presence through direct address, the authors are erasing the ironies of narration to inscribe the "truth" of their realist fictions.

**STOWE AND THE RHETORIC OF SENSATION**

*Uncle Tom's Cabin* straddles the boundaries of several genres of nineteenth-century fiction. Full of the domestic details appropriate to the realist and sentimental novels of its era, *Uncle Tom* juxtaposes homely scenes with public scandals vivid enough to rival English sensation novels. If fictional accounts of illegal kidnappings, imprisonments, rapes, and murders could "produce a sensation" in the popular British novels of that genre, how much more scandalous must have been *Uncle Tom*’s suggestion that in America analogous activities were legal under the system of slavery. The rhetorical challenge that *Uncle Tom* takes on is to convince a white, middle-class public accustomed to thinking of blacks as "other" that the emotional experience of slaves was exactly analogous to their own. As the novel’s best-seller status attests, Stowe accurately gauged her audience’s willingness to be shocked into sympathy. *Uncle Tom* certainly produced a public sensation—not to mention the private sensations its readers experienced individually.

In its day, *Uncle Tom* prompted scandalized reviewers to question the truth of its story. British and Southern reviewers, especially, expressed doubts about the likelihood that scenes such as Eliza’s last-minute escape over the frozen Ohio River or Uncle Tom’s final martyrdom at the hands of
Legree's savage slaves could ever really occur. According to their own political agendas, critics labeled *Uncle Tom's* story true or false, its author a prophetess or a liar.

Are the stories told in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* true? This is not a question for postmodern criticism to ask; the stories' being rendered in discourse, and the discourse being that of fiction, already places the novel's signifiers at two removes from its signifieds, and renders the question of its truth-status moot. For Stowe, though, her audience's acceptance of the novel as a "true" representation of slavery was essential. In response to critical attacks, she published *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1853), a compilation of newspaper articles, advertisements, bills of sale, and anecdotes about slavery. This accumulation of evidence—much of it, paradoxically enough, invented by Stowe herself—was supposed to prove her novel's authenticity. Of *Uncle Tom* Stowe writes in the *Key*: "This work, more, perhaps, than any other work of fiction that ever was written, has been a collection and arrangement of real incidents,—of actions really performed, of words and expressions really uttered. . . . [T]his is a mosaic of facts" (5). Occurring in a separate text from the novel, and uttered with intense seriousness, the claim inverts the tradition of the framed fiction, or the mock editor's note that ironically introduces *Pamela* or *Robinson Crusoe* as "real" manuscripts. Whereas the (masculine) tradition of the frame only pretends to claim that the story is true, Stowe's (feminine) strategy in the *Key* is to assert literally and earnestly that the story is factual—even though she knows that the novel and the *Key* itself are only loosely true, if they are true at all, based as they are on her own necessarily imperfect recollections and on other persons' reports of the actuality of slavery. The narrator's assertions, even though they are, strictly speaking, inaccurate, are perfectly serious. The speaker of the *Key* justifies her attempt by alluding to the public reception of *Uncle Tom*: "It is treated as a reality,—sifted, tried and tested, as a reality; and therefore as a reality it may be proper that it should be defended" (5). For Stowe's contemporary readers, the question of the novel's truth was as important as it was for her: Southern critics cited their states' constitutions to prove that slaves could not legally be abused as they are in *Uncle Tom*; hostile linguists demonstrated that Stowe's renditions of dialects were faulty and geographically misplaced; Southern ladies wrote "anti-*Tom*" novels to refute Stowe's book, picturing the "true" happy situation of slaves in the South.

104
If the truth-status of *Uncle Tom* was controversial, its emotional impact was never at issue. Stowe’s most vehement detractors have agreed that the novel evokes tears: the question has always been whether the novel’s sentimental strategies are in themselves objectionable. George F. Holmes, a Southern reviewer who violently derided *Uncle Tom*, saw the sentiment-provoking scene of Eva’s death as “a gem shining amid surrounding rubbish” (he canceled out his praise, however, by accusing Stowe of having stolen the scene from Dickens). More recently, critics concerned with the novel’s potentially palliative effect upon the activism of individual readers have regarded sentimentalism as a dangerous falsehood. James Baldwin’s asserting that “sentimentality, the ostentatious parading of excessive and spurious emotion, is the mark of dishonesty, the inability to feel” (578) returns, in a quirk of history yoking the civil rights activist with the conservative slave owner, to the original proslavery objection to Stowe’s work: the accusation of deceit. Baldwin implies that the emotional experience the novel aims to inspire is itself a pretense, and that actual readers of *Uncle Tom* could indulge in a good cry, feel exonerated, and then forget about the issues of oppression and exploitation that the story addresses; the experience of reading sentimental fiction provides a cowardly means for the “sentimentalist” to evade “his aversion to experience, his fear of life, his arid heart.”

But Stowe’s own understanding of a text’s emotional function was entirely different from Baldwin’s. His refusal to bend to her text’s strategies testifies to the necessity of placing rhetoric in its historical situation before attempting to analyze it, because a message uttered in one period to an intended audience can go completely astray in another context. Increasingly, critics are looking into the content of *Uncle Tom*’s message, the political and religious implications of the story’s emphasis on feminine domestication of American culture, submission to suffering here as a key to bliss in the hereafter, and reinforcement of Christian family values. Any reader sharing Baldwin’s social concerns would find much to object to in all of this.

I am less concerned here, though, with the novel’s messages—ostensible or encoded—than with the mode in which the messages get transmitted. As though she could anticipate the political, ethical, and theological objections to her story’s content, as though she could predict the intended
Testing the Model

audience’s reluctance to accept Uncle Tom as true, Stowe consistently relied on the rhetorical techniques of sermons—strategies she had internalized while listening to her father, brothers, and husband, among others—to bring home her message to her readers. From her point of view, doubt among readers resembles doubt among parishioners. Christianity provides a master-narrative that represents relationships among earthly events and eternal realities; the revivalist preacher who would “awaken” his congregation must inspire them to accept “Divine Truth” on faith. Genuinely hoping to spark a change in the system that condoned slavery, Stowe faced a similar task. Her novel needed to inspire readers to accept, on faith, the truth of her story—even though the story itself, like the “facts” she fabricated to prove it, was invented. Like the preacher, she partly side-stepped the dilemma of how to prove the unprovable by moving away altogether from the message of speech toward the message of the body. Stowe’s assertions that the novel is true are, strickly speaking, nonsense: her overriding strategy is not to appeal to sense at all, but rather to sensation.

By trying to provoke an emotional response in her audience, Stowe placed herself squarely in the tradition of the male Calvinist preachers who emulated Jonathan Edwards.13 Perry Miller has explained how Edwards developed the “rhetoric of sensation” to resolve for himself the dilemma of preaching in language which operated, by Lockean definition, always at one remove from reality. Edwards accepted Locke’s theory that words are signs for the things they represent and deduced that “words are of no use any otherwise than as they convey our own ideas to others” (quoted in Miller 177). Edwards was troubled, however, by the implications of abstract speech: to speak in words, to say “God, man, angel,” is to evoke the arbitrary signs for those entities, rather than conceiving “the actual ideas.” According to Miller, Edwards was torn between appreciating the efficiency of symbolic thought processes and abhorring the system of substitutions as a form of deceit. Edwards was in no position to anticipate—and playfully to accept—the inevitability of what Derrida would call “deferred presence” or “differance.” His theology demanded a belief in the existence of “the actual idea,” originating in God. In the potential for speaker and listener to take the sign for the actual idea, the false for the true, Edwards saw “the supreme manifestation of original sin.” The preacher resolved this conflict by ensuring that the words he must unavoidably use to work upon his congregation would be so pointedly arranged as to inspire the sensations they stood for.
Edwards hoped that the signifier could bring the signified into being within the bodies of his auditors. As he put it, "To have an actual idea of a thought, is to have that thought we have an idea of then in our minds. To have an actual idea of any pleasure or delight, there must be excited a degree of that delight. So to have an idea of any trouble or kind of pain, there must be excited a degree of that pain or trouble" (quoted in Miller 178). Miller observes that Edwards's reasoning on this point was "the most important achievement of his life and the key to his doctrine and practice" (179).

Edwards's rhetorical means of exciting "a degree" of pain or trouble included heavy reliance on direct address, that trope by which he repeatedly pictures "you, sinner" in "the hands of an angry God." Typically, the "application" sections of his discourses shift the sermons' focus from abstract exegesis to personalized accusations. In the final sections of his sermons, audiences would find themselves confronted with catalogues of sins committed by "you": "How many sorts of wickedness have you not been guilty of! How manifold have been the abominations of your life! What profaneness and contempt of God has been exercised by you!" (Edwards 671). Lest individual listeners try to shirk the accusations by distancing themselves from this unenviable "you," Edwards supplied details of sins so ordinary that no member of his intended audience could deny having committed them. In order to excite "a degree" of pain, the preacher would work upon the congregation's feelings, enforcing real tears when he could, yet impugning the authenticity of the emotion at the same time:

Sometimes it may be you weep . . . in your hearing sermons, and hope God will take notice of it, and take it for some honour; but he sees it to be all hypocrisy. You weep for yourself; you are afraid of hell . . . Is it a heinous thing for God to slight you, a little, wretched, despicable creature; a worm, a mere nothing, and less than nothing; a vile insect that has risen up in contempt against the Majesty of heaven and earth? (673)

This worm, this vile insect—observed from an analytical distance—might seem to resemble Fielding's "little Reptile of a critic," the figure with whom the actual receiver of a text would presumably hesitate or even refuse to identify. The context, however, marks the difference in strategies. In Fielding's literary realm, the pretense, the falsehood at the heart of writing fiction is a given part of the game, and the distancing narrator labors under
Testing the Model

no moral necessity to evoke a genuine experience in his reader. In Edwards's theological realm, the situation is reversed: the preacher's primary goal is to subvert the pretense at the very heart of language by enforcing an emotional experience in the audience, by requiring them to see themselves reflected in that "you."

What Stowe's narrator does in the interventions within Uncle Tom's Cabin more closely resembles Edwards's strategy than Fielding's. In the nineteenth-century world, the property of the preacher, the reliance upon earnest, exhortative address, belonged to men (in Chapter 7, I examine some of the reasons why it was impossible for a woman to imitate the preacher's activity directly). Stowe was accustomed to hearing sensationalist preaching from male members of her family. She was awakened to Christianity at age thirteen while listening to one of her father's "frame sermons," a religious exhortation framed by a personal narrative of spiritual experience. The sermon moved Harriet to tears; she later wrote that she was "drawn to listen by a certain pathetic earnestness in his voice" (Gerson 13). That pathetic earnestness, that expressed faith in the link between sensation and genuine experience, and that concern for conveying "truth" despite the "deceitful" nature of fiction and of language itself, combined to create the strategy that Stowe, the woman novelist, borrowed from Edwards through her father and brothers, the male preachers, thus transforming a masculine means of enforcing spiritual presence into a feminine strategy for evoking presence in fiction.

"HOW FAST COULD YOU WALK": BUTTONHOLING THE ACTUAL READER

The narrator of Uncle Tom's Cabin is unusually explicit about her concern that her novel should be received as a direct representation of reality. In the final chapter, "Concluding Remarks," she explains how her desire to write the novel grew out of her observations of the political and theological debates about whether Northerners should be legally required to return fugitive slaves to Southern owners. From the tenor of these arguments she concluded that "these men and Christians cannot know what slavery is; if they did, such a question could never be open for discussion. And from this arose a desire to exhibit it in a living dramatic reality"(622). Though she uses exclamation marks pretty freely, Stowe seldom italicizes
The power of a "living dramatic reality" repeatedly erupts within the text. Throughout the "Concluding Remarks" and the narrative itself, the narrator frequently employs the conventions appropriate to "realism of presentation," implicitly suggesting the authenticity of her sources. In introducing one of the slave-heroines, for example, the narrator (referring to herself with an authoritatively masculine editorial "we") asserts that "Eliza, such as we have described her, is not a fancy sketch, but taken from remembrance, as we saw her, years ago, in Kentucky" (54). Similarly, the narrator reports of the slaves' horror of being sold down river: "We have ourselves heard this feeling expressed by them" (164). Stowe also adopts the realist convention of "omitting" or "disguising" proper nouns—for instance the name of "——— street" in New Orleans (468)—as if to mask the identities of real people and places. Taking the narrative's truth claims a step further, the "Concluding Remarks" refer often to "the writer's" personal observations of slaves, and quote the novelist's husband, Calvin Stowe, as an authority on slavery, without referring to his relation to the writer (627).

Stowe's narrator manipulates the conventions of verisimilitude in order to realize the problem of slavery for her readers, to let them see "what slavery is" and to encourage them to accept her text as authentic documentation of the situation. As the action of the novel demonstrates every time a character takes a risk to aid a desperate slave, Stowe believed in the power of what the narrator calls "the magic of the real presence of distress—the imploring human eye, the frail, trembling human hand, the despairing appeal of helpless agony" (156). Just as the "magic" of "the real presence" works to stir sympathy among her characters, Stowe evidently intended the verisimilitude, the "living dramatic reality," of her novel to work magic among her readers, to move them to sympathy and action.

Of course, concluding a novel with a chapter about how the fiction came to be written foregrounds the fact that it is not an authentic document, but only a novel. The editorial "we" (the pronoun of male journalists) and the narrator's distancing habit in this final chapter of referring to "the writer," rather than testifying with a personal "I," reinforce the self-reflexiveness suggested by so much intervening commentary: as we have seen, in fiction these are indicators of a preoccupation with literariness.
These distancing elements in Stowe’s interventions strain against the continued assertions that the story is real. In an uneasy blending of earnest direct address and distancing ironies, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* presents a turbulent marriage of feminine and masculine modes of fictional discourse.

Stowe uses three basic types of interventions in *Uncle Tom*: (1) passages in the distancing tradition of Fielding’s irony, which refer either disparagingly or disarmingly to a third-person “reader” (for example, “our readers” [68, 122, 158], “the reader” [310, 470], “many of my lady readers” [407]; (2) passages that oscillate between the distancing and engaging approaches and are explicitly addressed to specific narratees who are meant to represent large segments of the intended audience, such as “mother” (153–154), “good brother of the Southern states” (156), “sir” (208), “you, generous, noble-minded men and women of the South” (622), “Christian men and women of the North” (624), or “mothers of America” (624); and (3) passages addressed not so much to any fictive narratees created by or within the text, as to the actual reader, under the name of “you.”

The first of these categories—third-person references to “the reader”—consists most frequently of straightforward reminders that it is the narrator’s duty to keep the narratee informed of the fictional facts; for instance, “it would be injustice to her memory not to give the reader a little idea of [Dinah]” (310), or “we must daguerreotype [Tom] for our readers” (68). Significantly, although these interventions assume the distancing, third-person stance, they subvert the metaliterary implications of that stance by stubbornly insisting upon treating the subject matter as if it were true, speaking of the characters as if they were real people to whose memory the narrator (who is not, after all, a character, but a figure who claims authoritative access to events and information outside the text) must do justice, or whose daguerreotype she would be able to take.

The third-person references to “the reader” serve a rhetorical function very similar to that served by third-person references to “sinners” in a sermon. Even when Stowe’s narrator adopts the sarcastic tone that typifies the distancing narrators of Thackeray or Kingsley, she does so to invoke the “real presence” of the distressed characters, as well as “the real presence” of the reader who would sympathize with them. When she refers to “readers” in interventions that bring up presumed failings in her audience’s ethics or
attitudes, her narrator makes the corrections for those failings perfectly clear. For example, in one passage Stowe twits "any of our refined and Christian readers" who "object to the society into which this scene introduces them" (132), soberly reminding "them" that they belong to a culture that encourages and perpetuates the slave-catchers whom such readers may find disagreeable. The passage aims to spark a feeling of guilt in any actual reader who sees his or her own attitude mirrored in that group of "readers" to which the passage refers.

On some occasions, the narrator inverts this strategy ironically, pretending to disapprove of a "reader's" presumed reaction to an event, but obviously endorsing that reaction. Consider an intervention in a scene describing the exploits of an escaped slave:

If it had been only a Hungarian youth, now bravely defending in some mountain fastness the retreat of fugitives escaping from Austria into America, this would have been sublime heroism; but as it was a youth of African descent, defending the retreat of fugitives through America into Canada, of course we are too well instructed and patriotic to see any heroism in it; and if any of our readers do, they must do it on their own private responsibility. (299)

The narrator’s diction—"bravely defending," "fugitives escaping into America," "sublime heroism"—makes the passage’s ironic intent obvious, in a way which seldom occurs among the similarly sarcastic interventions of, for example, Vanity Fair. Whereas Thackeray’s narrator’s opinion on his characters may be difficult to trace through his ironic assertions about them, Stowe’s narrator’s analogy between the Hungarian hero and the escaped slave can leave very little doubt that she most heartily approves of "any readers" who see the resemblance "on their own private responsibility." And, by implication, any readers who don’t ought to recognize their own failure, once they have considered the analogy.

The most strikingly engaging of Stowe’s rhetorical strategies, and the feature that most closely resembles the rhetoric of sermons, is her narrator’s heavy reliance on remarks directly addressed to narratees. Stowe’s narrative interventions are structured as direct address nearly twice as often as they are third-person references. The second and third categories of intervention
listed above—interventions addressed to a "you" either named or unnamed—play an important role in Stowe's attempt to get the actual reader to take the narrative assertions to heart. When naming narratees, Stowe's narrator keeps them in broad categories and avoids limitations that might allow any given actual reader to deflect the remarks being addressed to him or her. Although a few passages of direct address are sarcastically aimed at some presumed flaw in the narratee, the narrator usually attributes amiable motives and compassionate assumptions to the "sir" or "mother" to whom she speaks. Such engaging passages include: "And oh! mother that reads this, has there never been in your house a drawer, or a closet, the opening of which has been to you like the opening again of a little grave? Ah! happy mother that you are, if it has not been so" (153–154). Any mid-nineteenth-century mother, whether or not she had lost a child, would have been sensitive to the appeal. Nor are Stowe's narratees exclusively female: "And if you should ever be under the necessity, sir, of selecting, out of two hundred men, one who was to become your absolute owner and disposer, you would, perhaps, realize, just as Tom did, how few there were that you would feel at all comfortable in being made over to" (476). Although these passages specify the sex of the narratees to whom they are addressed, they imply the existence of impulses which are not necessarily limited to mothers or to gentlemen, and they encourage the actual reader who might be touched by their suggestions to sympathize with the novel's characters who lose their children or their freedom.

Uncle Tom's named narratees are sometimes delineated even more specifically than the "mother" or "sir" in the passages above, but Stowe usually includes a surprisingly large and varied number of groups in her addresses. The aim is apparently to include the largest possible number of actual readers among the figures of readers represented by the narratees. This is most striking in a long passage in "Concluding Remarks," in which the narrator speaks to men and women of America . . . [f]armers of Massachusetts, of New Hampshire, of Vermont, of Connecticut, who read this book by the blaze of your winter-evening fire,—strong hearted, generous sailors and ship-owners of Maine,— . . . [b]rave and generous men of New York, farmers of rich and joyous Ohio, and ye of the wide prairie states . . . [a]nd you, mothers of America. (623)
In a late twentieth-century context, this sounds ridiculous: the appeal to "mothers of America" too closely resembles a wartime recruiting poster or television commercial. Stowe's narrator makes the appeal, however, without a trace of irony: the long list of addressees concludes with the main clause of the sentence: "I beseech you . . . I beseech you." The narrator pleads with the narratees—and, by implication, with those readers who can identify with them—to sympathize with the slaves. With the repeated plea, "I beseech you," the distancing references to "the writer" that introduced the "Concluding Remarks" and the masculine editorial "we" that recurs throughout the text have yielded to the personal, engaging, feminine "I," the sign of the woman who would intrude her presence into the text as part of its "living dramatic reality."

Stowe's rhetoric does not end in begging for pity or preaching compassion. The narrator uses interventions of the third type, addressed directly to "you" or "reader," to require the actual reader to recognize parallels between his or her own life and the lives of the fictional slaves. We have already seen examples of this strategy among the addresses to named narratees, for instance, the appeal to the "mother" to remember the pain of losing a child, or the request for "sir" to imagine being put up for sale. At important rhetorical peaks of the novel, the narrator ensures the widest possible response to her appeals by not limiting the regional identity or political biases of her narratees. One of the most famous passages in the novel, Eliza's escape (which I mentioned in Chapter 2) is rendered all the more memorable by a brilliantly wielded example of this strategy. Apparently Stowe was concerned with convincing her audience that the episode was not only plausible, but true, for in "Concluding Remarks" she asserts that "the incident of the mother's crossing the Ohio river on the ice is a well-known fact" (618). But during the scene itself, she exploits the power of engaging direct address to persuade the reader of the scene's authenticity:

If it were your Harry, mother, or your Willie, that were going to be torn from you by a brutal trader, tomorrow morning—if you had seen the man, and heard that the papers were signed and delivered, and you had only from twelve o'clock till morning to make good your escape, how fast could you walk? (105)

Would a reader need to be a mother, or need to have a son named Harry or Willie, to feel the personal appeal of that italicized you? (Probably not—
but still, imagine the impact of this passage on a reader like Elizabeth Gaskell, still mourning the death of her own infant Willie at the time she read *Uncle Tom.* The narrator requires the reader to exercise his or her imagination in such a way as to draw out the parental feelings that may be active or latent in his or her real life, and, having evoked those real feelings, implores the reader to direct them at the characters. The many passages in the novel addressed to “you,” “thou,” or “ye,” without limiting even the sex of the narratee as this example does, carry as far as possible this strategy of making an appeal to the reader’s presumed experience of emotions, in order to render more immediately present the feelings attributed to the characters in the fiction. There are more than twenty-two such passages, (for example, on pages 167, 426, and 383). For any reader willing to take on the imaginative assignments the narrator demands, these interventions should increase the verisimilitude—and therefore, the emotional impact—of the novel.

When it works, this strategy may, indeed, evoke tears: the actual reader who pauses seriously to consider what it would feel like to be in the characters’ situations might experience the tightness in the throat, the wetness in the eye, that we conventionally associate with a sentimental response. When the narrator makes you cry, she is taking a prerogative that belongs, in the extratextual nineteenth-century world, to the man in the pulpit. Just as the female author appropriates the male preacher’s strategy for enforcing a sense of presence upon an audience, the feminine, engaging narrator wavers between her own territory of discourse and that of the masculine, distanc­ing narrator. For all her earnest insistence that “you” must be persuaded to accept the characters’ pain as a present reality, the narrative discourse (as opposed to the overt claims the narrator sometimes makes to the contrary) neither suppresses nor denies that one cannot finally transmit a representation of reality through words. The narrator’s distancing moves point to an awareness that written language—even when it manipulates conversational modes of rhetoric to imitate the form of the “message of speech” (to return to Barthes’s formulation)—is always and only language. Furthermore, crying over a novel is not the same as taking action against slavery: once the reader’s sympathy is aroused, the reader is obliged to act upon the feeling by behaving sympathetically toward real-world slaves. The narrator’s engaging moves are her means of circumvent-
WOMEN'S NARRATORS WHO CROSS GENDER

ing potential roadblocks in her project, to arrive at the "truest of messages," the "message of the body."

SILLY READERS OF LADIES' NOVELS: ELIOT'S NARRATEES

No one disputes that George Eliot was preoccupied with realism when she began writing novels. Her anonymous essays in the Westminster Review, her early, pseudonymous correspondence with her publisher, John Blackwood, and her narrators' assertions in the interventions that continually interrupt her first two books repeatedly express her wish to avoid becoming one of those lady novelists who wrote silly novels. Wanting to be a novelist, she had no choice but to become a woman novelist; she could signal her unwillingness to be classified among the "lady novelists" by signing her fictions with a man's name and by employing masculine, distancing strategies in her narrative discourse. The silliness she was most concerned to avoid was the lady novelists' lapses of realism: Eliot says at every opportunity that she wants her novels to be true. Much like Stowe, she adapted earnest interventions as a means of encouraging a "real" sense of presence in her texts.

Nevertheless, assigning a gender to Eliot's narrators is no straightforward task. The masculine pseudonym coheres with the few hints in Scenes of Clerical Life that establish the narrator as a man acquainted with the neighbors whose tales he relates; in Adam Bede, however, the narrator betrays no solid clues as to gendered experience. I call the Adam Bede narrator "she" partly by default and partly because her engaging strategies dominate the text, marking its discourse as feminine. Still, masculine moves are also present in the novel—especially in chapter 17—bringing the narrator's gender-identity continually into question. The gender of her narratee provokes questions, as well. The "readers" with whom she argues about the appropriateness of the narrative techniques are often specified as women—"silly ladies," one might call them. And yet the attitudes she attributes to those narratees are identical to the objections that she tries to answer in her letters to her publisher. The letters to Blackwood presume that he wants to transform her into a "lady novelist," even though Blackwood ostensibly believed he was corresponding with a man; the narrative interventions in Scenes and Adam Bede put Blackwood's supposed objections into the mouths
Testing the Model

do not hallucinate.

of "lady readers," even though the novelist was drawing upon arguments she was having with a man. Perhaps because the laughing/weeping Lewes—her ideal reader—was entirely sympathetic with her novelistic aims, Eliot projected what she saw as the adversarial position of Blackwood onto the part of her imagined audience that Lewes could not occupy: the ladies.

Eliot implied that lady readers wanted to read "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists," and her Westminster Review article by that name specifies her reasons for objecting to that desire. Summing up the lack of "genuine observation" to be found in those novels, Eliot likens them to

the pictures clever children sometimes draw "out of their own head," where you will see a modern villa on the right, two knights in helmets fighting in the foreground, and a tiger grinning in a jungle on the left, the several objects being brought together because the artist thinks each pretty, and perhaps still more because he remembers seeing them in other pictures. (Essays 315)

She decries fiction that imitates other fiction, self-reflexive fiction of a different kind from the metafiction her male contemporaries played with. In hilarious detail, Eliot mocks the results of fiction writing that makes no reference to the extratextual world: ludicrous, improbable plots: awkward, inflated, often unintelligibly abstract language; preposterously overrated heroines, whose creators praise their brilliance while filling their mouths with nonsense; and fantasy visions of religious conversion, social climbing, or historical events. What appalls Eliot about these novels is that their authors know little or nothing about the worlds they are trying to depict. They imitate other art or fantasy, ignoring "reality."

In her attack on "Silly Novels," George Eliot defines the tone that she would presumably wish her own narrators to take, instead of the pedantic, affected, showy style of the "Lady Novelists." She compares narrative tone with social behavior, noting how unpleasant it would be to spend time with any lady who flaunted her learning in the pompous manner of the lady novelists' narrators. Eliot would prefer the company of "a really cultured woman," whose behavior she describes specifically: "In conversation she is the least formidable of women, because she understands you, without wanting to make you aware that you can't understand her. She does not give
you information, which is the raw material of culture,—she gives you sympathy, which is its subtlest essence" (Essays 317). Sympathy, the "subtlest essence" of culture, is what Eliot the reviewer claims to want to see in a woman novelist's narrator. It is also what her own engaging narrators try to elicit from her actual readers. Perhaps because of the imagined battle with Blackwood, the narrator of Scenes is not particularly engaging in his stance: he relies upon the distancing motif or positing flawed narratees. His narrative style is gendered masculine, then, as are his sparse autobiographical details.

If Lewes played the role of the ideally sympathetic reader in the novelist's imagination as she wrote, Blackwood also seems to have been present in her mind as the silly reader who cannot grasp the point. If we compare the letters Eliot wrote to Blackwood while she was composing the Scenes and Adam Bede with the interventions in both novels, we can see that she often directly answered Blackwood's objections (or rather, what she construed those objections to be) while writing her fiction. Her letters to Blackwood show that she was classifying his literary tastes as perfectly aligned with those of the silly readers, and her summaries of his position were not always fair. Still, in the narrative passages of Eliot's first two novels, as in her letters to Blackwood and in the "Silly Novels" essay, she argues consistently for the precedence of the "real" over the "ideal" in fiction.

As Gordon Haight has noted, "Neither George Eliot nor Blackwood was converted" by their correspondence (George Eliot 239). Perhaps because Blackwood remained unreconstructed, Eliot persisted in her interventions in Scenes of Clerical Life to ask the narratee to consider how much more George Eliot's characters resemble the people in one's own life than they do the figures in other novelists' fictions. Eliot has declared to Blackwood that she could not "step aside from what I feel to be true" in her fiction (Letters II, 299), and her narrator took up the challenge of making actual readers also feel the fiction to be true, in order to arouse their sympathy.

**SYMPATHY: "THE SENSE OF HIS PRESENCE"**

For George Eliot, sympathy, the "subtlest essence" of culture, was also the highest moral force operating in the world. In this she departs the company of Stowe and Gaskell, who also preach sympathy, but who see it as
Testing the Model

the necessary result of Christian faith. Having passed through a fervently evangelical period in her youth, Eliot rejected conventional Christianity in 1842 in a traumatic break with her faith and her father. Influenced by her own painstaking translations of Strauss and Feuerbach, as well as by the events of her life, she gradually replaced her faltering faith in divine love with a humanistic belief in the power of sympathy. George Eliot continued at first to couch her moral writings in terms of a "God," particularly in her anonymous essays for the Westminster Review. But these essays contain strong undertones of her developing humanism as well. A lengthy article written in 1855 attacks the teachings of the popular evangelist Dr. Cummings. The attack focuses on the harsh, destructive personality attributed to God in Cummings's writings and concludes with a summary of George Eliot's own version of God:

The idea of God is really moral in its influence—it really cherishes all that is best and loveliest in man—only when God is contemplated as sympathizing with the pure elements of human feeling, as possessing infinitely all those attributes which we recognize to be moral in humanity. In this light, the idea of God and the sense of His presence intensify all noble feeling, and encourage all noble effort, on the same principle that human sympathy is found a source of strength: the brave man feels braver when he knows that another stout heart is beating time with his; the devoted woman who is wearing out her years in patient effort to alleviate suffering or save vice from the last stages of degradation, finds aid in the pressure of a friendly hand which tells her there is one who understands her deeds, and in her place would do the like. The idea of a God who not only sympathizes with all we feel and endure for our fellow-men, but who will pour new life into our too languid love, and give firmness to our vacillating purpose, is an extension and multiplication of the effects produced by human sympathy. (Essays 187–188)

According to Eliot, the sympathetic person who senses the presence of an Other—divine or human—capable of sharing in his or her feeling will find supporting strength to intensify that feeling. In Adam Bede, Eliot dramatizes the effects of such a presence in two ways: Dinah's sermon evokes the presence of Jesus, bringing "the idea of a God" vividly to life for her
WOMEN'S NARRATORS WHO CROSS GENDER

auditors; the narrator asserts her own sympathetic presence and that of her actual readers, bringing the fiction "to life." Both the preacher and the narrator depend upon direct address to achieve their effects.

Dinah's sermon occurs early in the novel, functioning as a model for the way in which direct address can instill a sense of presence in an audience. Dinah begins in a low key, with a prayer for inspiration from God and an invocation of her text for the talk: "The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor" (68). Her explication of that text, lasting for six long paragraphs, emphasizes that "Jesus Christ spoke those words," and that the poor are of particular importance to Jesus and to the followers of Wesleyan Methodism. She details Jesus' kindness to the poor, his miracles, and his infinite sympathy, then turns the focus of her talk for a moment on her hearers: "Ah! Wouldn't you love such a man if you saw him—if he was here in this village?" (70). After this brief suggestion that Jesus could manifest a presence in Hayslope, she returns to her doctrine, explaining Christ's status as the son of God and his mission "not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."

At this point Dinah's sermon shifts in tone, focusing on her hearers, and convincing the traveling stranger (through whose perspective the scene is focalized) that Dinah has the Methodist's capacity to move an audience, even though her listeners don't fully understand her message. As if openly and spontaneously responding to Jesus' words, Dinah exclaims to her audience: "The lost! . . . Sinners! . . . Ah, dear friends, does that mean you and me?" (71). The observing stranger notes Dinah's shift in emphasis: "At last it seemed as if, in her yearning desire to reclaim the lost sheep, she could not be satisfied by addressing her hearers as a body. She appealed first to one and then to another, beseeching them with tears to turn to God while there was yet time" (72). The tearful gaze, beseeching tone, and individual appeals, "first to one and then to another," recall the narrator of Uncle Tom's Cabin, speaking passionately and personally to specific members of her audience.

Dinah's message, like Stowe's, relies heavily on repetitions of the word "you" to bring a sense of Christ's suffering and of the individual mortal's sins home to each listener. "'All this he bore for you!'" she exclaims of the Passion: "'For you—and you never think of him; for you—and you turn your backs on him; you don't care what he has gone through for you. Yet he is not weary of toiling for you: he has risen from the dead, he is praying for you at the right hand of God'" (74). The effect of her sermon, very much
like the discourses in the Edwardsian tradition, is to force Dinah's hearers to feel themselves to be the specific subjects of her list of sins. The heavy, hammering "you . . . you . . . you" of her talk drives a double impression into her listeners: that they are sinners, and that the Jesus of whom she speaks so passionately is real, possibly even physically present among them. As the traveler notices, the individuals in the crowd hardly comprehend Dinah's characterization of themselves as sinners. The narrator asserts that one man resolves to go less often to the tavern and to "[clean] himself more regularly of a Sunday"; another "couldn't help liking to look at [Dinah] and listen to her, though he dreaded every moment that she would fix her eyes on him, and address him in particular" (72—73). The sermon appeals not to their logical sense, but to their sensations.

The auditor who receives the biggest and perhaps the most confused impression from Dinah's sermon is "Chad's Bess," a notorious young woman who, before this day, had always been rather proud than otherwise of her small-scale vanity and frivolity. Like her fellow villagers, Bess only vaguely understands the charges leveled against her. Dinah's doctrine of sin and repentance makes no logical sense to Bess, but Dinah uses the rhetoric of sensation to break through Bess's denseness:

[Bess] had a terrified sense that God, whom she had always thought of as very far off, was very near to her, and that Jesus was close by looking at her, though she could not see him. For Dinah had that belief in visible manifestations of Jesus, which is common among the Methodists, and she communicated it irresistibly to her hearers; she made them feel that he was among them bodily. (73)

Dinah communicates "that belief in visible manifestations of Jesus" through a rhetoric of sensation that defies sense. She claims literally to see him—"See! . . . where our blessed Lord stands and weeps. . . . He is among us; he is there close to you now; I see his wounded body and his look of love" (74). Her own "sense" of Jesus' presence, transmitted directly through her assertions and indirectly through her address to individual listeners, makes her subject seem so real to them that they respond emotionally, even hysterically. At the climax of her sermon, Dinah turns to Bess, "whose bonny youth and evident vanity had touched her with pity":

120
"Poor child! Poor child! He is beseeching you, and you don't listen to him. You think of earrings and fine gowns and caps, and you never think of the Saviour who died to save your precious soul. Your cheeks will be shrivelled one day, your hair will be grey, your poor body will be thin and tottering! Then you will begin to feel that your soul is not saved; then you will have to stand before God dressed in your sins, in your evil tempers and vain thoughts. And Jesus, who stands ready to help you now, won't help you then: because you won't have him to be your Saviour, he will be your judge." (74–75)

Poor Bess dissolves into sobs, and thereafter, under Dinah's continued influence, her behavior improves: the narrator establishes that Bess tries to change, not because she has really absorbed the logic of Dinah's argument, but because she has begun—under that barrage of "you's" and "yours"—to think less well of herself than she had. Similar to Jonathan Edwards's jeremiads in its direct application to her audience, Dinah's sermon differs from his in her enormous capacity for sympathy, which contrasts with the historical preacher's accusatory, authoritarian air of self-righteousness that Stowe's narrator so closely imitates.

In her sympathetic mien, Dinah resembles the narrator of *Uncle Tom*. Dinah's specific appeals to particular listeners are more like Stowe's exclamations to "mothers" or "good brothers of the South," than they are like George Eliot's more broadly applicable remarks to "you." But Dinah, according to the narrator, structures her sermon unselfconsciously, never calculating the effect it will have on her audience, though she strives for and believes in that effect. Dinah's technique recalls Eliot's remark about Stowe's narrative personality in *Dred*: "She never makes you feel that she is coldly calculating an effect, but you see that she is all a-glow for the moment with the wild enthusiasm, the unreasoning faith" of her Christian characters (*Essays* 327). The emotive strategy of Dinah's sermon is precisely that of the exhortative passages in Stowe's slavery novels, and the traveler observing Dinah's style makes an inward comment that parallels Eliot's remark on Stowe: "She was not preaching as she heard others preach, but speaking directly from her own emotions, and under the inspiration of her own simple faith" (72). Eliot sets up this Stowe-like figure, opens the emotional life of the book by having her preach a sermon that employs the rhetoric of
sensation to make Jesus “real” for her audience, and then endorses both Dinah’s motivations and her earnest, engaging preaching style by allowing her to have a positive influence on every life that she touches within the book. Dinah’s role in the plot reinforces the suggestion of her power that the sermon establishes. Eliot’s narrator, furthermore, seeks to extend that power beyond the realm of the characters to that of the actual reader, relying heavily, as Dinah of course does, on direct, earnest gestures toward “you.”

*Adam Bede* opens with one of the most direct addresses to a reader imaginable:

> With 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. With this drop of ink at the end of my pen I will show you the roomy workshop of Mr. Jonathan Burge, carpenter and builder in the village of Hayslope, as it appeared on the eighteenth of June, in the year of our Lord 1799. (49)

This, the entire first paragraph of the novel, sets forth the date and location of the first scene as specifically as possible. But even before she mentions these details, the narrator establishes the relationship she is to hold with the reader: with the “drop of ink” at the end of her pen, she will create a world like the illusion that the sorcerer can create. The sorcerer’s “visions of the past” are not fabricated from nothing, but are visible in a drop of ink used “for a mirror”; that is, the sorcerer’s illusions are reflections of something that is real. Like the magician, this narrator intends to record in ink reflections of a real rural English world, sixty years in the past. The narrator does not call herself a sorcerer or a master of illusion, however; she only draws the parallel between the magician’s trick and her own act, writing. Thus introduced to the reader, the narrator often returns, both openly and subtly, to remind the reader that *Adam Bede* is something written, that it is a reflection, as in a mirror, of reality, and not a reality in itself. One could certainly argue that the narrator’s recurring presence interferes with the “illusion of reality” within this novel; indeed the opening paragraph is a clear statement from the narrator that she consciously wants the actual reader to keep the illusory aspect of her history in mind. This earnest address—combining the engaging insistence upon “your” presence with the distancing suggestion that the story, though realistic, is not real—
establishes the paradoxical blend of feminine and masculine strategies that run throughout the novel.

In terms of the technical moves of narrative discourse, Eliot's narrator seldom employs the distancing mode. The opening of chapter 17 is addressed to a disgruntled lady reader, that silly, female version of a Blackwood-like critic who would prefer a more idealized portrait of Irwine than the novel offers. The effect is distancing—as W. J. Harvey describes it, "The reader is repelled by having his reactions determined for him; he feels himself, and not the character, to be a puppet manipulated by the author" (Art of George Eliot 70). Only once among the other chapters does the narrator refer to the reader in the distancing third person. This occurs near the beginning of the book, in the chapter that follows Dinah's sermon. The narrator reflects that "Methodism" in Dinah's day denoted a faith and a way of life quite different from what Wesleyanism had become by 1859: "It is too possible that to some of my readers Methodism may mean nothing more than low-pitched gables up dingy streets, sleek grocers, sponging preachers, and hypocritical jargon—elements which are regarded as an exhaustive analysis of Methodism in many fashionable quarters" (82). This is distancing in that the actual reader is supposed not to want to identify with those in "fashionable quarters" who are charged with accepting such a reductive version of the history of Methodism, especially after having seen in Dinah's sermon how much more Methodist faith and practice might once have embraced.22 This reference to "my readers" is clearly not engaging, and for Adam Bede it is exceptional.

Each of the many other references to the reader in Adam Bede is a direct address, not to the "madam" or "Mrs. Farthingale" who sometimes crops up in Scenes of Clerical Life, but simply to "you." As Barbara Hardy has described it, the dominant narrative "tone is personal: it is the tone of voice in which the author tells a story about remembered people. It is also the tone in which she addresses a living reader" (Novels of George Eliot 158). The repeated direct addresses inscribe a narratee who attends avidly to the narrator's discourse, sympathizing with the characters and paying scrupulous attention to her assertions. Often the narrator compliments the narratee when repeating a bit of information or explaining an obscure motive, by deferring to the narratee's memory and perspicacity: "you must remember" (145), "you perceive . . . you remember" (170), "you understand" (172), "as you know" (356), "you know Hetty did not" (443), and
Testing the Model

again, "you perceive" (258) or "you perceive how it was" (573). As if in conversation, the narrator thus graciously concedes that she is perhaps repeating or even belaboring points, while nodding to her listener's capacity for recognizing this, and trusting in her listener's indulgence.

The narrator is more peremptory, though always gently so, when instructing the sympathizing narratee on how to receive what she is saying. Examples of these civil directives are "do not suppose" (118), or "do not reason about it, my philosophical reader" (294). These instructions presume that the actual reader might be inclined to suppose or to philosophize wrongly, were he or she without the benefit of the narrator's admonitions, but their tone implies the narrator's assumption that her "philosophical reader" will tractably follow her advice. Other passages of address reveal the response that the narrator expects, and sometimes wishes to counteract. "You will perhaps be surprised to hear" (173) and "possibly you think" (399) are instances of this effort to second-guess, and to redirect, the actual reader's developing impressions of the characters. The narrator can be very direct in this attempt, as when she launches a defense of Adam's ill-advised passion for Hetty: 'Before you despise Adam as deficient in penetration, pray ask yourself if you were ever predisposed to believe evil of any pretty woman—if you ever could, without hard head-breaking demonstration, believe evil of the one supremely pretty woman who has bewitched you. No" (198). This repetitive use of "you" in connection with Adam's most dangerous character flaw is the narrator's surest means of engaging the actual reader's empathy for "our friend Adam's" mistake. The narrator openly admits her intent to influence the narratee, shirking the use of "I" no more than that of "you." "I must remind you again" (209), she says, or "I assure you" (241), or "I beseech you to imagine" (242). The narrative "I" is present, personal, and insistent; she speaks directly to "you," bringing the actual reader's presence into the foreground as well.

Not every narrative intrusion in Adam Bede presupposes a specific response from the narratee. Some of the narrator's rhetorical questions seem genuinely to inquire into the actual reader's feelings or experiences, as if in conversation. "Have you ever seen a real English rustic perform a solo dance?" she asks, going on to suggest an answer: "Perhaps you have only seen a ballet rustic, smiling like a merry countryman in crockery, with graceful turns of the haunch and insinuating movements of the head. That is as much like the real thing as the 'Bird Waltz' is like the song of birds"
Here the narrator appeals to the actual reader's experience of country dancers, real or artificial, and willingly fills in for the reader's possible ignorance with her amusing parallels.

In other instances, where the experience she asks the narratee about is less idiosyncratic, the narrator relies on the actual reader's own emotional memories to fill in the sentiment, as in the first scene in which Adam tentatively courts Dinah:

That is a simple scene, reader. But it is almost certain that you, too, have been in love—perhaps, even, more than once, though you may not choose to say so to all your lady friends. If so, you will no more think the slight words, the timid looks, the tremulous touches, by which two human souls approach each other gradually . . . you will no more think these things trivial, than you will think the first-detected signs of coming spring trivial. . . . I am of opinion that love is a great and beautiful thing too; and if you agree with me, the smallest signs of it will . . . be like those little words, "light" and "music," stirring the long-winding fibres of your memory, and enriching your present with your most precious past. (537)

When she refers to "your present," the narrator evokes a consciousness of the moment at which the actual reader is reading that passage, absorbed in this budding love between Adam and Dinah. The "small signs" of their love should stir the actual reader's memory, bringing the "precious past" into a present response to Adam and Dinah. In the reader's experience, the past should momentarily enter the present: the personal memories should reinforce the reader's consciousness of his or her own genuine presence in the act of reading. If the narrator can evoke the actual reader's complete empathy for the characters, then she will have taken a step toward educating the actual reader's faculty for sympathy. And to the extent that she can accomplish this, she aligns the reader even more specifically with her flawed hero, Adam, whose sympathies are educated through his contact with suffering and with Dinah. Significantly, the narrator does not generalize about the appropriate attitude to take toward these characters: instead she directs her remarks to "you." The technique parallels Dinah's strategy in her sermon when she exhorts Bess to imagine her own future sufferings in order to bring Jesus to life for her and to impress upon her a sense of what he has suffered for her. The device inspires belief.
Testing the Model

This device of drawing on the actual reader's memory and imagination to fill in her descriptions and explanations hints at a lack of faith in any narrator's power to evoke a response without an actual reader's help. In this Eliot's narrator resembles the consistently self-deprecating narrator of *Mary Barton*, so dubious about her ability to transcribe imagined scenes, emotions, or even conversations "accurately." The narrator of *Adam Bede* expresses no misgivings about describing such fundamental elements of her story, but candidly admits other limitations to her narrative capacities. Her diffidence is never as extreme as the eighteenth-century conceit that a character such as Sophia Western or the Widow Wadman is simply too beautiful to be described in words and is expressed more sincerely than Fielding's or Sterne's. When in doubt, the narrator turns to "you" to explain:

It is of little use for me to tell you that Hetty's cheek was like a rose-petal, that dimples played about her pouting lips . . . —of little use, unless you have seen a woman who affected you as Hetty affected her beholders, for otherwise, though you might conjure up the image of a lovely woman, she would not in the least resemble that distracting kitten-like maiden. I might mention all the divine charms of a bright spring day, but if you had never in your life utterly forgotten yourself in straining your eyes after the mounting lark . . . where would be the use of my descriptive catalogue? I could never make you know what I meant by a bright spring day. (128)

This is no hyperbolic trope, intended to imply that Hetty's beauty is so exceptional that it defies langauge, like Sophia's. Instead, it is a glimpse at the narrator's assumptions about the sources of actual readers' responses to realistic fiction. A reader who had never lived anywhere but Siberia, for instance, would obviously have no memories to correspond with the narrator's English "bright spring day"; but, more significantly, a British born and bred person who had never fully responded to the power of such a spring day, who had "never utterly forgot [him]self" through the season's romantic influence, could have no clearer idea of the narrator's "bright spring day" than the Siberian could.

Similarly, a reader who has never been affected by a woman "as Hetty affected her beholders" can only guess at what the narrator is trying to evoke
in describing Hetty's attractiveness. This is particularly true in that the
figurative language surrounding Hetty throughout the text—images of
furry, heartless kittens, or rosy, juicy peaches with hard pits—is peculiarly
repellent, in spite of all the narrator's reports of the compelling effect Hetty
has upon those who see her. It may be difficult indeed to conceive of what
the narrator means by saying of Hetty's beauty that "it is a beauty like that
of kittens, or very small downy ducks making gentle rippling noises with
their soft bills, or babies just beginning to toddle and to engage in con­
scious mischief—a beauty with which you can never be angry, but that you
feel ready to crush for inability to comprehend the state of mind into which
it throws you" (127). It is all very well for the narrator to use "you" in this
passage, perhaps in the impersonal sense of "one," but can the device make
actual readers feel that they have ever been thrown into a state of mind in
which they would even momentarily want to crush a kitten, a duckling, or a
baby with whom they could "never be angry"? "Unless you have seen"
someone like Hetty, the narrator despairs of being able to make "you" see
Hetty herself. The narrator recognizes the ambivalence of her own attitude
toward Hetty, and in that ambivalence recognizes that the actual readers'
mental images of Hetty, not to mention their emotional response to her, are
outside the narrator's firm control.

This is inevitably true, of course, of the mental images and emotional
responses that fiction evokes. A narrator's words can only begin to shape
a reader's experience of a book: imagination and emotion make every actual
reader's Pride and Prejudice or Moby-Dick different from any other actual
reader's internalized versions of the novels. This poses a particular problem
for George Eliot's attempts at realism, a problem that the narrative tech­
ique both reflects and essays to remedy. Eliot's narrator, speaking from the
author's own experience, tries to create a world that is a mirror, like the
sorcerer's drop of ink, of a real, past world. She wants to distinguish it as
much as possible from the "silly novels" that reflect only fantasy or other
fiction, and she makes this desire explicit by mentioning the contrast
between her homely characters and their fictional prototypes. She enlists
the reader's sympathy for Dinah and Seth with elaborate mock solemnity:
"We can hardly think Dinah and Seth beneath our sympathy, accustomed as
we may be to weep over the loftier sorrows of heroines in satin boots and
crinoline, and of heroes riding fiery horses, themselves ridden by still more
fiery passions" (82). Similarly, she praises Hetty's beauty in the context of
Testing the Model

her oddly patched-together finery: "[Hetty's image in the mirror was] none the less lovely because Hetty's stays were not of white satin—such as I feel sure heroines must generally wear—but of a dark greenish cotton texture" (195). Such comments, particularly the reference to Hetty's lovely image in the mirror, should remind readers of the resemblance this mirror image of the Hayslope world is designed to bear to their own world.

The reflection is distorted; it differs from that which it represents, if only in that it surrounds the original with a frame. Still, the mirror, like the novel, reflects a representation of objects in the nonfictional world, and the narrator is particularly concerned that readers, unlike Hetty, should recognize the mundane reality of the originals. As a character, Hetty is not a representation of a real-world prototype, any more than she represents the idealized heroines in silly ladies' novels. The narratee, however, is meant to be a representation: in the mirror of "you" actual readers should see themselves, as in Hetty's mirror-image they should see resemblances to people they know. By mentioning the literary models she refuses to imitate, the narrator professes her unwillingness to idealize or to fantasize the way Hetty does, and requires actual readers to manifest their concurrence by becoming emotionally involved with these people whom they should see as so different from conventional literary figures, and so like themselves.

To be sure, the narrator's realism has limits, which she acknowledges even when it means she must depart from engaging strategies. One limit is the difficulty discussed above, namely, the problem of making actual readers visualize people or empathize with emotions for which they can find no parallels in their own experience. The narrator, sustaining her theme of the power of sympathy, would like to believe that a "realistic" emotional truth must be universal, until she tries to evoke an unconventional emotion—like the desire both to kiss and to crush Hetty—and must throw up her hands in defeat. Another acknowledged limit to her realism is the fact that though she claims that her characters are drawn from life, they nevertheless develop into extraordinary personalities. This comes to the surface of the narrative in one admonition to the narratee:

Adam, you perceive, was by no means a marvellous man, nor, properly speaking, a genius, yet I will not pretend that his was an ordinary character among workmen; and it would not be at all a safe conclusion that the next best man you may happen to see with a basket of tools over his shoulder and a paper cap on his
head has the strong conscience and the strong sense, the blended susceptibility and self-command of our friend Adam. He was not an average man. (258)

The narrator proceeds to explain that some men like Adam do exist, but they are rare. The passage suggests the narrator’s doubts that actual readers, unlikely as they are ever to have known or even heard of a man as admirable as Adam, may feel themselves to be in as remote a fantasy world as that of a silly novel while reading Adam Bede. For all her disclaimers of fantasy, the narrator is still creating a world where extremes do exist: Hetty’s exaggerated attractiveness and selfishness, Dinah’s limitless desire to give of herself, Adam’s heroic emotional strength and capacity to learn forgiveness. The novel does operate on a more ideal plane than that of day-to-day occurrences, and such an intervention is tantamount to the narrator’s admitting that fiction has to be more exceptional, less “average” than reality. The narrator’s most engaging stroke consists of her two strategies in dealing with actual readers’ potential doubt: first, by admitting openly that her characters and events might not always accord with the actual reader’s experience, and second, by always keeping in mind the individual reader’s capacity for disbelief. She keeps that awareness close to the surface of the narrative by addressing her arguments and advice personally to “you.”

WHILE “THE STORY PAUSES,” THE DISCOURSE CROSSES GENDER

For the narrator intent on reinforcing her reader’s belief in the “reality” of the world she mirrors, nothing could be more audacious than to insert into the novel an extended commentary like chapter 17, “In Which the Story Pauses a Little.” Opening the second book of the novel with an exclamation from “one of my lady readers” demanding that she make Mr. Irwine a more “edifying” example of a perfect minister, the narrator retorts, “Certainly I could, my fair critic, if I were . . . able to represent things as they never have been and never will be” (221). The chapter goes on to present the ostensible thesis of this novel: one can learn more of the deepest passions by close, sympathetic contact with real, lowly people than one can ever absorb from fantasy visions in life or in literature. The narrator claims “to give no more than a faithful account of men and things as they have mirrored themselves in my mind. The mirror is doubtless defective;
Testing the Model

the outlines will sometimes be disturbed” but she feels “bound to tell you, as precisely as I can, what that reflection is” (221).

The chapter-long essay has become famous as a manifesto for all the points of realism that Eliot had earlier set forth in the Westminster Review and in her letters to Blackwood. It fills all the purposes that an author's theoretical preface or afterword to a novel could fill, while going one step farther. Not only does it force the actual reader to stand back from the fiction and consider its relation to reality, it makes him or her do so at a moment when the fictional world has already begun to be mirrored in meticulous detail. The chapter strives for a wrenching effect, analogous to the distancing effect of any metafictional narrative intervention, but multiplied in its intensity as it is in its length. The essay resembles the prefatory chapters in Tom Jones, except for one essential difference. Fielding's little essays occur regularly, at predictable intervals, and begin each of many books in the novel; they are only one part of an elaborate structure that works consistently to distance the actual reader from the fictional world. Eliot's chapter 17, appearing so unprecedentedly and unexpectedly at the beginning of only one of the six books in the novel, provides a jolt for any actual reader who does not skip it, a jolt the novel does not repeat.

What, then, could be the purpose of this jolt? Why would Eliot’s narrator require her actual reader to abandon, if only momentarily, the illusion that the reasonably recognizable world she has begun to evoke is in some sense real? Why would she want the actual reader to remember that her characters' personalities are not fixed in reality, but are entirely the products of one person's authorial choices? Why, in other words, would she abandon the feminine novelistic project established by her engaging narrative techniques in the first sixteen chapters to signal a masculine, distancing acknowledgment that the fiction is really only fictional?

The answer, I think, is that this narrator—and by extension George Eliot—has tested the limits of the feminine, earnest stance and found them inadequate to her project. The pretense that the story is real can go only so far. After all, this narrator wants her actual readers to remember that they are merely reading, that the sympathy they are expending on Adam and Hetty, Dinah and Seth is only a model for what the actual reader could and should feel for real-world sufferers. Chapter 17, so personally and intently directed at “you” after its distancing first address, is explicit about
the purpose of writing fiction that is realistic, but nevertheless admittedly not real:

And I would not, even if I had the choice, be the clever novelist who could create a world so much better than this, in which we get up in the morning to do our daily work, that you would be likely to turn a harder, colder eye on the dusty streets and the common green fields—on the real breathing men and women, who can be chilled by your indifference or injured by your prejudice; who can be cheered and helped onward by your fellow-feeling, your forbearance, your outspoken, brave justice.

(222)

If empathy for her characters helps develop the actual reader's capacity for sympathy, so be it, but reading the novel should, according to the narrator, be only an exercise for strengthening that capacity in the reader's life. 

Whenever Eliot's narrator addresses a remark to "you," she is gradually building up her readers' awareness of their presence in the act of reading, of their actual relation to the characters, the narrator, and the author. With this chapter, she is expanding that awareness to force readers to recognize their necessary relation to characters that appear in their own real lives.

In this light, then, the Adam Bede narrator's shifting emphasis upon engaging and distancing techniques is not entirely paradoxical. The feminine insistence that the story is real works in tandem with the masculine acknowledgment that it is really a story. The combined narrative stances operate to redirect the actual reader's response to the fiction away from the text and into the extra-textual world. W. J. Harvey (who stops short of wholeheartedly endorsing intervention in Eliot's novels) has described this effect; "We do not leave the 'real' world behind when we are confronted with the world of [Eliot's] novels; in fact, George Eliot compels us to keep both worlds and their interrelationships firmly in our minds" (Art of George Eliot 79). The combination of engaging and distancing stances leads, however, to two slippery narrative moves that persistently point to paradoxes at the heart of any realist narrative text.

The first of these two moves is the narrator's insistence in chapter 17 that Adam Bede is a real person she knows. In the midst of defending the verisimilitude of her portrait of Pastor Irwine, the narrator quotes Adam's
opinions on the minister, dramatizing a scene in which Adam and the narrator hold a conversation many years after the novel's main action (225–228). The device is blatantly inconsistent with the chapter's rhetoric. If, on the one hand, the narrator is supposed to be an individual capable of conversing with Adam, then the narrator's assertions about characters' thoughts and emotions must be subjective, conjectural; they must be the projections of one person's imagination onto other persons whose real feelings she could not know. If, on the other hand, the narrator is not supposed to be a person in the story—if her status is heterodiegetic, not homodiegetic—then her discussion of the choices she has made in creating Pastor Irwine's character is consistent with her status, but her claim to have met Adam makes no sense at all.

Chapter 17 confuses the issue of the narrator's presence: she is present in a latter-day Hayslope, conversing with Adam, but she is also present in the extradiegetic situation in which she invents characters (such as Irwine) and tells "you" about them. The presence of the reader, too, becomes confused: the chapter presents the actual reader with both the distancing figure of a "lady reader" and the engaging "you" whom the narrator is so earnestly attempting to convert. The narrator's stance, then, oscillates between distance and engagement for the duration of the chapter.

The problem of the narrator's and the actual reader's position in chapter 17 finds a parallel in the second slippery move, another form of metalepsis. In two early passages of direct address the narrator places "you" upon the fictional scene. The conventional device of metalepsis is unusual for Eliot; its playful stance contrasts with the sober urgency of most of her interventions. In the tradition of Fielding's pretense that his narrator could "endanger the Reader's Neck" by picturing a reader-figure in a precarious position, the narrator positions "you" on the scene in two episodes, the introduction to Mr. Irwine's family and the first glimpse of the Poysers' home. In the latter passage, the narrator places "you" outside a window at the Hall Farm. "Put your face to one of the glass panes in the right-hand window," she urges, "What do you see?" (116). Under the influence of the repeated engaging interventions, the continual presence of "you" in this text, actual readers may find themselves simultaneously distanced and engaged by this maneuver. Sense tells them they are not at the Hall Farm: they are seated somewhere with a book in their hands, reading. And yet, the appeal to visual imagination, to the internal sensory experience of par-
Women's Narrators Who Cross Gender

Participating in the creation of a fictional world, directs the actual reader's attention to the physical, emotional reality of response. As the narrator puts it, "imagination is a licensed trespasser: it has no fear of dogs, but may climb over walls and peep in at windows with impunity" (115–116). The question to the narratee—"What do you see?"—brings the narrative focus back to sensation. It asks the actual reader to defy sense, to overlook the ontological paradoxes of a realist fiction, and to "feel" the story "to be true."

Adam Bede's narrative discourse, then, represents an intermittent tug-of-war between sense and sensation, between engaging insistence upon the story's reality and distancing acknowledgments of its fictionality, between urgent feminine earnestness and metaliterary masculine playfulness. Considering George Eliot's position in the canon and her personal attempts to mask her gender in her public writing, the struggle is not surprising. Long considered among the great Victorian novels, her oeuvre has always been rated as comparable to the works of her male contemporaries. Eliot's reputation for brilliant, sophisticated manipulation of narrative technique is doubtless partly attributable to her willingness to incorporate the masculine effects of distancing narration into her novels. The flicker of masculinity that surfaces at those distancing moments in Adam Bede is congruent with the male pseudonym, the anxious desire not to be recognized by her Victorian audience as the "fallen" Marian Evans, and the wish to be taken seriously as an antitype of the Lady Novelist.

The fluctuation of gender in the novel's interventions resembles the apparent shift in the gender of the writer's first-person pronouns at the end of her essay on "Silly Novels." In the final paragraph, the referent of "we" oscillates between the masculine reviewer's editorial "we" and the "we" that speaks for women novelists. The gender-versatility of George Eliot's written voice must be partly responsible for her high status in an androcentric canon. We would be underrating her centrality to women's novels and to the feminine Victorian tradition, however, if we were to overlook her novels' insistent reliance upon the engaging narrator.