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John Rignall

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John Rignall

METAPHOR, TRUTH AND THE MOBILE IMAGINATION IN *THE MILL ON THE FLOSS*

The relationship, and conflict, between brother and sister that lies at the heart of *The Mill on the Floss* involves not only important differences of character and gender, but also radically different modes of thought and expression. The contrast between narrow-minded Tom and large-souled Maggie is, among other things, a contrast between different forms of knowledge and different ways of using language. For Tom, with his 'conscious rectitude of purpose' and 'narrowness of imagination and intellect',¹ knowledge is unquestioning, unhesitating, and immune to doubt. No shadow of epistemological uncertainty dims the harsh light by which he sees and judges. In describing the qualities of such a mind as his, the narrator stresses its predisposition to prejudice and, at the same time, defines an alternative view of knowledge: 'prejudices come as the natural food of tendencies which can get no sustenance out of that complex, fragmentary, doubt-provoking knowledge which we call truth' (579). The first-person plural here unites narrator and reader in the community of the enlightened who can perceive Tom's limitations and appreciate the difficult and elusive nature of true knowledge. It is towards this kind of knowledge 'which we call truth' that Maggie struggles, and for which she suffers; and it is this kind of knowledge that the novel itself promotes, making us aware, for instance, of the complex pattern of strengths and weaknesses, of admirable single-mindedness and pernicious dogmatism and self-righteousness, that constitutes Tom's character. Such knowledge is not only beyond the mental capacity of a man like Tom, but also it cannot be conveyed by his kind of plain-speaking. Complex understanding requires linguistic subtlety — the sort of subtlety that is, in the first place, the property of Eliot's narrator, and one of whose essential features is metaphor.

The narrator's well-known discourse on metaphor is set in train by the attempt to define the young Tom's resistance to the formal education he is subjected to at the hands of Mr Stelling. The painful predicament of a boy with no head for abstractions, little power of speech, and no capacity to use or even understand metaphor, is described and reflected upon in a passage which both employs metaphors and combines them with an abstract commentary on metaphorical speech. The character is made the object of a mode of knowing and speaking that will always lie beyond him. However, the irony here is not simply at the expense of Tom, his youth and his limitations of mind and language, for the passage touches upon an irony inherent in the nature of language itself. The apostrophe to Aristotle in which the meditation on metaphor culminates, concludes by alluding to a general problem of language, the problem of fitting words to things, of finding linguistic equivalents for the objects of experience: 'we can so seldom declare what a thing is, except by saying it is some-

thing else' (209). The implications of this observation go beyond Aristotle's identification of metaphorical speech as a sign of high intelligence, for it raises the possibility that all speech is intrinsically metaphorical. As Nietzsche is to put it a few years later, 'we believe we know something about the things themselves when we speak of trees, colour, snow, and flowers; and yet we possess nothing but metaphors for things — metaphors which correspond in no way to the original entities'.² Eliot never goes as far as Nietzsche's thoroughgoing scepticism about language and his radical demolition of the notion of truth; but if we place her reflections on metaphor alongside the later reference to 'that complex, fragmentary, doubt-provoking knowledge which we call truth' (579), we have, so to speak, the component parts of Nietzsche's famous pronouncement: 'What then is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms'.³ *The Mill on the Floss* does not exactly confirm this anticipation of what has become the poststructuralist orthodoxy, but it does raise questions about metaphor and its relation to truth, and provoke doubts about the definitive knowledge which the novel appears to offer us in its conclusion.

It is certainly possible to read Eliot's awareness and exploitation of the problematic nature of language and knowledge in this novel in terms of gender, as her means of challenging the dogmatic certainties of a male-dominated culture whose immediate representative in Maggie's life is her brother.⁴ Tom's inflexible certitude casts him as one of those 'men of maxims' whom the narrator takes to task for being 'guided in their moral judgment solely by general rules ... without [taking] the trouble of exerting patience, discrimination, impartiality' (628). Ironically, his arch-enemy, the lawyer Wakem, is a man of a similarly narrow and dogmatic cast of mind who also sees women as mere appurtenances to the male: 'We don't ask what a woman does — we ask whom she belongs to' (542-3). Nevertheless, while the novel clearly exposes such masculine bigotry for what it is, Eliot seems to take pains not to attribute narrowmindedness exclusively to one gender. The narrator may castigate 'them *men* of maxims', but in the same chapter the gossips who condemn Maggie for returning to St Ogg's without first marrying Stephen Guest are shown to be female: 'Public opinion in these cases is always of the feminine gender — not the world, but the world's wife' (619). Similarly, the contrast between Tom's and Maggie's sensitivity to language may repeat the contrast between their parents', but it does so with the genders reversed. It is the literal-minded Mrs Tulliver who comically fails to understand Mr Tulliver's figure of speech when he claims that she would want him not to hire a good waggoner because 'he'd got a mole on his face' (57); and her obtuseness forces from him the weary explanation: 'I didn't mean justly the mole; I meant it to stand for summat else; but niver mind — it's puzzling work, talking is' (58). The mother is as ignorant of metaphor as the son, while awareness of the puzzling work of language links father to daughter, for even as a child Maggie knows that one word 'may mean several things' (214). There is no clear line of patriarchal descent as far as inflexibility of mind and language are concerned.

It is also the case that in Philip Wakem Maggie finds a male counterpart who shares both her sensitivity to language and her agility of mind — an agility which runs the risk of being branded as mere shallowness. Mr Stelling's dismissal of girls' merely superficial cleverness — 'They can pick up a little of everything, I daresay... but they couldn't go far into anything. They're quick and shallow' (220-1) — finds an echo in Philip's melancholy self-analysis in conversation with Maggie in the Red Deeps. When she remarks that he seems to think more of painting than anything, he replies:

'Perhaps I do ... but I think of too many things — sow all sorts of seeds, and get no great harvest from any one of them. I'm cursed with susceptibility in every direction, and effective faculty in none. I care for painting and music — I care for classic literature, and medieval literature and modern literature — I flutter all ways, and fly in none.' (426)

Both the substance of this self-description and its mode of expression are significant. What Philip is defining and criticizing in himself is the disposition of a dilettante; and his self-criticism seems to imply the superiority of that single-mindedness so forcefully demonstrated by Tom Tulliver. Yet the judgement he passes on himself is not necessarily one that the novel endorses. As in the case of that other dilettante figure, Will Ladislaw in *Middlemarch*, the dilettante disposition has the redeeming qualities of a broad and generous understanding and a mobile and sympathetic imagination. It is one way — perhaps a peculiarly masculine way — of being 'large-souled' (635) like Maggie; and her response to Philip at this point shows that they share not only a common outlook, but also a common breadth of imagination and mode of expression. Philip's metaphor of fluttering and flying is taken up by Maggie and neatly turned into an answering simile: 'It always seemed to me a sort of clever stupidity only to have one sort of talent — almost like a carrier pigeon' (426). The intercourse of these two mobile imaginations involves not so much the puzzling work of language as its deft and playful manipulation in metaphor. It is no coincidence that the very name of their secret meeting place, the Red Deeps, is itself daringly charged with metaphorical meaning. 'A good metaphor', Aristotle maintains in the passage that the narrator is clearly alluding to (94), 'implies an intuitive perception of the similarity in dissimilars.'⁵ The capacity for such perception is certainly one of the characteristics which distinguish the mobile imaginations of Philip and Maggie; but another, equally important, is the ability to acknowledge and deal with difference. Tom's stultifying bigotry consists in his refusal to accept any other viewpoint than his own, or to accommodate the manifestly different character of his sister by tempering the demands he makes on her. By contrast, Philip's final letter to Maggie movingly acknowledges the difference, and the gulf, between them, makes no demands, and simply offers trust, love, and support. The style of the letter rises in places to a level of passionately rhetorical metaphor — 'You have been to my affections what light, what colour is to my eyes — what music is to the inward ear' (634) — but it also speaks plainly of difference and

distance: 'I have no just claim on you for more than affectionate remembrance'; and 'I know that we must keep apart for a while' (635). Here the large soul and the mobile imagination encompass both forms of expression, the figurative and the plain, and perceive both similarity and inescapable difference.

The value implicitly accorded in this novel to both the perception of similarity and the acknowledgement of difference is one of the factors that makes the ending so problematic. As has often been noted, Tom and Maggie's final embrace obliterates the differences that have developed between them on the basis of gender and character. At the same time the narrator's assertion that in this moment they relive the past, postulates a similarity between their dying embrace and their childhood companionship which is clearly spurious. The comparison with 'the days when they clasped their little hands in love, and roamed the daisied fields together' (655), looks more like a metaphor than a description of their past experience. The actual childhood scenes in the novel tell a very different story — a story of Maggie's subordination to her domineering and unforgiving brother. If the final image is a metaphor, it is one that is prepared for not by the scenes of Tom and Maggie as children, but by the narrator's reflections on childhood in that early part of the novel. It is, the narrator muses, memories of the countryside dating back to early childhood that make the familiar features of the natural world so resonant with meaning:

These familiar flowers, these well-remembered bird-notes, this sky with its fitful brightness, these furrowed and grassy fields, each with a sort of personality given to it by the capricious hedgerows—such things as these are the mother tongue of our imagination, the language that is laden with all the subtle inextricable associations the fleeting hours of our childhood left behind them. (94)

The importance of the countryside for memory and imagination is conveyed by the significant metaphor of the mother tongue. The natural world of childhood is figuratively a language; and it is, of course, figurative language that serves to reproduce that world. What this passage does is bring together nature, childhood, the metaphor of language, and the language of metaphor in a meditative moment of harmony which unites past and present, man and nature, the estranged adult and the familiar countryside of home. In doing so it provides a means of understanding the closing image of the two children with hands clasped in love. The image of Tom and Maggie roaming the daisied fields together is a metaphor of unity and harmony which recapitulates the elements of the narrator's meditation; and it offers knowledge not of the past, but rather of an ideal.

Metaphor here is certainly the mark of a mobile imagination, but one which, for reasons that may be both personal and aesthetic, is driven to produce a consoling fiction

rather than the 'doubt-provoking knowledge which we call truth'. Metaphors may mislead as well as illumine. However, in the brief Conclusion which follows the drowning, both the acknowledgement of difference and the perception of convincing similarity reassert themselves. 'Nature repairs her ravages', we are told, but 'to the eyes that have dwelt on the past, there is no thorough repair' (656). Loss is irremediable, difference is unmistakeable when the past is clearly perceived. Yet the mobile imagination may still find consolation. For Philip, alone in the Red Deeps, 'the buried joy seemed still to hover — like a revisiting spirit' (656). The past lives on in the memory, and in the language of metaphor, for the hovering of the spirit carries an echo of the image of fluttering with which Philip once described himself, and which Maggie so neatly answered. This delicate filament of connection is the kind of linguistic subtlety that best serves the 'complex, fragmentary, doubt-provoking knowledge' which this novel aspires to and which, leaving aside the concluding asseverations of unity, it persuades us to call by the name of truth.

Notes

- 1 *The Mill on the Floss*, ed. A.S. Byatt (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1979), 579. Further references to this edition are given in brackets in the text.
- 2 Nietzsche, 'On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense', *Philosophy and Truth*, trans. Daniel Breazeale (New Jersey and London, Humanities Press International, 1979), 82-3.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 84. This translation actually has 'moving host' rather than 'mobile army', but I have preferred to use the latter expression since it is more widely known.
- 4 As Mary Jacobus has done in 'The Question of Language: Men of Maxims and *The Mill on the Floss*', *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 8 (1981-2), 207-22.
- 5 *Aristotle's Art of Poetry*, ed. W. Hamilton Fyfe (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1940), 62.