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SACRED AND SECULAR: GEORGE ELIOT'S CONCEPT OF PILGRIMAGE

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The distinctive tenor of George Eliot's mind was theological. Pre-eminent among Victorian novelists for her prodigious scholarship, she ventured into that realm of thought which Ruskin declared a "dangerous science for women - - one which they must indeed beware how they profanely touch - - that of theology".¹ In a letter of 6 November 1838 to Maria Lewis, her Nuneaton governess and first confidante, Eliot expressed her early preoccupation with the spiritual life and her wish not to "rest contented with making Christianity a mere addendum" to her pursuits, or "with tacking it as a fringe" to her garments: "May I seek to be sanctified wholly".² The influence of Miss Lewis's Evangelical Christianity upon the earnest and impressionable young scholar is evident in her letter of 18 August 1838, in which she referred to life as "a pilgrimage, a scene calling for diligence and watchfulness, not for repose and amusement".³ Although her beliefs underwent radical change, her conception of life as a pilgrimage remained constant.

All the great religions of the world were in her view "the record of spiritual struggles which are the types of our own", and this universal battle of the spirit she described through the metaphor of the journey: "There is no short cut, no patent tram-road, to wisdom: after all the centuries of invention, the soul's path lies through the thorny wilderness which must be still trodden in solitude, with bleeding feet, with sobs for help, as it was trodden by them of old time".⁴ Regarded as a free thinker by the members of her family and actually spurned by her father for refusing to attend church services, she maintained her right to question the orthodox expression of faith she could no longer accept as her own:

I have not returned to dogmatic Christianity - to the acceptance of any set of doctrines as a creed, and a superhuman revelation of the Unseen — but I see in it the highest expression of the religious sentiment that has yet found its place in the history of mankind, and I have the profoundest interest in the inward life of sincere Christians in all ages.⁵

George Eliot's sympathetic observation of the varieties of spiritual experience is indeed borne out in the diverse systems of theology presented in her fiction: Evangelicalism in Scenes of Clerical Life (1858), Methodism in Adam Bede (1859), Congregationalism in Silas Marner (1861) and Felix Holt (1866), Roman Catholicism in Romola (1863), Anglicanism in Middlemarch (1872), and Judaism in Daniel Deronda (1876).

Even after her renunciation of Evangelical Christianity, Eliot continued to revere the Bible. Her vigorous prose is attributed by Haight to her diligent study of the King James Version, which she read over and over again while at school and throughout her life.⁶ J. W. Cross refers to her enjoyment of reading aloud parts of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and St. Paul's epistles, which "best suited the organ-like tones of her voice"; the Bible, he writes, "was a very precious and sacred Book to her, not only from early associations, but also from the profound conviction of its importance in the development of the religious life of man".⁷ She was indebted to the Old Testament for her recurring images of Eden, the flood, the wilderness, and the promised land, and to the New Testament for those of temptation, conversion, sacrifice, and rebirth.

According to Cross, The Pilgrim's Progress and Rasselas also "had a large share of her affections" as did Thomas á Kempis's The Imitation of Christ, of which she wrote to Sara Hennell

on 9 February 1849: "One breathes a cool air as of cloisters in the book - it makes one long to be a saint for a few months. Verily its piety has its foundations in the depth of the divine-human soul".⁸ This great classic of devotional literature, which was her constant companion, suggested several of the themes explored in her novels, such as spiritual conflict and creative suffering. The Imitation's central motif of pilgrimage is conveyed in biblical terminology: "Keep yourself a stranger and pilgrim upon earth, to whom the affairs of this world are of no concern. Keep your heart free and lifted up to God, for here you have no abiding city".⁹ John Keble's Christian Year, which Eliot bought in 1840 and described to Maria Lewis as "a volume of sweet poetry", also brings comfort to Dorothea in Middlemarch.¹⁰ In a letter of 16 December 1841 to her friend Martha Jackson she declared Carlyle to be "a grand favourite" of hers, and recommended Sartor Resartus, which must have impressed her as a new and compelling treatment of the archetypal theme of pilgrimage.¹¹ Intellectually, she was to follow a similar course to that taken by Carlyle, who, despite his loss of belief in the dogmas of the Church, retained in his own writing the metaphorical style and prophetic power of the Bible.

Under the impact of David Friedrich Strauss's The Life of Jesus Critically Examined, Ludwig Feuerbach's The Essence of Christianity, Charles Hennell's An Inquiry into the Origins of Christianity, Charles Bray's The Philosophy of Necessity; or, the Law of Consequences as Applicable to Mental, Moral and Social Science, and Auguste Comte's treatises on his philosophy of Positivism, Eliot rejected Christianity as a divine revelation and emphasized instead the mythological and symbolic significance of Christ. However, in all her questing after a more richly human expression of religion, free from ecclesiastical trappings, she remained captivated by the person of Jesus. She kept near her desk an engraving of Delaroche's Christ and a cast of the Risen Christ, sculpted by Thorwaldsen, whose studio in Rome Dorothea visits with Will Ladislaw. Eliot could never entirely dissociate herself from Christ, the sharer in human suffering, and the supreme lover of the world. The concept of the suffering God of love, which is integral to both Old and New Testaments, is one of several legacies of biblical thought to find its way into her fiction.

Basil Willey aptly points out that the development of George Eliot as intellectual and novelist is a paradigm of the nineteenth century.¹² In an age of increasing fragmentation and alienation she sought to create a synthesis out of the ideal and the actual, the static and the dynamic, the rational and the intuitive. It was largely her era's compartmentalization of the sacred and the secular that forced her to abandon a religion which she thought had failed to establish a reconciliation between the divine and the human. Her aversion for belief which is unrelated to life is expressed in Mr. Tulliver's notion that the clergy have "a sort o' learning as lay mostly out o' sight".¹³ Throughout her work she stresses the need for a vision which encompasses both the tragedy and the glory of human existence and which discerns a spiritual dimension even in the mundane facts of everyday experience.

Evangelical Christianity's other-worldliness and preoccupation with worldly success as a sign of a favouring Providence were equally abhorred by Eliot for fostering a spirit of exclusivism. The selfrighteous Bulstrode, whose name is ideally suited to one who merely paves his own road to salvation with little or no heed for those encountered along the way, represents the distorted view that the ambition of the elect necessarily coincides with the will of God. The motto heading chapter 85 of Middlemarch, in which he is presented in disgrace for being other than he professed to be, associates him with the temptation and superficiality of Bunyan's Vanity Fair and with the judgment that befalls those whose labours in life have been purely for the sake of self-glorification. Fred Vincy,

also a believer in the power of Providence, assumes that circumstances will arise in accordance with his wishes and convenience. Both Bulstrode and Vincy regard the divine and human as separate spheres and are, therefore, thwarted in pursuing their goals. Whereas Bulstrode in his spiritual blindness seeks both prosperity on earth and reward in heaven, Felix Holt adopts poverty on earth to enable himself to enrich others and is indifferent to what happens beyond this life. George Eliot retained from the Calvinistic religion of her youth a conviction of the irrevocable consequences of human deeds, but as author she adopts the role of judge which she formerly attributed to the Deity and, instead of deferring retribution or reward until the next life, makes her characters subject to her implacable laws here and now.

Religion to George Eliot involves much more than a scheme of salvation which focuses on deeds in this world only insofar as they determine one's position in the world to come; it should, in her view, encourage a social vision which perceives in this present life opportunity to grow in understanding of and service to others: "Heaven help us! said the old religions - the new one, from its very lack of that faith, will teach us all the more to help one another".¹⁴ The concern for social reform which permeates her fiction, but which is especially evident in Felix Holt and Middlemarch, is indissolubly linked with the transformation of the individual. Lydgate, the stranger in Middlemarch, of whom Eliot observes, "character too is a process and an unfolding. The man was still in the making", has a reforming effect even upon Bulstrode: "One can begin so many things with a new person! - even begin to be a better man".¹⁵ Romola desperately appeals to Tito: "Is it not possible that we could begin a new life?"¹⁶ And Deronda exhorts Gwendolen to break away from her former self and become a new creature: "I believe that you may become worthier than you have ever yet been - worthy to lead a life that may be a blessing".¹⁷ In her last novel George Eliot suggests, however, that all change is not identical to progress, "since mere motion onward may carry us to a bog or a precipice".¹⁸

As a meliorist, she believed that the human lot would be improved not by divine grace or miraculous intervention, but by the transfiguring action of the heart, which results in the furthering of sympathy, the goal of the pilgrimage. Scenes of Clerical Life, the starting-point for Eliot's own literary pilgrimage, introduces in the manner of an overture this dominant motif which is orchestrated in increasing complexity and variation throughout her novels until it reaches its fullest expression in the finale, Daniel Deronda. Her new Religion of Humanity, in its identification of the divine with the human, provided her with a sense of vocation as a novelist and resolved the tension in her mind between the sacred and the secular.

NOTES

- 1 John Ruskin, "Of Queens' Gardens", Sesame and Lilies, in The Works of John Ruskin, edited by E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, Library edition, 39 vols (London, 1903-12), XVIII, 127.
- 2 The George Eliot Letters, edited by Gordon S. Haight, Yale edition, 9 vols (New Haven, Connecticut, 1954-78), I, 12.
- 3 The George Eliot Letters, I, 6.
- 4 The George Eliot Letters, V, 448; George Eliot, "The Lifted Veil", in Works of George Eliot, Library edition, 10 vols (Edinburgh, 1901), V, 272.
- 5 The George Eliot Letters, III, 231.

- 6 Gordon S. Haight, *George Eliot: A Biography* (Oxford, 1968), p. 9.
- 7 *George Eliot's Life as Related in Her Letters and Journals*, edited by J. W. Cross, 3 vols (Edinburgh, 1885), III, 420, 419.
- 8 *George Eliot's Life*, I, 23; *The George Eliot Letters*, I, 278.
- 9 Thomas á Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, translated by Leo Sherley-Price, Penguin Classics (Harmondsworth, 1952), p. 60.
- 10 *The George Eliot Letters*, I, 46.
- 11 *The George Eliot Letters*, I, 122.
- 12 Basil Willey, *Nineteenth Century Studies: Coleridge to Matthew Arnold* (London, 1949), p. 204.
- 13 George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, edited by A. S. Byatt, Penguin English Library (Harmondsworth, 1979), p. 72.
- 14 *The George Eliot Letters*, II, 82.
- 15 George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, edited by W. J. Harvey, Penguin English Library (Harmondsworth, 1965), p. 153.
- 16 George Eliot, *Romola*, edited by Andrew Sanders, Penguin English Library (Harmondsworth, 1980), p. 493.
- 17 George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, edited by Barbara Hardy, Penguin English Library (Harmondsworth, 1967), p. 765.
- 18 *Daniel Deronda*, p. 584.