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Joseph Wiesenfarth

MYTHIC PERSPECTIVES IN GEORGE ELIOT'S FICTION

George Eliot developed a systematic sense of myth and mythmaking when she read and translated D.F. Strauss's *Das Leben Jesu kritisch bearbeitet* into *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined* (1846). Strauss carries on his monumental work of demythologizing the gospels by affirming that myth represents the truth of human feelings and aspirations and that these themselves are an expression of the Idea that divinity and humanity are to be united. This Hegelian theory of the place of primitive Christianity in the evolution of man's historical destiny depends for its elaboration on the conception of myth that Strauss derived from Karl Otfried Müller's book of 1825 *Prolegomena zu einer wissenschaftlichen Mythologie*, which was translated by John Leitch in 1844 as *Introduction to a Scientific System of Mythology*. A brilliant classical scholar, Müller argued that 'mythical images were formed by the influence of sentiments common to all mankind' and that the articulator of myth simply obeys 'the impulse which acts also upon the minds of his hearers, he is but the mouth through which all speak, the skilful interpreter who has address first to give form and expression to the thoughts of all.' What the community affirms, the mythmaker expresses. The myth that arises is the poetry of their beliefs.

George Eliot reformulates Müller's sense of myth in three places in her canon. In 'Janet's Repentance', when Bill Powers is encouraged by Dempster to incite the crowd against Mr. Tryan, the narrator ironically likens him to 'the enunciator of ancient myth who makes the assemblage distinctly conscious of the common sentiment that had drawn them together.' In *Silas Marner* the antique Mr. Macey is presented as the mythmaker of Raveloe. He is described as an 'oracular old gentleman' in chapter 7; and the epithet 'oracular' seems especially important here because George Eliot emended her manuscript to insert the word in her text. Mr. Macey's recital of the story of the Lammeter-Osgood wedding and the story of how the Warrens become the Charity land is ritualistic. These stories are the heritage of the community, all listen attentively to them, and a certain few ask premeditated questions at designated moments in the course of the recital. 'Every one of Mr. Macey's audience had heard this story many times, but it was listened to as if it had been a favourite tune, and at certain points the puffing of pipes was momentarily suspended, that the listeners might give their whole minds to the expected words. But there was more to come; and Mr. Snell, the landlord, duly put the leading question' (ch. 6). Mr. Macey's voice is heard as the single voice that orchestrates the belief of the many.

George Eliot once again re-creates Müller's mythmaker in the person of the troubadour poet Juan in *The Spanish Gypsy*. Juan explains to Pepita that the poetic act of

singing her a love song does not necessarily make him a lover outside the song itself, because, as he says:

‘Juan is not a living man all by himself;
His life is breathed in him by other men,
And they speak out of him. He is their voice.

....

We old, old poets, if we kept our hearts,
Should hardly know them from another man’s.
They shrink to make room for the many more
We keep within us.’ (Book I)

These three illustrations of George Eliot’s use of Müller’s sense of mythmaking are progressively more explicit and progressively more serious. It is almost as though the truth of Müller’s formulation impressed itself only gradually on Eliot’s sensibility and that she did not actually achieve a total realization of its implications until she wrote *The Legend of Jubal* (1869), a poem about the vocation of the poet himself. Jubal is a mythopoeic poem in which George Eliot ascribes the origin of music to Jubal, son of Cain, who invents the lyre in its most rudimentary form and takes its music and his song all around the world only to return home to a music-filled land where he himself is totally unrecognized. But Jubal realizes, finally, that such lack of recognition does not matter. What does matter is that his very own ‘fate/ Was human music’s self incorporate’:

‘Thy senses keenness and thy passionate strife
Were flesh of her flesh and womb of her life.’

Less cryptically, one man had the courage to gather into himself all of human music and give it adequate expression. And Jubal’s fate was to music what George Eliot’s was to fiction. Not that she invented it, of course; but that in her fiction she had become the mythmaker of the secular humanist community of nineteenth-century Europe. Her novels express what that community thought and felt. They forge a richly moral fiction in the absence of a generally accepted theological doctrine. The myths in her novels, therefore, are at the service of the supreme moral principle of fellow-feeling. They show how through suffering men and women can learn sympathy with others who are not unlike themselves and thereby make human life a possibility and even at times a joy.

Sympathetic understanding of others is a matter of major commitment in George Eliot’s novels and expresses itself simply in the movement of one person towards another (Silas toward Eppie) or more complexly, as the context of commitment widens, in the bonds between the individual and the family (Maggie and the

Tullivers), the individual and religious belief (Dinah and Methodism), the individual and a social group (Felix and the workers), the individual and the nation (Romola and Florence), the individual and his race (Mordecai and the Jews), and, finally, the individual and humanity (Deronda and the world). Progressively, therefore, the fullest development of moral nature is attained only when the bonds which knit man to fellowman, family, religion, group, nation, and race are integrated with and become identical to the bonds which knit man to mankind. In fellow-feeling George Eliot finds the saving point of man's moral experience; and from it, in its variety and complexity, she plots the mythology of modern civilization.

Eliot incorporates myth into her fiction in at least three ways: first, at times it is used in allusions; second, at times it is used to establish a structural pattern; and, third, at times it is used as an energizing force. Each of these uses of myth can be more or less briefly illustrated. The use of mythical allusions is so common that one is hard-put to make a choice, but suppose we look at the allusion to Hercules at the end of chapter 18 of *Middlemarch*. Shortly after Lydgate casts his vote for Mr. Tyke to be chaplain of the fever hospital — he intended, remember, to vote for Mr. Farebrother — he finds that there is 'a pitiable infirmity of will in Mr. Farebrother,' but remains curiously unaware of his own recent infirmity of will in voting for the chaplain. He is moved — somewhat in self-justification for his vote, I think — to criticize the vicar's reflections on Hercules:

The vicar's talk was not always inspiring: he had escaped being a Pharisee, but he had not escaped that low estimate of possibilities which we rather hastily arrive at as an inference from our own failure. Lydgate thought that there was a pitiable infirmity of will in Mr. Farebrother.

Prodicus, the ancient writer whom Farebrother refers to, tells the story of the Choice of Hercules; it is preserved by Xenophon in the *Memorabilia* (II.i.21). Hercules comes to a crossroads where he meets Virtue and Vice and resolves to follow Virtue, endure hardship, and become antiquity's greatest hero. Lydgate thinks well of this Hercules, whom he seems to think could easily be a model for him. Both have, after all, released people from the grip of Death: Hercules restores Alcestis to Admetus, and Lydgate restores Fred Vincy to Mrs. Vincy, the Middlemarch Niobe. But the other stories of Hercules that Farebrother tells, drawing on Sophocles (*Women of Trachis*) and Ovid (*Fasti* 2:309; *Metamorphoses* 9:201), displease Lydgate. They depict the Hercules who cards wool for Omphale and wears the fatal Nessus shirt sent by his wife Deianira. This Hercules, in truth, is the one whom Lydgate resembles the more, for his skilful hands are given the task of plaiting Rosamond's hair; and she becomes his basil plant, feeding, as he says in the Finale, on 'a murdered man's brains.' When Lydgate was at his crossroads, he resolved 'to do good small work for

Middlemarch and great work for the world' (ch. 15). But he fails to do either, because, as Mr. Farebrother tells Dorothea in chapter 72, 'character is not cut in marble — it is not something solid and unalterable.' How ironic it is that chapter 19 should open with Will Ladislaw standing in front of the Belvedere Torso! It is not, as is often thought, a statue of Apollo. It is the mutilated remains of the torso of Hercules, who is resting after his great labours. So much for one (not so) simple classical allusion.

The patterning of a story on a myth begins as early as 'Mr Gilfil's Love-Story' in which the relationship of Anthony Wybrow to Caterina Sarti is based on the myth of Narcissus and Echo and that of Gilfil and Caterina on that of Orpheus and Eurydice; the first expresses self-love and the second selfless love, and in their juxtaposition George Eliot completely embodies conflict in mythic analogues. A late instance of the same kind of patterning occurs in *Daniel Deronda*, where Gwendolen's turbulent relationship with Grandcourt and Lydia Glasher is totally realized on the model of Creusa's relationship to Jason and Medea.

This kind of structure flirts with artificiality if a writer slavishly imitates a mythical model. So the model must be *emulated*, not *imitated*. G. H. Lewes made this distinction in an 1845 review when discussing Lessing's drama *Emilia Galotti*, which was based on the Virginius myth of the father who kills his daughter at her bidding rather than let her be defiled ('Lessing', *Edinburgh Review* 82, 451-70). Lewes maintained that Lessing mistakenly adopted a pagan ethic along with a mythic pattern when trying to express himself in a Christian context. George Eliot, following Lewes's lead, registered shock in her Autograph Journal on seeing the play: 'The Roman myth of Virginius is grand, but the situation transported to modern times and divested of its political bearing is simply shocking' (21 November 1854). She also preserved Lewes's distinction between the imitation and emulation of myths in her remarks on such diverse works as Goethe's *West-östliche Divan*, Meredith's *The Shaving of Shagpat*, and Sophocles's *Antigone*. Her statement on the last in 'The *Antigone* and its Moral' (*Leader* 29 March 1856) suggests both the permanence of myth and its openness to adaptation: 'Whenever the strength of a man's intellect, or moral sense, or affection brings him into opposition with the rules which society has sanctioned, *there* is renewed conflict between *Antigone* and *Creon*.' This sense of the *Antigone* allowed George Eliot to use it in fashioning the moral conflicts of *The Mill on the Floss* and *Romola*.

The third way that George Eliot uses myth in her novels is by allowing it to act as an energizing force. In 'Janet's Repentance,' for instance, Mr. Tryan is cast into the role of the Good Shepherd. But not only does he develop according to the model of Jesus, he also believes and lives the Christian myth that is his model. A similar use of myth occurs in *The Mill on the Floss* where the Legend of St. Ogg is lived out by Maggie

Tulliver, who professes the value of spontaneous caring contained in the myth. Eliot's most thorough use of the energizing force of myth occurs in *Daniel Deronda* where Mordecai is inspired by the Jewish myth of the return from Exile to the Promised Land, and he passes on this inspiration to Deronda.

Aside from these uses of myth, there is an interesting dialectical development within George Eliot's fiction that is best seen in her changing attitude toward the story of Ariadne. In *Romola* Ariadne is allied to Bacchus and seen as leading a carefree life with this 'Care-dispeller.' In *Middlemarch*, however, the myth of Bacchus, Ariadne, Theseus, and the Minotaur is used architectonically in Dorothea's story where Ariadne is presented as heroine. This acceptance of Ariadne is allied to an acceptance of passionate feeling, which adds a new dimension to *Middlemarch*. By the time George Eliot comes to write *Deronda*, she is ready to praise Rex Gascoigne's 'fiery, demonic' love for Gwendolen.

If one takes a stance outside of George Eliot's conception of myth and her ways of using it, one can see the emergence of another kind of mythic pattern in her fiction. Northrop Frye's definition in *Anatomy of Criticism* of the genres of comedy, romance, tragedy, and irony as the mythoi of spring, summer, autumn, and winter helps us to take an overview of the canon. *Scenes of Clerical Life* are rudimentary experiments in tragedy ('Amos' and 'Gilfil') and tragicomedy ('*Janet's Repentance*'). *Adam Bede* is a tragicomedy; 'The Lifted Veil' an instance of irony; *The Mill on the Floss* and *Romola* are tragedies in the classic mode; and *Silas Marner* and *Felix Holt* are comedies in the mode of Greek middle comedy, 'tragedy in the disguise of mirth' ('Menander and Greek Comedy,' *Leader* 16 June 1855). *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda* are romances; that is, they are stories of quest in the epic mode, one with analogues in the Golden Age of Spain and the life of Theresa of Avila, and the other with an analogue in *Exodus* and the Jewish search for a homeland. Viewed in this context, George Eliot's novels begin by exploring tragedy, comedy, and irony in small limited communities and move to exploring the tragedy and comedy of life in the politicized societies of *Romola* and *Felix Holt*; and finally they move out beyond these genres in quest for new political configurations of life in the Reform Era of *Middlemarch* and the end of Exile in *Deronda*. George Eliot's fiction concludes, appropriately, on a note of quest. Having begun with the simplest use of myth in allusion, she ends with its most complex use as an energizing force to open new worlds.