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THE SIXTEENTH GEORGE ELIOT MEMORIAL LECTURE - 1987

delivered by DR. BERYL GRAY

THE SEDUCTION OF MAGGIE TULLIVER

Although from its first chapter the novel evolves towards the crises of Maggie's brief maturity, my focus here is on the two final Books of The Mill on the Floss. Book VI is called "The Great Temptation"; Book VII is called "The Final Rescue". Taken together, these two Books can be read as an allegory of moral struggle and redemption.

The temptation itself is located in Paradise. Indeed, the first chapter of Book VI - "The Great Temptation" - is entitled "A Duet in Paradise". In conjunction, the key titular words - "Temptation" and "Paradise" - conjure the Temptation in the Garden of Eden and supply the image of Eve's Tempter, who hovers behind Stephen's role as Maggie's Tempter. Paradise is Lucy Deane's home, to which significantly George Eliot gives no other name.

The word "duet" in the chapter's title implies that Lucy's Paradise is to be musical. This is its essential quality if it is to offer joy to Maggie after her years of deprivation, for the power of sound to which she is highly susceptible is also for her a paramount sensory need. To this Paradise Maggie comes for rest and recovery after the grief of her father's Day of Reckoning. Before she arrives, though, we are presented with Stephen already very much at ease in Lucy's drawing-room, where the prominently-displayed piano stands open in readiness for the promised duet.

It is to the quality of Stephen's voice that Maggie is to be particularly susceptible. It is appropriate, therefore, that the reader should be given an early opportunity to appreciate that voice; and so we soon hear him sing. But what he sings is as integral to George Eliot's scheme as the resonance he brings to the recital. It is Adam's part in "Graceful Consort", from Haydn's oratorio: The Creation. (Lucy of course sings Eve.) The anticipated duet is therefore not only performed in Paradise; it is about it. It expresses the mutual delight of (the still innocent) Adam and Eve, which in turn expresses the mutual delight of Stephen and Lucy.

In the oratorio, the duet is preceded introductory recitatives, first Adam's, and then Eve's. Stephen is particularly keen that Lucy should sing Eve's - "for the sake of the moral", he says.

"You will sing the whole duty of woman - 'And from obedience grows my pride and happiness.'"

"Oh no, I shall not respect an Adam who drags the tempo, as you will,"

says Lucy - and goes straight into the duet. This is all very light-hearted, but the application to themselves is neverthe less intentional on George Eliot's part. The fact that Lucy evades her recitative means that, as Eve, she is absolved from offering Adam the following assurance of her servility:

O thou, for whom I am!
My help, my Shield, my all!
Thy will is law to me.
So God, our Lord, ordains,
And from obedience grows
My pride and happiness.

It is important that Lucy does not sing these words, for the Eve in her does not imply subjection. Her reign in Eden owes its rightfulness to the marriage of demeanour with place, not to the Will and Law of her Adam. She is to be grieved by his behaviour and her usurper's, not banished because of her own. She is to be wronged, not made abject. It was obviously equally important to George Eliot both to make Stephen's musical portrayal of Adam imperfect in some way, and to ensure that the nature of his imperfections didn't reflect on the quality of his voice - which is so crucially to influence Maggie.

In order to be readily responsive to Stephen's influence, Maggie is seen first yielding to the influence of Paradise itself. Soon after she arrives, she is left alone in the drawing-room for a few minutes. Her eyes wander to the window, and gradually the delights of spring - the colours, the delicious scent of flowers, and the gurgling and singing of the birds - stir her senses and reawaken memories. The potency of Paradise, working through the potency of the past, has already opened her to the temptation which has not yet manifested itself. Lucy comes in, however, perfectly on cue as its herald:

"There is one pleasure, I know, Maggie, that your deepest dismalness will never resist," said Lucy, beginning to speak as soon as she entered the room.
"That is music, and I mean you to have quite a riotous feast of it."

Lucy's hospitable offices will make Paradise - and her cousin's susceptibility - complete. The instrument of joy is of course to be Stephen.

Stephen sings no music in "First Impressions" (the chapter in which he and Maggie meet); but we are reminded that music is very much the stuff on which this relationship is to be nourished when Lucy tells him that she wants Maggie to hear his best songs. Though we don't hear these songs, their effect is dramatic, and leaves Maggie in a state of "strong excitement":

Her eyes and cheeks had an almost feverish brilliancy;
her head was thrown backward, and her hands were clasped
with the palm outward, and with that tension of the arms
which is apt to accompany mental absorption.

Purcell's "wild passion and fancy" has already overcome the recollection of her bare, lonely past, and the music of which she has been deprived in her youth not only completes Paradise for her: it has become its entire expression. "Life seems to go on without effort, when I am filled with music," says Maggie. "At other times one is conscious of carrying a weight." And we are immediately reminded that, though this overwhelming influence is eulogised in general terms, it is Stephen who has poured it forth. Innocently, Lucy says: "And Stephen has a splendid voice, hasn't he?"

What Lucy doesn't know is that, not only has Stephen's resonant baritone at last brought satisfaction to Maggie's ears, but that Stephen and Maggie are strongly attracted to each other. So much so, that by the time Philip can be included in the music parties, Stephen has become obsessed with the desire to get Maggie to look at him. All mutual glances are an avowal of the feelings that Maggie is trying to resist; but the more she tries, the more Stephen wilfully contrives means of exerting the influence he knows he has on her.

The reunion of Maggie and Philip (whose relationship Tom had of course forbidden) means that the quartet of friends can now be assembled according to Lucy's plan. Stephen is the last to arrive on the occasion of their first music party, when, inevitably, the immediate effect is of his voice. Its confidence and brightness oppress Philip, whose own unimpressive tenor voice is pitched, alas, even higher than usual through emotion at seeing Maggie. Sensitive to the atmosphere of constraint, Lucy decides that the best thing would be to get on with the music: the two men, who are unconsciously competing for Maggie, are simultaneously to render up their voices to her. They are to sing the duet from Auber's opera Masaniello, which Maggie has never heard - and it is Stephen's cause that the performance will serve, for it will reveal to perfection the contrast between his voice and Philip's. And so, as if in anticipation of his triumph, he goes towards the piano "giving a foretaste of the tune in his deep 'brum - brum', very pleasant to hear."

The influence of Stephen's voice and the power of his will are now fused in the intensity of his gaze. Maggie soon throws her work down, and becomes

lost in the vague state of emotion produced by the inspiring duet - emotion that seemed to make her at once strong and weak; strong for all emotion, weak for all resistance.

The combination of the special voice with the nature of the music itself has achieved all that Maggie's soul has ever craved. But it is not only Stephen's splendid baritone, or the stirring qualities of the duet, that engulf Maggie, for the roles that Stephen and Philip sing are highly indicative of narrative purpose.

The story of Masaniello (or La Muette de Portici) is based on the 1647 uprising of the Neapolitans against their Spanish oppressors. In the duet, the fishermen friends Masaniello (a tenor, and therefore sung by Philip) and Pietro (baritone) swear to regain their country's honour, and to wreak vengeance on the tyrants - specifically for the heinous abduction of Massaniello's sister, Fenella (the dumb girl of the title). Although Masaniello does not yet know who is responsible for Fenella's disappearance, she has in fact been seduced and cast off by the subsequently married but contrite Alfonso, who is the son of the Spanish viceroy.

The first part of the duet (which is in D major) is a sustained, arousing declaration of courageous, patriotic intent. But when the strain passes into the minor so thrillingly that Maggie half starts from her seat, the music is reflecting the transition from the concern for the honour of the country to a concern for the fate of Fenella. It is Pietro (or Stephen) who effects the transition (and causes the frisson). The two friends have been expressing their patriotism in impassioned unison when, the music darkening in tone, Pietro exclaims (I give an English version of the words), "Oh, infamous power that oppresses me." "Think of my sister ravaged by a pitiless monster!" responds Masaniello, fully accepting the minor key. "Is she to be the victim of this seducer?" asks

Pietro - to which Masaniello fervently replies, "Whoever he is, I swear to kill him". Leading back to the major key, this brings the return of the patriotic theme. The passage is a tragic parenthesis devoted entirely to desperate thoughts of a beloved sister. In the thrall of the performance from the beginning, it is no authorial accident that Maggie's profoundest and most electric response coincides with its introduction.

The relationship between the operatic roles - both sung and mute - and the singers, and between the singers and their crucial audience (Lucy has excused herself from participation, and her response to the music is to the effect it has on Maggie), goes beyond what is immediately apparent, for the friendship and mutuality of purpose that is expressed in the duet is transformed later in the opera into opposition and betrayal: Pietro is destined to denounce and poison his friend. Masaniello, on the other hand, is not only a folk-hero, but an ideal brother. Once reunited with his dishonoured, cast-off sister, he soothes her and sings her to sleep, offering her both the fraternal protection and the sanctuary for her bruised soul that Tom is later to deny Maggie, and which Philip - the ideal brother of Maggie's imagination - is prevented by his own feelings from giving her. So devoted a brother is Masaniello, that, after he has led a successful uprising, he is prevailed upon by the forgiving Fenella's pleadings to offer her seducer and his bride refuge from the mob. It is for this, and for refusing to become the new ruler, that the enraged Pietro poisons him; but the hallucinating, dying Masaniello survives long enough to perform one last act of heroism before being slain by the rebels. Distraught, Fenella commits suicide. In their death, brother and sister are not divided.

The part Stephen sings, then, is, unknown to Maggie (who, we remember, is unfamiliar with the opera) ultimately that of a friend whose capital treachery surpasses even the villainy of the Spanish. The whole drawing-room scene is informed by the irony that it is his singing which is the more moving, since Philip, still unaware that Stephen is to be the poisoner of his hopes, finds emotional relief in singing and playing his share.

But the role of Pietro also prefigures Stephen's own part in life, as it were, in direct relation to Maggie (who, like Fenella in the passage described above, is both mutely the emotional centre, and the cause of future actions). Pietro is not Fenella's seducer, but it is he who voices her downfall; and it is his interpreter, Stephen - made sympathetically to deplore Fenella's fate - who is to cause Maggie's.

After the duet, Philip is encouraged by Lucy to sing Elvino's aria from Bellini's opera, *La Somnambula*. Philip identifies the song by its English words, "I love thee still". It is an offering to Maggie of what he "could not prevail on himself to say to her directly", but he succeeds only in clarifying the distinction that can never be eradicated between the loving child that was and the ardent woman that is. Maggie is therefore "touched, not thrilled by the song: it suggested distinct memories and thoughts, and brought quiet regret in the place of excitement." Relinquished from the influence of Stephen's singing, Maggie has failed to be captured by its alternative. The effect is of profound climax followed by vague anticlimax, until Stephen revives the whole room with his "antidote" to Philip's pathos when he energetically and unchivalrously rolls out "Shall I, wasting in despair, / Die because a woman's fair?", seeming "to make all the air in the room alive with a new influence." Despite this new influence, however Maggie's mind remains discriminately free to acknowledge the nature of Stephen's power; for it is not music itself that is a temptation for Maggie. It is Stephen.

This is demonstrated when the music from The Tempest * is introduced. For the time being, Stephen is not required to sing. Here, the music is used as a screen behind which he can pursue his compulsion, and scheme to win some acknowledgement from Maggie. The small, solicitous act of fetching a footstall for her, together with the anxiety he manifests for her comfort are what in fact cause her to betray her feelings directly to him - his "entreaty look at her" earning the returned "glance of gratitude". The attack is potent because his ally is Maggie's real need for some chivalry. The influence of his voice has made her merely vulnerable. It is his solicitousness which vanquishes her.

Stephen's musical reunion with Lucy moments later symbolises a double falseness. Not only has he been successfully proffering himself to his cousin, but his slyly faultless manoeuvres cause the observant Philip to be false to his musicianship. Lucy, of course, has continued to sing in true innocence, oblivious (except to Philip's mistakes) and serene. Against these sounds rages Philip's "deafening inward tumult". On the reader, the effect is of moral as well as aural cacophony.

Aware of what is happening between herself and Stephen, Maggie's instinct is to go away. To make her escape more difficult, however, she must first attend the ball at Park House, where - on Stephen's own territory - she will be made to sample the bliss that could truly be hers. At first, she manages to resist the music and brightness of the ball. While she resists, Stephen keeps his distance; but she remains safe only while Waltzes are played. When the merry country-dance begins, though, an importunate young fellow guest is at last able to persuade her to be his partner,

and Maggie quite forgot her troublous life in a childlike enjoyment of that half-rustic rhythm which seems to banish pretentious etiquette. She felt quite charitably towards young Torry, as his hand bore her along and held her up in the dance; her eyes and cheeks had that fire of young joy in them which will flame out if it can find the least breath to fan it.

Now Stephen's eyes are "devouring" her.

The possibility that he too should dance with Maggie, and have her hand in his so long, was beginning to possess him like a thirst. But even now their hands were meeting in the dance - were meeting still to the very end of it, though they were far off each other.

Unleashed by the dance. Maggie is undone because she is guilty of feeling, "in spite of all the thoughts that had gone before, a glowing gladness at heart". The desires of the present have taken precedence over the "precious past", and Maggie allows Stephen to guide her into the conservatory. His powerful gaze

made Maggie's face turn towards it and look upward at it - slowly, like a flower at the ascending brightness. And they walked unsteadily on, without feeling that they were walking - without feeling anything but that long grave mutual gaze which has the solemnity belonging to all deep human passion.

* In George Eliot's day, this was assumed to be by Purcell. However, Margaret Laurie has convincingly argued that the only song composed by him for The Tempest is "Dear Pretty Youth". See "Did Purcell set The Tempest?" (1963 - 1964 Proceedings of the Royal Musical Association, 90 Session (1964); pp. 43 - 56).

That long meeting of eyes suggests a kind of willing consummation. The force that instigates it, though, comes - as always - from Stephen. They have succumbed to each other, but there is (again as always) significant difference in their conditions. Maggie is in a trance that is lifted the moment its circumstances are altered, which happens when they reach the end of the conservatory and are obliged to turn. Stephen, on the other hand, is drunk with Maggie: motionless and pale, "he was incapable of putting a sentence together"; and, when she raises her beautiful, seductive arm to reach a rose, he takes the unpardonable liberty of darting towards it, clasping it by the wrist, and showering kisses on it. Erotic in itself, and overlaying the union implicit in the mutual rapture that precedes it, Stephen's action demonstrates the tendency of their love. Maggie is shocked not just by Stephen, but at herself. Her determination to resist him is renewed. But Stephen is persistent, and, in the step-by-step progress towards the final crisis, the struggle between Maggie and Stephen defines itself with increasing stress as a struggle between good and evil - the "good" supported by Maggie's urgent allusions to the past, the "evil" by Stephen's attempts to negate that past. These attempts culminate in his declaration that they "should break all these mistaken ties that were made in blindness, and determine to marry each other". Maggie's reply has the solemnity, not only of her own beliefs, but of George Eliot's:

"I would rather die than fall into that temptation," said Maggie, with deep, slow distinctness - all the gathered spiritual force of painful years coming to her aid in this extremity. She drew her arm from him as she spoke.

Stephen then offers the rational argument that neither of them is absolutely bound to anyone else. Maggie's rejection carries her own (and her author's) strongest convictions:

"you don't believe that - it is not your real feeling," said Maggie, earnestly. "You feel, as I do, that the real tie lies in the feelings and expectations we have raised in other minds. Else all pledges might be broken, when there was no outward penalty. There would be no such thing as faithfulness.... If life were quite easy and simple, as it might have been in Paradise, and we could always see that one being first towards whom ... I mean, if life did not make duties for us before love comes, love would be a sign that two people ought to belong to each other. But I see - I feel it is not so now: there must be things we must renounce in life; some of us must resign love. Many things are difficult and dark to me; but I see one thing quite clearly - that I must not, cannot seek my own happiness by sacrificing others... Our love would be poisoned. Don't urge me; help me - help me because I love you."

Despite this appeal, Stephen continues his obsessive pursuit. His entire love-sick self is concentrated in opposition to her endeavours not to succumb. When she doesn't respond, the appeal of his love becomes fused with the appeal of his suffering; but it is his need to succeed in eliciting from her the response that it is treachery to yield that proclaims him the Serpent. His singing has now become

a way of speaking to Maggie. Perhaps he was not distinctly conscious that he was impelled to it by a secret longing ... to deepen the hold he had on her.

And so, to deepen the hold still further, there is to be one more dramatically crucial music party. This inevitably takes place in Lucy's drawing-room, so that the memory of the idyllic Creation scene that introduced him as Lucy's lover, is mocked. Now he insists that Lucy and Philip are the singers, so that he is free to submit totally to the forces of his own compulsion. Now - as Philip correctly divines - there is some double intention in his every word and look.

Philip suddenly understands everything - both that Stephen and Maggie are in love, and that Maggie is struggling against the condition. And yet, in the grip of this intuitive knowledge - or even because of it - he fails next day to come, as promised, to take the girls on the river. Of course, he is not to know that Lucy will change her plans and leave Maggie alone; nevertheless, in asking Stephen to take his place, he is willing to expose Maggie further to Stephen's influence.

When Stephen appears instead of Philip, the shock to Maggie nearly overwhelms her. She is morally debilitated; incapable of further effort. While Stephen's manner shows an hypnotic certitude, she is transfixed:

"Let us go," Stephen murmured, entreatingly, rising, and taking her hand to raise her too. "We shall not be long together." And they went.

And it is now that Maggie is to be "borne along by the tide". But she doesn't just go with Stephen. She is led. "Led" is certainly the key word in the paragraph that conducts her to the river. Memory is expressly excluded.

This is the point of no return. There can be no acceptable future prospect for Maggie. However long deferred, death can be the only resolution. Devoid of her own will, her consciousness has become extinguished, like the sleepwalker - Amina - of Bellini's opera, over whom Philip's impotent voice had prophetically grieved in the music party. As she is led, arranged - manipulated - by this "stronger presence", she not only justifies Philip's misgivings, but, in enacting the role of the opera, as it were, draws the formal music scheme of the novel to a close. The prophecies, the roles, and the parallels, are all met in the fatal acquiescence to Stephen's command.

The rest of Maggie's story, once she has awoken from her trance, will be devoted to consequences. As she regains possession of her consciousness, she understands that the Paradise that Stephen offers her is a mirage. Her resolution to renounce him gains strength until it is her authority which predominates. But the temptation of his love is not instantly lifted with her awakening. It comes back "with a cruel charm" the night after she has left him, seeming "to slip away and fade and vanish, leaving only the dying sound of a deep thrilling voice that said, 'Gone - for ever gone.'"

Rejected by her brother and by St Ogg's, the way for Maggie's "final rescue" from the struggle of life is prepared when she has been forgiven - and her actions understood - by Philip and by Lucy, and when she has begged Lucy's pardon on behalf of Stephen. But first she must withstand her greatest temptation of all: the "passionate cry of reproach" that is Stephen's letter. It is the Tempter's most nearly irresistible bid, and the final sentence encapsulates his power:

"Maggie - have you forgotten what it was to be together? - to be within reach of a look - to be within hearing of each other's voice?"

This reproach provokes her "last conflict", and it is almost her undoing: "she felt as if her real temptation had only just begun":

She did not read the letter: she heard him uttering it, and the voice shook her with its old strange power ... [But] it was the doubt in the justice of her own resolve that made the balance tremble, and made her once start from her seat to reach her pen and paper, and write "Come!"

Maggie's transmutation of the written word into the spoken makes Stephen's appeal seem almost sacred. It is the voice which makes it almost irresistible, for it touches her soul; and we remember how, in Book IV of the novel, when Maggie was in "The Valley of Humiliation", Thomas à Kempis had come to her as "A Voice from the Past", saying

Blessed are those ears that receive the whispers of the divine voice, and listen not to the whisperings of the world. Blessed are those ears which hearken not unto the voice which soundeth outwardly, but unto the Truth, which teacheth inwardly....

But now Maggie has made the transition from the ideal of self-suppression required by Thomas à Kempis, to the painful need for self-denial which her own inmost soul makes mandatory. Her ability finally to resist the strange power of Stephen's voice - a power that is reinforced by his misery - is a moral triumph, and it earns her the blessing at last of reunion with Tom in the shared, momentarily regained, Paradise of childhood.

Editor's footnote:

Dr. Beryl Gray is the Vice Chairman of the London Branch of the George Eliot Fellowship. Her book George Eliot and Music will be published by Macmillan in the spring of 1989.