On 15 September 1830, the world’s first passenger railway carried from Liverpool to Manchester its very first passengers—among them such dignitaries as the Duke of Wellington and Robert Peel. A correspondent for *The Times* called the inaugural procession “most delightful” and was especially impressed by the “crowds which have lined almost every inch of our road” and by the “flags and banners, and booths and scaffoldings, and gorgeous tents, which have enlivened even the dullest parts of our journey” (“Dreadful” 3). There was much to celebrate, and the correspondent continued to effuse for a few sentences before bowing to the demands of tragedy: “I am obliged . . . to defer the description as comparatively uninteresting owing to the fatal accident (as I apprehend) that has befallen Mr. Huskisson.” Along the way, William Huskisson, MP for Liverpool and longtime champion of the railway, was crushed to death by an engine called the Rocket. Strolling the tracks during what was supposed to be a brief stop, Huskisson found an oncoming train bearing down upon him. And owing to a combination of panic and hesitation, he failed to escape the train’s path: “The wheel went over his left thigh, squeezing it almost to a jelly, broke the leg, it is said, in two places, laid the muscles bare from the ankle, nearly to the hip, and tore out a large piece of flesh, as it left him” (“Dreadful” 3). Huskisson was rushed to Manchester in a private train—which, the *Times* reporter added,
had gone “33 1/2 miles in the hour.” Summing up the decidedly ambivalent experiences of the day, the correspondent struck a note of mechanical fatalism: “I need scarcely repeat what has been already said by others in this account, that the dreadful accident which most probably will deprive the country of so eminent a statesman, was owing to no fault of the machinery” (“Dreadful” 3). These things, as George Eliot might say, are a parable.

That Eliot did, in fact, regard the accident as a parable is evident from her introduction to *Felix Holt* (1866), where Mr. Sampson, the coachman, has a vision not just of Huskisson’s death but of the general ruin wrought by railways:

His view of life had originally been genial, and such as became a man who was well warmed within and without, and held a position of easy, undisputed authority; but the recent initiative of Railways had embittered him: he now, in a perpetual vision, saw the ruined country strewn with shattered limbs, and regarded Mr. Huskisson’s death as a proof of God’s anger against Stephenson [the engineer who designed the Rocket]. “Why, every inn on the road would be shut up!” and at that word the coachman looked before him with the blank gaze of one who had driven his coach to the outermost edge of the universe, and saw his leaders plunging into the abyss. (8)

At least part of Mr. Sampson’s bitterness comes from simple self-interest: the railway will likely bring an end to coach travel and thus deprive him of his livelihood. Yet, the lugubrious imagery and the pointed contrast between coach and railway suggest that the problem may be as much epochal as personal. Eliot’s final image is the crucial one here, with Sampson poised at the edge of an abyss watching his leaders plunge forward, for it captures a dramatic change in the contours of human agency. Sampson drives his coach to the edge but cannot stop his leaders: they are propelled forward by a force as implacable as that of the railway engine. Lost in the transition from coach to railway is the sense of “easy, undisputed authority,” the sense of control and leisure, the sense that we can steer in whichever direction we choose and stop where we will. With Huskisson’s death, steering itself has become a thing of the past. Now there is only one direction—the way of the railroad tracks—and it plunges us toward an abyss.

For Eliot, Huskisson’s death was a parable of modernity—the moment when history stops working like a coach and starts running like a railway. It reflects a newfound inability to participate in the making of history or to shape the course of progress. Instead, control is ceded to a force as inhuman as it is ineluctable, one we cannot direct even if it threatens to run us over or hurl us into an abyss. That Eliot located this
change at the time of Huskisson’s death is one reason the years 1829–
33 had a particular prominence in her work: two of her three Scenes of
Clerical Life (1857) are set then, as are three of her four provincial
novels: Mill on the Floss (1860), Felix Holt (1866), and Middlemarch
(1871–72). The other reason, however, that those years seemed partic-
ularly pregnant concerns the First Reform Bill, which was passed in
1832. For Eliot, those two events were deeply connected; they were in
fact mirror images of each other. Where Huskisson’s death captures
our alienation from history-making, the frenzy for reform captures its
double: the turn to the political (narrowly understood) as a way to
reclaim our ability to shape the future. In Eliot’s work, the 1830s repre-
sent that moment when history escaped human control and politics
emerged as the engine of restitution.

Felix Holt dramatizes the absurdity of this conjunction, the
futility of trying to overcome alienation by way of political reform. Not
that Eliot thought reform unnecessary or undesirable. Far from it. She
thought reform—all political reform—inadequate. Politics, Eliot felt,
could never do what we need it to do; it alone could never redress
modernity’s alienation from history. That is simply beyond its power. If
there is a solution—and ultimately Eliot wasn’t sure—then it must be
not only political but also social, economic, moral, and spiritual. What
is needed, in other words, is a new brand of radicalism, one that
eschews mere political reform in favor of something broader. The
central concern of Felix Holt, however, is to demonstrate that any reform
broad enough to be effective is also potent enough to be catastrophic.
Every effort, no matter how carefully planned or well intentioned, is as
likely to inflame as to resolve. What remains in Felix Holt, as for Eliot
more generally, is a radicalism in which the stakes are so high and the
risks so acute that it can only act like conservatism.

The Second Reform Bill

Set in the early 1830s, “when faith in the efficacy of political
change was at fever-heat in ardent Reformers” (Felix Holt 179), Felix Holt
was published in 1866, a new time of political fever. The Second
Reform Bill was then working its way through Parliament. Looking
back, both bills seem like relatively small steps on the long road to
universal suffrage in Britain. Yet at the time, the stakes of reform
seemed monumental, as if the introduction of one measure more or
less could revitalize England, or destroy it. The First Reform Bill—about which one MP, John Wilson Croker, exclaimed, “No King, no Lords, no inequalities in the social system; all will be levelled to the plane of the petty shopkeepers and small farmers” (113)—only raised the number of electors from 439,000 to 656,000, or roughly five percent of the population (O’Gorman 179), though, as Harold Perkin has argued, contemporaries felt that this exhausted the ranks of the respectable middle and upper classes (313). The Second Reform Bill encouraged the same kind of hyperbole. Even Lord Derby, the leader of the Tory party promoting the bill, declared, “No doubt, we are making a great experiment and taking a leap in the dark” (qtd. in Briggs 513).

Much of the debate over the Second Reform Bill centered around the figure of the respectable working man. How could the franchise be made broad enough to include the working classes without admitting the poor and the dependent? As Theodore Hoppen has explained, the various reforms proposed first by Gladstone and later by Disraeli were carefully calibrated to incorporate a small group of working-class artisans without upsetting the existing balance of power (247–51). Even strongly reformist groups like the Reform League—composed primarily of skilled workers—did not agitate for universal or manhood suffrage. Instead, they supported a qualified form of household suffrage so as to exclude paupers and others without a stake in society (Hall, McClelland, and Rendall 95–102). To a large extent, in fact, the idea that the franchise should include only those with such a stake was shared by radicals and conservatives alike. By general consensus, the vote belonged not to the British people as a whole but to those sections of the (male) population invested in the success of the nation. If certain members of the working classes deserved the vote, it was not because they had a natural right to self-government.¹ Rather, it was because they were, as one of the Reform League’s leaders, Edmond Beales, argued, “co-operators in the production of the national wealth—the very strength and muscle and sinew of the nation” (140). These, then, were the terms in which the details of reform were fought out. Were the working classes trustworthy? Did they have a stake in prosperity? Was it possible to admit them and still keep out the disreputable poor?

In addition to these, however, there was another, quite different set of questions that threaded its way through the debate: What was the value of reform? Why was it wanted or needed? What did
radicals hope to gain from increased suffrage? And what did conservatives fear to lose? It was these questions about political hopes and political anxieties that most interested Eliot and that most directly shaped *Felix Holt*. To appreciate their power over the novel requires grappling with a term that falls strangely outside the scope of Victorian reform debates, namely democracy.

Determining exactly how the word democracy was used in the 1860s is itself not a simple task. It was not, to begin with, synonymous with reform. In fact, associating reform with democracy was one of the ways that anti-reformers tried to bury the bill. Robert Lowe, the strongest voice of opposition in Parliament, referred to reform as “a principle the most dangerous, the most sweeping, the most democratic, that has ever been set forth by any Minister in this House” (129). Such was the company kept by the word democracy. Faced with this rhetoric, however, the bill’s supporters did not try to defend the idea of democracy. They accepted Lowe’s disdain for all things democratic and claimed that reform was the surest way to prevent them. Disraeli, who eventually pushed the Second Reform Bill through Parliament, called it a “bulwark against democracy” (qtd. in Smith 320) rather than a step in that direction. Even where it was supported, reform was understood as a check on democracy, not an embrace.

Just how far the terms reform and democracy could diverge is clear from Bernard Cracroft’s contribution to the influential *Essays on Reform* (1867). “In this country,” Cracroft wrote, “if you had manhood suffrage, with womanhood suffrage thrown into the bargain, you would not and could not have a democracy” (181). For Cracroft, at least, it was possible to imagine a government based on universal suffrage that was nonetheless not democratic. Democracy, then, meant something more than popular governance. As Cracroft’s fellow contributor, G. C. Brodrick, put it, democracy is “an ambiguous term, which sometimes denotes a certain form of Government, and sometimes a certain state of society” (21). Actually, Brodrick’s “sometimes . . . sometimes . . .” formulation is a bit imprecise. Most often, democracy denoted both things: a form of government and a state of society. Democracy was less like a political system and more like a political trajectory—a progression first captured by de Tocqueville—along which the equal distribution of political power made way for a more equal distribution of social and economic capital.

In mid-Victorian England, in other words, the notion of
democracy still seemed revolutionary. It carried connotations not just of legal and political equality, but also of a social equality that bordered on economic equality. Lowe referred to it as “a form of government in which the poor, being many, governed the whole country, including the rich, who were few, and for the benefit of the poor” (151). These are economic terms strangely fitted to the ideals of democracy, but in the 1860s, the fit seemed snug. What Lowe called the “strictest democratic principles” sound today like a neo-liberal caricature of socialism: “to make war against all superiority, to keep down skill, industry, and capacity, and make them the slaves of clumsiness, idleness, and ignorance” (144). To invoke democracy, then, was often to conjure a political order that threatened to overrun not just English politics but English society more broadly.

The demos, of course, saw things differently. Not that they denied the link between political enfranchisement and social and economic equality—that much they embraced with great fervor. They just greeted that transformation with eagerness rather than anxiety. Beales phrased it this way:

[Our goal is] that of promoting as much as possible the political power, and by that power, the physical welfare of the people. Reform of representation is only the means to our end, the end being the material welfare of the great masses of the community. (qtd. in Briggs 522)

For radicals as much as liberals and conservatives, electoral reform was the linchpin for the transformation of society at large. For these radicals, the term democracy referred not to the first stage of reform but to this process as a whole. Political gains, as Beales put it, were just a stepping stone to economic gains, the surest way to ensure “material welfare” for the lower classes. For nineteenth-century working-class radicals, political change was thought to be the vehicle for social change, and electoral reform the gateway to prosperity.

In this sense, British radicalism owed more to Thomas Paine than to Karl Marx or even Robert Owen. Rights of Man (1791) galvanized a generation of radicals in the late eighteenth century, and nineteenth-century radicalism preserved much of that republican fervor. As Gareth Stedman Jones has argued, what Painite radicals called “the people,” nineteenth-century radicals called “the working class,” but the newfound rhetoric of class did not distract them from their decidedly political aspirations (173). Recall the six fundamental
reforms proposed by the Chartists: universal suffrage, equal representation, annual parliaments, no property qualification, vote by ballot, and payment of members. Conspicuously absent from this list is everything we might expect from a working-class movement: the right to organize and strike, a fair day’s wage, equal access to education, and full employment—to say nothing of the abolition of capitalism and private property in favor of cooperative activity and communal ownership.

The point, here, is not to deny the radicalism of Chartism, but to show how fully its radical energies were channeled through politics. Joseph Raynor Stephens called Chartism “a knife and fork question” (Perkin 219), and really knives and forks were just the beginning of what he and his compatriots had in mind. Ultimately, they sought nothing less than the complete transformation of English society. But the surest way to achieve that transformation, they thought, was through Parliament, and the surest way to Parliament was through electoral reform. William Lovett, writing from a cell in Warwick Gaol, put it this way:

> The most important questions that, we conceive, have engaged our attention during the last twelve months are these:—How can we best create and extend an enlightened public opinion in favor of the People’s Charter, such as shall peaceably cause its enactment; and how shall that opinion be morally and politically trained and concentrated, so as to realize ALL THE SOCIAL HAPPINESS that can be made to result from the powers and energies of representative democracy? (20–21)

More characteristic than exceptional is his faith in the capacity of “representative democracy” to produce “SOCIAL HAPPINESS” encompassing everything from economic equality to moral rectitude. In the very same pamphlet, Lovett wrote: “Are we not justified in directing the public mind to the attainment of political reformation, as the most certain and direct means of all moral as of all social reformation?” (5).

By the time of the Second Reform Bill, Chartism had run its course and the revolutionary energies it once mobilized had splintered into a host of competing activities. The intervening years saw changes in both the emphasis and organization of working class radicalism, the arc of which is generally described as a move toward greater negotiation and compromise. And yet, what lived on as part of the legacy of Chartism was the continued emphasis on politics as the engine of social and economic change. When the former Chartist and longtime radical Ernest Jones gave his lecture, “Democracy Vindicated” to the Edinburgh Working Men’s Club in 1867, he continued to emphasize the
social effects of democracy. “Wherever democracy has reigned,” he argued, “there has society reached its highest development, moral, social, and intellectual” (313). Well into the 1860s, in other words, radicals continued to view political change as the catalyst for socio-economic change. Nor were they alone in this. Liberals and conservatives made the same conjunction. As the Second Reform Bill wound its slow way through Parliament, it was supported by those, like Beales and Jones, who thought enfranchisement the surest way to transform England, and it was obsessively scrutinized by those, like Lowe and Disraeli, who feared that reform might unleash the dangers of democracy. What both groups shared, though, was the fundamental belief that electoral reform carried with it the prospect of social revolution. But what looked like social development to many radicals looked more like social cataclysm to most liberals and conservatives.

**Felix Holt**

Midway through *Felix Holt*, in the calm after the frenzy of nomination day, Felix comes across a knot of working men who are listening to the appeals of a Chartist-style political radical: “If we working men are ever to get a man’s share, we must have universal suffrage, and annual Parliaments, and the vote by ballot, and electoral districts.” At which point, Felix shouts back “No!—something else before all that” (291–92). And, taking the speaker’s place on the soapbox, he elaborates:

That was a true word spoken by our friend when he said the great question was how to give every man a man’s share in life. But I think he expects voting to do more towards it than I do. I want the working men to have power. . . . But I should like to convince you that votes would never give you political power worth having while things are as they are now, and that if you go the right way to work you may get power sooner without votes. (292)

As far as Felix is concerned, enfranchisement is not just irrelevant to the problem of giving “every man a man’s share in life”: it is a dangerous distraction. It may provide some new political power, but it is not, in Felix’s phrase, “political power worth having.” Far better for the working men to find on their own “the right way to work.”

*Felix Holt* is not really a political novel. It is instead an anti-political novel, a novel about the limit of politics. What is at stake is not the outcome of reform, but its premise, for the novel challenges that
most fundamental of reformist assumptions: that legislative change necessarily produces social and economic change, that democracy also means economic equality. Extraneous to the novel is the question of whether those changes will be positive or negative, whether they will produce anarchy and communism (as Lowe and his supporters feared) or moral rectitude and social happiness (as Beales and Earnest Jones hoped). *Felix Holt* rejects the underlying belief that politics is the real engine of change, that it can address the deepest social problems: ignorance, mystification, and, above all, alienation from history.

The problem that most concerned Eliot—and the one she thought especially resistant to political reform—is the one embodied by Huskisson’s death and glimpsed by Mr. Sampson, the coachman: the loss of control over history, the replacement of the coach we can drive by the railway that drives us. To Eliot’s mind, any radicalism worth its name must be able to redress this loss; and political radicalism, she felt, could not. Her understanding of the real stakes of radicalism appears in visions like Mr. Sampson’s and in parables like the one she offers at the end of her introduction to *Felix Holt*:

> The poets have told us of a dolorous enchanted forest in the under world. The thorn-bushes there, and the thick-barked stems, have human histories hidden in them; the power of unuttered cries dwells in the passionless-seeming branches, and the red warm blood is darkly feeding the quivering nerves of a sleepless memory that watches through all dreams. These things are a parable. (10–11)

They are, in fact, a parable of two things (which, as we will see, belong together). On the one hand, they are a parable of Transome Court, with its secret history of sin and suffering. More generally, though, they are a parable of history itself. These trees harbor people, complete with blood, nerves, cries, and dreams—all that we call life. And yet these people are hidden from view, their cries unuttered and their passions concealed. The force of Eliot’s parable depends not only on this sense of muteness but also on the deep-rooted passivity that accompanies it. The most these people can do is watch as their lives, like waking dreams, roll by. And the question, here as throughout *Felix Holt*, is whether they can ever awake. Can they once again take control of their lives, or are they doomed to suffer silently? Can these “human histories” become human history? For Eliot, finding a way to answer “yes” is the true challenge of radicalism.

The trouble with Felix Holt, the radical, is that he does answer “yes” to this question—but does little to aid the radical cause. In his
nomination-day speech, as elsewhere, he rejects the idea that politics alone can give the working class “power worth having”: “extension of suffrage,” as he puts it, “can never mean anything for them but extension of boozing” (130). Yet, staunch as his opposition to political change may be, he never develops a viable alternative. It is not, after all, as if Felix eschews politics while championing benefit clubs and workers’ cooperatives. Apart from feeble efforts to organize a meeting of Sproxton men, Felix earns his radical bona fides by claiming that “I mean to work all my life long against privilege, monopoly, and oppression” (182), all the while sitting at home with his mother, fixing watches, or playing Beatrice and Benedict with the minister’s daughter. Everything is left, as he repeatedly says, to “public opinion,” but little is said about how that opinion can be altered. In the end, Felix is not the kind of radical who believes in praxis. He is the kind of radical who believes in rhetoric. Or, rather, he is the kind of radical who thinks pugnacious rhetoric amounts to radicalism. He wants, as he says, to become “a demagogue of a new sort; an honest one, if possible, who will tell the people they are blind and foolish” (262).

This is one of the reasons that he is so often accused of being more conservative than radical. And there are, in fact, several points in the novel where Eliot herself gives voice to this critique. For example, Felix’s only public address—the declamation of voting rights that I quoted above—elicits the “hear, hear” not of radicals or liberals but “Tories from the Crown” (292). There is also the censure issued by Eliot’s fictional radical-liberal paper:

The Duffield Watchman hath written continually in allusion to him [Felix] as one of those mischievous men who seek to elevate themselves through the dishonour of their party; and as one of those who go not heart and soul with the needs of the people, but seek only to get a hearing for themselves by raising their voices in crotchety discord. (427-28)

Felix may, indeed, be “one of those mischievous men” who substitutes incendiary rhetoric for meaningful participation and confuses condescension with fellow-feeling.

Not all of Eliot’s contemporaries saw it that way, however. Many reviewers were inclined to agree with Felix’s own assessment that he was, as he says, “A Radical—yes; but I want to go to some roots a good deal lower down than the franchise” (264). Felix sees himself, in other words, not as something less but as something more than a political radical. And
the Athenaeum, for one, agreed, noting that “the contrast between the man who is a mere political Radical and the true friend and lover of working men, whose radicalism goes down to the roots of his life, is beautifully wrought out” (828). With its own string of effusive adjectives, the Guardian echoed that tribute to Felix’s “thoroughgoing elementary deep-reaching Radicalism” (856). Real radicalism, these reviewers suggest, does not limit itself to legislative affairs. It is not about policies or positions but about character, commitment, and sympathy.

These reviewers help clarify why it is that Felix Holt the radical so often acts like Felix Holt the conservative. His radicalism and his conservatism belong to different spheres entirely. He is radical if what matters are intentions or ideals, but he is conservative if what matters are practices or actions. What he wants to do is help the working classes, but what he does, primarily, is talk about helping the working classes. Now, “help the working classes” is a rather vague description, but it is difficult to specify Felix’s intentions in any detail. He wants, we know, to be “a demagogue of a new sort,” to go “a good deal lower down than the franchise,” and to struggle “against privilege, monopoly, and oppression.” Elsewhere, he says quite grandly that he wants “the working men to have power” (292). Yet his actions almost never share this scope or ambition. When they are not merely rhetorical, they are still remarkably modest—often they are directed at no larger a public than the drinking establishment run by Mr. Chubb.

This disjunction between grand intention and modest action is hardly lost on Felix; he simply does not think there is a way to reconcile the two. For example, he says to Esther:

As long as a man sees and believes in some great good, he’ll prefer working towards that in the way he’s best fit for, come what may. I put effects at their minimum, but I’d rather have the minimum of effect, if it’s of the sort I care for, than the maximum of effect I don’t care for. (435)

The phrase “some great good” has all of the vague ambition of Felix’s intentions. But the effects, again, are put “at their minimum.” The strange thing about Felix’s claim here is the missing term. There are only two outcomes that Felix can imagine: “the minimum of effect . . . of the sort I care for” and “the maximum of effect I don’t care for.” The possibility of producing the maximum effect of the sort he cares for does not even enter Felix’s mind. For Felix, as for Eliot, there is no direct way to transform intention into action. And if we want to avoid
unforeseen consequences (“the maximum of effect I don’t care for”) then even our most radical intentions must be acted out modestly and conservatively.

One of the narrative consequences of this divorce between intention and action is the massive amount of wasted energy in *Felix Holt*. Consistent with his penchant for modest action, Felix tries “not to waste energy, to apply force where it would tell, to do small work close at hand, not waiting for speculative chances of heroism, but preparing for them” (287). He tries, in other words, to do only what he knows he can accomplish, while simultaneously preparing for a time when greater accomplishments may be possible. The problem is that this provision against wasting energy amounts to little more than a recipe for wasting energy by continually preparing for worthier pursuits that may or may not materialize. In this, however, he is not alone: consider the fruitless anguish of Mrs. Transome and the strange quietness of Annette, Esther’s mother. Above all, though, consider the abortive debate between Lyon and Sherlock—so long prepared for and so quickly dismissed. Not just Felix but many of the characters suffer from an excess of intention, filled with ideas so vital that no outlet appears commensurate.

The one great exception is Felix’s fateful foray into the mob. This one time, Felix attempts what he elsewhere deems impossible, namely radical action—the conversion of grand intention into great effect. Faced with a budding riot, Felix decides that “some vain effort would satisfy him better than mere gazing” (314). Until now, he has taken every possible precaution against such “vain efforts,” but here the potential rewards are too high to ignore. He might, as he says, “save some one” (314). Then again, he might not; he might murder someone. But, as Eliot remarks:

> It was not a moment in which a spirit like his could calculate the effect of misunderstanding as to himself. Nature never makes men who are at once energetically sympathetic and minutely calculating. He believed he had the power, and he was resolved to try, to carry the dangerous mass out of mischief. (316)

“Energetically sympathetic” is the key phrase here, suggesting the end of waste and a new partnership between intention and action. The riot seems to Felix a singular opportunity to test the possibility of radicalism, to see if he can steer events in the direction he chooses by uniting his sympathy with a newly potent energy.
The early signs are auspicious: Felix saves Spratt from near-certain death and guides the mob towards a byroad that leads out of town (news of Tucker’s murder surfaces only later). The nature of Felix’s authority is carefully qualified by Eliot, however. He is, she suggests, ultimately dependent on the whims of a mob.

A man with a definite will and an energetic personality acts as a sort of flag to draw and bind together the foolish units of a mob. It was on this sort of influence over men whose mental state was a mere medley of appetites and confused impressions, that Felix had dared to count. (317)

So long as Felix can bind together this mob, he can continue to lead—but mobs are not particularly discriminating about their leaders. To whom they attach their “medley of appetites” matters less than that they are attached. And quickly, Felix discovers he is not the only man with a “definite will and an energetic personality.” On the way out of town, a new cry goes up: “Let us go to Treby Manor,” and, as Eliot says, “from that moment Felix was powerless” (319). Powerless to stop the looting of Treby Manor, powerless to escape the mob he tried to lead, powerless to acquit himself of suspicion. There is a sense, though, that he was always powerless, even when most influential, or at least that the power he assumed was always tainted with delusion. He did, after all, commit a murder, which hardly testifies to the power of his intention. What it suggests, rather, is a power more raw and less manipulable, a power that Felix suffers rather than wields.

“He looked,” Eliot says elsewhere, “to undiscerning eyes, like a leading spirit of the mob” (315). Why he should look different to discerning eyes, I cannot say. He was a leading spirit of the mob. But what Felix discovers—though only belatedly—is that being the leading spirit of the mob means being led as well. He cannot direct the mob without also being directed: in trying to avert a calamitous riot, Felix commits a murder and unwittingly leads the rioters toward the house of the best-established family in town. For these things, he is not without responsibility—despite the purity of his intentions. Dimly, as the mob escapes him, he begins to sense this strange moral fact: “Felix Holt’s conscience was alive to the accusation that any danger they [the Debarrys] might be in now was brought on by a deed of his” (319). Note Eliot’s wording: not an intention of his or an impulse of his but a deed of his. Between intention and deed lies the mob, with its “medley of appetites and confused impressions.” No effort to translate intention into action can escape this distortion.
The importance of this gap between intention and action is not unique to *Felix Holt*; it was a career-long interest of Eliot’s. Its characteristic form, as Neil Hertz has shown, is the one we first meet in *Scenes of Clerical Life*, when Tina’s desire to murder Wybrow culminates, through no fault of her own, in Wybrow’s death. Similar circumstances resurface with Bulstrode and Featherstone, Lydgate and Laure, and Gwendolyn and Grandcourt. In each case, the desire to see someone die fulfills itself, not in murder, but in a death that cannot easily be distinguished from murder. And to the extent that Felix, too, struggles with the guilt of a death for which he is ambiguously responsible, he certainly belongs in this group. There are, however, some important differences in Felix’s case. In the first place, the relation between intention and action is turned on its head. Where Tina, Bulstrode, Lydgate, and Gwendolyn find their intentions realized despite their inaction, Felix finds his intention unfulfilled precisely because he tries to act on it. His real intention is not murderous, as he has no desire to see Tucker or Trounsem die. But in trying to turn radical intention into radical action, he opens a fatal floodgate. The more important difference, however, is the move from the personal to the historical. Felix’s murders are not only accidental, they are also incidental—we learn of Tucker in a parenthesis and of Trounsem in a touching afterthought (321). The real force of the sequence lies elsewhere, not with the moral reverberations of murder but with the political reverberations of radicalism.

Felix’s failure exposes the most profound questions raised in the book: can a group of individuals ever add up to anything other than a mob? Can human beings steer history, or will every attempt fall prey to the fatal distortions that Felix experiences? In *Felix Holt*, there is no way around the mob. Felix’s one great attempt at radical praxis, his one effort to direct human events, leaves him imprisoned for murder—victim to those same forces he tried to lead. Precisely as he feared, then, the effort to turn good intention into grand action has produced “the maximum of effect I don’t care for.” Even the purest of intentions, when acted upon, produce only the most perverse kinds of fulfillment. The mob is merely a figure for this problem, one of the names Eliot gives to the forces that render any guiding hand volatile at best and self-defeating at worst. Railroads are another figure, as we know from Huskisson. Felix’s effort to direct the mob is as futile as any effort to steer a railway carriage off its tracks. In both, human history progresses across a landscape divorced from human agency.
The same rules apply in the more rarefied world of Transome Court, even if the problems are patrilineal rather than social. Consider that most haunting of characters, Mrs. Transome, who had tried to redeem her life through an act of transgression. “She had thought,” Eliot writes, “that the possession of this child would give unity to her life, and make some gladness through the changing years that would grow as fruit out of these early maternal caresses” (23). “But,” the narrator adds, “nothing had come just as she had wished” (23). Nor does it ever. *Felix Holt* opens with the return of this child, Harold, bringing only disappointment to Mr. Transome and frustrating her every hope for his and her future life:

It had come to pass now—this meeting with the son who had been the object of so much longing; whom she had longed for before he was born, for whom she had sinned, from whom she had wrenched herself with pain at their parting, and whose coming again had been the one great hope of her years. The moment was gone by; there had been no ecstasy, no gladness even; hardly half an hour had passed, and few words had been spoken, yet with that quickness in weaving new futures which belongs to women whose actions have kept them in habitual fear of consequences, Mrs. T. thought she saw with all the clearness of demonstration that her son’s return had not been a good for her in the sense of making her any happier. (22)  

Harold’s return had been “the one great hope” of Mrs. Transome’s long years of waiting, and yet his return brings her no happiness. In bearing this child, she had intended to “give unity to her life,” but all she gained from it was a new estrangement. This is Mrs. Transome’s tragedy: not to have longed for something better but to have exerted herself for something better only to be denied the happiness it seemed to promise. That “her son’s return had not been a good for her” is sad but not tragic; the real tragedy lies in the fact that her effort to seize control over her life only increased her privation.

This tendency for redemption to slip beyond the power of agency is what links *Felix Holt’s* two parts. For if it is an anti-political novel, it is also an anti-romance, and though they often feel like alternatives—as they do for Esther—the two anti-genres belong together; agency proves as impossible to achieve in the family romance as it does in the pursuit of radicalism. There are no mobs in the romance plot, but Mrs. Transome shares Felix’s fate just the same. Once acted upon, her intention is subject to a range of forces diffuse enough to exceed her influence and powerful enough to allow only the most perverse forms of fulfillment. She leads what can only be
described as an afterlife, the ghostly haunting of a world whose orchestration she arranged but whose performance she cannot control. Mrs. Transome doesn’t suffer for her youthful indiscretion, any more than Felix suffers for his bravado. They suffer—Mrs. Transome much more than Felix—simply for trying to intervene in history, for grasping at the reins of public life and for thinking that intention could be turned into effect. We used to have a word for that: hubris. And no doubt there is something to be said for the influence of classical tragedy on *Felix Holt* (Thomson, “Classic”). In the end, however, Eliot is interested in something other than hubris, something for which we do not have a good word. What we have instead is a political philosophy characterized by the belief that every act is hubristic, and that philosophy is conservatism.

Eliot’s Politics

Fancy what a game at chess would be if all the chessmen had passions and intellects, more or less small and cunning; if you were not only uncertain about your adversary’s men, but a little uncertain also about your own; if your knight could shuffle himself on to a new square by the sly; if your bishop, in disgust at your castling, could wheedle your pawns out of their places; and if your pawns, hating you because they are pawns, could make away from their appointed posts that you might get checkmate on a sudden. You might be the longest-headed of deductive reasoners, and yet you might be beaten by your own pawns. (*Felix Holt* 278)

Undoubtedly, this game of chess would be difficult to win. But even more difficult would be deciding whether to play in the first place. However slim your chances if you do play, at least there would be the remote possibility that you could overcome the obstinacy of your pieces and win the game, which would likely be impossible if you don’t play at all. But—and here is the rub—there is also a chance that your sentient pieces, left to their own devices, could themselves coordinate a successful strategy. In that case, not playing would be a way of playing, or at least a way of allowing the game to develop. You could win simply by letting the game unfold according to its own immanent logic.

For Eliot, this game of chess poses the most fundamental questions about politics, history, and agency. Do you rely on your chessmen, or do you attempt to direct them yourself? Do you trust to progress and let history unfold according to the many actions of its participants, or do you intervene and try to direct it? Felix, as we saw, chooses to intervene and gets trampled by his own game pieces as a result. If the world
in which we act is mutable and subject to unpredictable changes—as it is—then the effects of our actions will themselves be mutable and subject to unpredictable changes. This, for Eliot, is the problem with agency: not impuissance but imprudence, not determinism but chaos.

In that regard, her conservatism owes a great deal to Edmund Burke. Like Burke, Eliot distrusted any effort to realize abstract ideals or to interfere with the natural development of institutions. “What has grown up historically,” she wrote in one of her more famous essays, “can only die out historically, by the gradual operation of necessary laws” ("Natural History" 287). The striking thing about Eliot, however, is that despite these conservative sympathies, she couldn’t reconcile herself to the merits of quietism. Burke’s confidence in the “inestimable value” of the “commonwealth, such as it stands” (111) was wholly foreign to Eliot’s sense that ours is an “imperfect social state,” as she says in the finale to Middlemarch (837). And the fact that nothing could be done to improve that social state never stopped Eliot from insisting that something must be done. Her reservations about the possibility of praxis were matched by her longing to direct history and shape the future. Simply waiting around—like the trees in her enchanted forest—for the advancement of human society was as unimaginable as a successful intervention. The best Eliot thought one could do was combine “the utmost activity with the utmost resignation” (Letters 8: 383, 462). That probably counts as one too many utmosts, but it is Eliot’s defining paradox. And its result was not merely paralysis, but anxious paralysis.

Consider, for example, her fraught response to requests for donations in support of Guissepe Mazzini—the Italian nationalist and fervent republican:

The reflection is inevitable, that the application [for funds] may ultimately be the promotion of conspiracy, the precise character of which is necessarily unknown to subscribers. . . . Now, though I believe there are cases in which conspiracy may be a sacred, necessary struggle against organised wrong, there are also cases in which it is hopeless, and can produce nothing but misery; or needless, because it is not the best means attainable of reaching the desired end; or unjustifiable, because it resorts to acts which are more unsocial in their character than the very wrong they are directed to extinguish: and in these three supposable cases it seems to me that it would be a social crime to further conspiracy even by the impulse of a little finger, to which one may well compare a small money subscription. (Letters 4: 199-200)

Eliot supports Mazzini and even defends the necessity of conspiratorial action in cases of egregious wrong; she just doubts her own ability—
actually, anyone’s ability—to recognize those cases. However legitimate
the cause, there is simply no way to tell if a given conspiracy will prove
hopeless, needless, or unjustifiable, and not even “the impulse of a little
finger” can escape complicity with the crimes it did not intend to
commit and may even have tried to prevent. Much the same could be
said of Eliot’s uneasy feminism. Though she supported increasing the
rights and improving the circumstances of women in the abstract, every
particular proposal seemed to her as likely to inhibit as to abet.9 In
other words, Eliot’s politics, like Felix Holt’s, were stretched across the
gap between intentions and actions. In many areas, her intentions were
progressive and often quite radical, but she could rarely see a way to
translate those intentions into action.

To add some precision to the characterization of George Eliot as
a conservative, it is worth comparing Eliot’s politics with two of its greater
influences, Herbert Spencer’s organicism and Auguste Comte’s posi-
tivism (see Graver). Like Spencer, Eliot believed that society was a system
of deep interrelations whose closest analogy was a biological organism.10
And, again like Spencer, she believed in the power of progress to improve
human life. Ultimately, though, his faith in progress far exceeded her
own. For Eliot, the urgency of contemporary social problems was too
pressing to defer. And she saw, moreover, how easily organicism could
become a mere pretense for deferral. In Felix Holt, it is the retired
tradesman (and the suspiciously semitic) Mr. Nolan who offers the fullest
defense of organicism: “Trade makes property, my good sir, and property
is Conservative, as they say now. . . . It’s all one web, sir. The prosperity of
the country is one web” (208). To Mr. Nolan, at least, organicism is an
excuse for continued economic exploitation. And to the extent that Eliot
still sympathized with organicism, it was for a reason quite different from
Nolan’s and indeed from Spencer’s. She did not reject human participa-
tion in history because she believed that society would evolve best on its
own; she resigned herself to evolutionary development because, as in
Felix Holt, human participation in history had become impossible. For
her, organicism was a lament.

Comte’s influence on Eliot, and on Felix Holt, took a different
form. As Comte saw it, the real social and spiritual problems of modern
life cried out for immediate action: not just the economic or political
but also the moral regeneration of society was required. Eliot certainly
agreed, and to some extent she even accepted Comte’s argument that
moral regeneration depended on the ability of the working classes to
shape public opinion. It is “the proletariat,” as Comte put it, that “forms on its own the principal source of public opinion” (140–41). Felix’s own tireless emphasis on public opinion is a testament to Comte’s influence. “I’ll tell you what’s the greatest power under heaven,” he says as part of his stump speech, “and that is public opinion—the ruling belief in society about what is right and what is wrong, what is honourable and what is shameful. That’s the steam that is to work the engines” (293). And as he makes clear in his later “Address to the Working Men,” it is the working classes who, being the majority, have “the power of creating a public opinion” (485).

Yet if Comte’s influence extends this far, it extends no further. Felix shows no interest in Comte’s wider aspirations: he has no grand philosophy of history and says nothing about the ideal organization of society. As we noted, Felix’s activities are always quite local and modest—committed to achieving “the minimum of effect . . . of the sort I care for” (435). All he feels he can do is “try to make life less bitter for a few within my reach” (263). Felix’s ideals may have a positivist bent, but their implementation is decidedly quietist.

For all that she shares with these three thinkers, then, Eliot has none of Burke’s satisfaction with the present, none of Spencer’s faith in the future, and none of Comte’s grand ambition. Her views combine, instead, the deepest misgivings about praxis with the most desperate yearning for a new social organization. *Felix Holt*, in particular, is trapped in this ambivalence. As a novel about both radicalism and the impossibility of radicalism, *Felix Holt* is continually circling around the question of what radicalism should do and how it should address what Eliot considered the greatest problem of modern life: man’s alienation from history. Should it promote political reform? Class warfare? Union organization? Moral reform? To try to implement any one of these is to share Felix’s fate, to initiate a course of events whose effects will bear little relation to intention. To embrace none, however, is to allow history to run us over like Huskisson.

*Felix Holt* resolves this problem by making Felix’s radicalism at once limitless and unknowable. Felix wants to help the working classes achieve a new respectability and, in that way, a new power. Yet the details of his strategy seem to go without saying. And it is precisely this vagueness that gives the impression of boundless commitment. Felix’s radicalism is something more than, deeper than, or greater than any specific platform—precisely as the *Guardian* and the *Athenaeum* point
out. By refusing to specify what that “something more” might be, Eliot strengthens the impression of Felix’s radicalism. No plan seems extensive enough, no movement broad enough, and no proposal thorough enough to compass it when, in fact, his radicalism is often little more than rhetorical. The great boon of abstraction, in other words, is that it allows Felix’s ideals to appear profound even though they may be empty. It is a way of keeping the possibility of radicalism open without risking the blowback of any particular course of radical action.

There are still a few things we can know about Felix’s boundless radicalism; we can know, for example, what it exceeds. Above all, what it exceeds is political radicalism. Whatever else he is, Felix Holt is something more than a political radical. He rejects the idea—common to Disraeli, Lowe, Beales, and Jones—that political change was the surest way to unleash social change. Eliot’s contemporaries may have believed in this social trajectory of democracy, but Eliot disagreed:

There is one passage of prophecy [from The Times of 1832–33] which I longed to quote, but I thought it wiser to abstain. “Now the beauty of the Reform Bill is, that under its mature operation the people must and will become free agents”—a prophecy which I hope is true, only the maturity of the operation has not arrived yet. (Letters 4: 248)

To Eliot’s mind, political reform alone could not transform people into free agents. The First Reform Bill seemed to her a clear proof of that. Whatever reform did accomplish, it did not give people the power to control history; it did not transform the age of the railway back into the age of the coach. And the reason it did not—and could not—is that it was insufficiently radical. No mere increase in suffrage could produce social revolution or end man’s alienation from history. For that, something further was required.

That something further, however, was precisely what Eliot could not formulate. Ultimately, it is this failure to embrace an alternative that made her such a lonely figure on the Victorian political scene. Countless contemporaries, after all, shared her desire to reform society, and there were some who even shared her skepticism about the impact of enfranchisement. Marx, for one, certainly did, as did Spencer and Auguste Comte—rare though it is to find these three on the same side of any issue. But these thinkers had none of Eliot’s more general reticence. They may have doubted the efficacy of political change, but they had their own ideas about what would be effective.
Felix’s deeper and more thoroughgoing radicalism is, like Eliot’s, also an empty radicalism. It serves as a placeholder for the kind of effective politics Eliot embraced but couldn’t bring herself to imagine. In the end, Felix Holt narrates two things: first, the inadequacy of political praxis narrowly understood; and second, the inadequacy of praxis per se, the absolute impossibility of translating intention into action without vitiating that intention. Politics alone, Eliot insists, cannot give us back our power to shape history. And yet, anything powerful enough to do so is also risky enough to be ruinous. This is the reason there is so much wasted energy in Felix Holt, because the only alternative to wasted energy is misdirected energy, and often enough wasted energy is to be preferred. It is also the reason that Felix Holt: The Radical can seem so much like Felix Holt: The Conservative: this is a radicalism as helpless as it is engaged.

**Coda**

Felix Holt was not, of course, Eliot’s final word on the relation between agency, politics, and history. In her two subsequent novels, Middlemarch (1871–72) and Daniel Deronda (1876), she continued to search for ways of resolving the impasse dramatized in Felix Holt. By way of a coda, I want to trace briefly just one of Eliot’s solutions as it winds its way through her late works: the possibility of involuntary agency. If the great problem of radicalism is the inability to translate intentions into actions, one way around this problem is to have actions unfold without intention, to have them spring into being fully formed. There is a hint of this in the trial sequence of Felix Holt, when, as Eliot puts it, Esther’s “feelings were growing into a necessity for action, rather than a resolve to act” (447). The effect of this rather neat distinction between a “necessity for action” and a “resolve to act” is to bury intention altogether. In this way, actions can emerge as matters of necessity rather than of choice.

Middlemarch explores the implications of this involuntary agency in much greater detail, most notably in the figure of Caleb Garth. Garth is the most decent of the Middlemarch characters, a man of few words and peerless integrity. And having few words, it turns out, is precisely what ensures his integrity; it is what keeps his acts from being infected by intention. Throughout, his decisions and judgments surface in silence, as phys-
ical tics and habitual movements rather than as intentions or ideas. When, for example, Garth decides to discontinue his employment with Bulstrode—having recently learned of Bulstrode’s sordid past—it is not because he thinks he should. Rather, it is because he feels he must. Asked why he is leaving, Garth responds: “That I’m forced to do. . . . I have that feeling inside me, that I can’t go on working with you. That’s all, Mr. Bulstrode. Everything else is buried, so far as my will goes” (696). Garth feels forced to go; and that, as he says, is all. It is not a question of will or intention, but rather of the necessity that Eliot calls feeling. The surest basis for action, Garth feels, is to accept what his body tells him to do.

Garth’s resignation, however, is still rather modest and personal. He has found a way around the problem of intention, but only at the level of what Eliot calls “unhistoric acts” (Middlemarch 837). In Daniel Deronda, involuntary agency is tied to a far more ambitious project. As with Garth, the basis of action is still feeling, but in this case feeling opens out into something broader, namely duty. As Deronda says to his mother when asked whether he will become a Jew: “I consider it my duty—it is the impulse of my feeling—to identify myself, as far as possible, with my hereditary people, and if I can see any work to be done for them that I can give my soul and hand to I shall choose to do it” (661). The density of terms here is quite staggering but also quite revealing. Duty follows from feeling, and it makes choice possible. Deronda does not choose his duty; he does not rely on ideas or intentions or judgments. Instead, he feels his duty. And, feeling it, he knows what it is he must choose.

Choice, in other words, is more like a recognition than a decision. We discover, at key moments, what our choice must be. This strange fact is beautifully exemplified in Eliot’s account of how Deronda finds himself saying “I shall call myself a Jew”: “It happened to Deronda at that moment, as it has often happened to others, that the need for speech made an epoch in his resolve. His respect for the questioner would not let him decline to answer, and by the necessity to answer he found out the truth for himself” (725). Choice, intention, will—none of these are instrumental in Deronda’s commitment. What happens instead is that the “need for speech” and the “necessity to answer” together become a resolve. The compulsion to speak reveals a truth—“I shall call myself a Jew”—that Deronda then accepts as his own.

One way—indeed, one crucial way—to understand Deronda’s commitment is as a solution to the problem of Felix Holt. What makes radicalism impossible in Felix Holt is that no action, however noble its
intention, can be justified against the likelihood of its failure. What makes radicalism newly possible in *Daniel Deronda* is that necessity, and not justification, has become the basis for action. Where Felix sees his intentions rebound upon him, Deronda eliminates the category of intention altogether. However we judge this solution, with Deronda’s sympathy or his mother’s skepticism, we must remember that what makes it necessary in the first place is the paradox of Eliot’s politics. Involuntary agency is Eliot’s solution to the problem that beset her: how to respect both the futility of praxis and the pressing need to shape our own future.

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**NOTES**

1. Even the most committed reformers rejected the “natural rights” argument and defied all efforts to impute such arguments to them; one went so far as to claim that not a “single passage, affirming or implying the *a priori* right of man to the franchise, can be produced from the works or speeches of any living Reformer” (Brodrick 12).

2. Versions of this narrative can be found in Perkin and Briggs. Finn provides a slightly different—and far more detailed—account of the contours of post-Chartist radicalism.

3. On this point, there is much critical agreement, though often it is taken prima facie as a political failing. Thomson calls Felix “a Radical in an anti-political sense” (“Politics” 104). Marxists like Swann and Eagleton have denounced the book as “an historical novel which in effect repudiates history and politics” (Swann 80), and “no more than the idealist protest of traditionalist values against the political itself” (Eagleton 116). Descriptively, that claim is irrefutable. David responds to this line of criticism by showing how *Felix Holt* can be “an explicitly political novel disdaining political action” (205).

4. By 1890, Jacobs could write: “Felix Holt the Radical is rather Felix Holt the Conservative; he is not even a Tory-Democrat” (qtd. in Hollis 157). Subsequent criticism has generally followed suit. With a similar turn of phrase, Levine writes: “Felix Holt is no more a radical . . . than Barry Goldwater” (qtd. in Bamber 432). Likewise, Thomson calls him “a Positivist, and a Tory Positivist at that” (“Politics” 104).

5. There is much more to be said about Lyon’s wasted energy in particular. He is a man, as Eliot puts it, who “suffered from imprisoned ideas” (240). He is also the one who comes closest to expressing how important “waste minutes” are to Eliot’s novel: “it is, I say, a very glorious truth, that even in what are called the waste minutes of our time, like those of expectation, the soul may soar and range, as in some of our dreams which are brief as a broken rainbow in duration, yet seem to comprise a long history of terror or of joy” (241).

6. For a more extensive development of this idea—and its relation to *Romola*—see Butwin.

7. For other views of the relation between the romance and political plots of *Felix Holt*, see Eagleton; Hertz; Fisher; and Graver.
Eliot’s conservative sympathies have drawn criticism from a number of quarters. The most searing critique is probably Cottom’s, in which Eliot stands in for a “liberal intellectual discourse” that shrouds its own self-interest in universal ideals, while Gallagher draws attention to the absence of any real working-class figures in this so-called radical novel. See also Bamber; Swann.

In July of 1869, for example, Eliot wrote the following postscript in a letter to Barbara Bodichon: “I have read Mill’s Book [On the Subjection of Women (1869)], and think the second chapter excellent; the 3rd and 4th not so strong and well argued as they ought to have been coming from him.” That Eliot found Mill’s work on women’s rights insufficiently forceful is a testament to her conviction. Three weeks later, however, when asked to support the establishment of a College for Working Women, she responded:

I feel painful doubts and difficulties about your undertaking, but I am never confident in my own opinions positive or negative on practical matters. . . . The instruction of Working Women on so high and difficult a scale seems to me unpracticable, nay, not desirable. But I feel sure that you have weighed the matter more than I have, and that your plan includes conditions, and perhaps embraces a class, other than I had contemplated. I am very ignorant of London life” (Letters 4: 458–60).

In the end, she became an annual contributor in the amount of two pounds and two shillings.

There is evidence of this throughout her work, but its clearest expression is in “The Natural History of German Life.”

This is my translation of “les prolétaires constituent spontanément, à cet égard, la principale source de l’opinion publique” (140–41).

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