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‘EVEN OUR FAILURES ARE A PROPHECY’: THE MILL ON THE FLOSS AND THE 1860s*
By Marilyn Orr

My title comes from a poem, ‘A Minor Prophet’, written by George Eliot in 1865, and I want to enlist its help in showing in this paper how the failures she experienced during the decade following the publication of The Mill on the Floss turned into a prophecy that shaped an aesthetic for the rest of her career.

Also known as ‘My Vegetarian Friend’, this poem traces many of the important ideas that Eliot has been working with from the start of her career. It begins as a humorous characterization of ‘a vegetarian seer’, who anticipates a glorious ‘Millennium’ in which animals, along with all other ‘meaner brutes’, will no longer be required: ‘By dint of diet vegetaritan/ All will be harmony of hue and line/ Bodies and minds all perfect, limbs well-tuned/ And talk quite free from aught erroneous’. In response, his friend the narrator (aka George Eliot one would have to think) declares his own contrary penchant for ‘nature’s blunders, evanescent types/ Which sages banish from Utopia’. The narrator assures his interlocutor that he worships ‘with the rest’ in beauty’s temple but adds, ‘by my hearth I keep a sacred nook’ for ‘the dear imperfect things’. Here then, the poem reworks the aesthetic credo most cogently expressed in Chapter 17 of Adam Bede, which argued for the equal rights of women peeling carrots and Madonnas as subjects for art. Eliot again reasserts here the need for the artist to love beauty and the commonplace. And she goes on to argue throughout her career that the beautiful are ethically obliged to love the ugly outcast.

But the poem identifies a further imperative: not only are the beautiful people under an ethical obligation to love the ugly, they need to do so in order to promote the sympathy that underlies human relations and so that they themselves might become good. The narrator expresses ‘pity’ for ‘future men’, who, living in a perfect world ‘will not know/ A keen experience with pity blent/ The pathos exquisite of lovely minds/ Hid in harsh forms – ‘. So the practice of compassion is as beneficial to the giver as to the receiver, and, further, there must be ugliness in order for there to be goodness. The poem thus identifies a ‘paradox’ that pervades Eliot’s whole career – her love for beauty, along with her longing for a better world in which love, peace, and justice prevail, counterbalanced always by her conviction that it is the desire for good, dependent upon the existence of its opposite, that constitutes the best of human nature.

The poem goes on to consider some of the historical implications of this quandary by representing how the ordinary citizen looks at what Carlyle would call the Great Man. The narrator describes ‘the patched and plodding citizen’, who exults in the coming of ‘some victorious world-hero’ but then settles back into the ‘more easy fellowship’ of his neighbours, acknowledging that, ‘could he choose’, this ordinary soul would turn time backwards, not forwards, in order to revisit the days of his hero-less childhood. ‘Yet no!’ the narrator cries, ‘the earth yields nothing more Divine/ Than high prophetic vision – ‘ that ‘beholds/ The paths of beauteous order’ – a future that leaves the flaws of the past behind. The poem resolves itself in a conclusion that accepts the paradox that the future must be different but the same: ‘Our finest hope is finest memory’. Here we see a tension that shapes all of Eliot’s work – the love for the
past (the slow, the gentle, the static) and the resistance to Utopia, counterbalanced always by the passion for a better world. It is such conflicting desires as these that cost Maggie her life and cause Eliot to consider the possibilities for an ideal hero or heroine in subsequent works of this decade.

Such desires also compel her in this decade to develop an aesthetic to address them. In this poem the narrator claims art and fine action as the necessary guide, for, he says, ‘faith’ is strengthened by the emotion that rises at the goodness evident in music, art, and ‘noble and at gentle deeds’ regardless of their success. The narrator has opined: ‘Bitterly/ I feel that every change upon this earth/ Is bought with sacrifice’. But here, near the end of the poem, he confronts the more perplexing problem of a sacrifice that achieves no change:

Even our failures are a prophecy,
Even our yearnings and our bitter tears
After that fair and true we cannot grasp;
As patriots who seem to die in vain
Make liberty more sacred by their pangs.

In saying that in our failures and tearful yearnings we are like patriots who seem to die in vain but actually make liberty more sacred by suffering for it, the narrator shifts attention away from the accomplishment of ‘that fair and true’ to the sincere desire itself. This reflects Eliot’s crucial realization at this period that whatever the social outcome of heroic deeds or of art, their importance in sustaining and even bettering those who are inspired by them cannot be overestimated. The poem thus opens up the whole question of heroism and of the questions concomitant with it, particularly the relation between public, social life and private, inner life, and, at another level, the seen and the unseen. Like a number of her poems, this one thus presents a dialogue between Eliot and herself, here debating ideas whose outworking energizes all of her fiction, beginning with their most intense formulation in The Mill on the Floss: the pros and cons of progress, the value of heroism, the significance of the individual, and the role of the artist.

These questions are the pressing ones that Eliot explores for the rest of her career, and the period of the 1860s bears an interesting kind of metonymic relation to them as the period of Eliot’s own supposed failure. This period is ushered in by her writing the death of Maggie Tulliver, which she accomplishes, as reported by Lewes, with more ‘bitter tears’ than accompanied any other work.2 Maggie’s death, interpreted so variously, is so very provocative because it gathers into itself many of the words we have for violent death — murder, suicide, sacrifice, and martyrdom — and affirms them all. If nothing else, Maggie is a martyr to the paradox cited above: the woman who is too in love with the past to have a future. In the present context, however, it is not a death that could be called ‘vain’, for hers is also a death that is a birth — the birth of George Eliot, novelist. Had she stopped writing fiction at this point her novels would still be honoured, but probably as pastoral, even nostalgic, accounts of the pre-industrial English Midlands. Instead, I would argue, Maggie’s death is a failure that is also a prophecy of George Eliot’s commitment to writing novels that are, in the poem’s words, ‘double mirrors, making still/ An endless vista of fair things before/ Repeating things behind’.

In this context, Maggie becomes the first in the series of heroes and heroines of subsequent
novels through whom Eliot works through questions related to the problem of appearing to die in vain and the equally heroic but more quotidian problem of appearing to live in vain. Eliot highlights her attention to the first of these questions in her *Leaves from a Note-Book* (undated) when she quotes her own Fedalma, the Spanish Gypsy — ‘The grandest death! to die in vain —’ — in the note entitled by the editor ‘‘A Fine Excess’. Feeling is Energy’ (*Essays and Poems* 222). Eliot reinforces her statement by saying ‘I really believe and mean this, — not as a rule of general action, but as a possible grand instance of determining energy in human sympathy, which even in particular cases, where it has only a magnificent futility, is more adorable, or as we say divine, than un pitying force, or than a prudent calculation of results’ (222-3). While the self-sacrifice that achieves the calculated results may indeed claim ‘the highest title to our veneration, and makes the supreme heroism’, she concedes, ‘the generous leap of sympathy is needed too to swell the flood of sympathy in us beholders’ (223). Feeling, in other words, indeed an ‘excess’ of feeling, cannot come from calculation and is necessary to provide the ‘energy’ that fuels the struggle for goodness in the world. We ‘beholders’ of heroic action are moved to good actions by acts of ‘magnificent futility’ more than by results.

Also in this Note Eliot castigates any who would use hopelessness as a reason for inaction, arguing ultimately, as I’ve said, that apparently futile heroism energizes observers for good. To despair of the value of one’s own actions ‘comes from that sapless kind of reasoning which is falsely taken for a sign of supreme mental activity, but is really due to languor, . . . and to a lack of sympathetic emotion’ (222). It is interesting to read of this kind of judgement from the pen of the woman whose self-doubt is legendary, whose journals are riddled with questions about the value of her work. Yet these judgements, as well as her frequent words of encouragement about the importance of even the smallest good work, hold all the more weight when we know that they arise out of a sense of her own failings. In this respect Maggie takes on further importance, in that she might be seen as a ‘martyr’ not only to the cause of women and to what is called in the novel ‘historical advance’ but to the advance of George Eliot’s writing. 3 The ‘futility’ of Maggie’s death is ‘magnificent’ indeed in its ‘fine excess’ of feeling that not only continues to inspire generations of response but propelled Eliot forward into a whole new stage of her career.

The importance of the ending of *The Mill on the Floss* is profound, for whether one sees it as an apocalyptic catharsis or an emotional consummation, it clearly inaugurates ‘George Eliot’ as novelist by marking Marian Evans’s departure from the landscape of personal memory that had grounded and nurtured her first works of fiction. Even though *Silas Marner* was published only a year later and developed out of memories of her youth, it is not written from the same emotional place: it is as if her imagination had accepted Maggie’s suffering and death as adequate propitiation and had ceased to require Eliot to re-live early experiences. (While I would not want to interpret all of this in a Freudian way, I would argue that though she continues to use remembered events to inspire her stories she never again is compelled to re-live them.)

This period marks a shift at every level, and it is rooted in developments in Eliot’s religious imagination. Having moved beyond the religious terrain of her youth, she was seeking a new kind of holy ground for her imagination. Maggie’s dramatic death signals the shift in psychological landscape that resulted from Eliot’s leaving behind the landscape of her
childhood and youth, a move that was reflected in a chronotopical shift in the geographical and temporal terrain of her next works. This change took a religious form because the imaginative core of her earlier works was what she once called in a letter ‘the inward life of sincere Christians’ that she witnessed in her youth (III, 230-31), and what continued to fascinate and energize her was the question of belief. Again, this fascination and energy were more than thematic, for her own need for belief – to believe in belief, as it were – constituted a religion for her.

Since the death of her father she had travelled extensively, but in this period she travels farther and more frequently and ventures more deliberately to push geographical boundaries. As if using her body to mimic her internal adventures, her travels reflect her religious and personal journeying. As a young woman she had visited Switzerland and Germany, as if, following her intense engagement with Strauss and Feuerbach, she meant physically to trace the terrain of Protestantism that would soon be the ground of her fiction. This new stage is marked by frequent visits to Italy and a truly adventuresome and highly significant journey to Spain, the nations which, along with France, are most associated with Roman Catholicism. Spatial journeying is matched then with temporal when Romola takes her imagination to pre-Reformation Renaissance Italy and The Spanish Gypsy, to medieval Spain, and thereby to religious worlds that predate both the Victorian crisis of faith and her own.

These journeys also mark a break out of the provincial environment that had suffocated Maggie, and The Mill on the Floss has already suggested the need for such religious questing. We are all familiar with two important references to religion in Maggie’s life: her intense relationship with Thomas a Kempis and the futility of Dr Kenn’s attempt to help her in the face of the unloving Christian community. But I want to remind us of a moment in Maggie’s childhood when Eliot points to a major flaw in the church. You will remember Mr Stelling, Tom’s tutor, famous for crushing the precocious Maggie’s spirit by granting her only the ‘superficial cleverness’ of girls (150). In talking about the education Tom is receiving, the narrator makes a long disquisition on the human dependence on metaphors, a dependence which prevents Tom’s tutor from understanding the nature of his pupil’s mind and teaching him accordingly. This critique of Mr Stelling is part of a larger critique of an education system that uses language to close, instead of open, children’s minds to the world and the world to children. But crucially this is also part of Eliot’s critique of religion, for Mr Stelling is also a cleric, trying to eke out a living to supply his wife with fashionable clothes and furnishings. In this context the narrator writes of Mr Stelling:

He thought religion was a very excellent thing, and Aristotle a great authority, and deaneries and prebends useful institutions, and Great Britain the providential bulwark of Protestantism, and faith in the unseen a great support to afflicted minds: he believed in all these things, as a Swiss hotel-keeper believes in the beauty of the scenery around him, and in the pleasures it gives to artistic visitors. (138)

This sentence is packed with important ideas: for one thing, it underlines Eliot’s compassion for young people, who are hostages to society – tiny individuals up against the massive power of social institutions and their blind agents. Also, in the scathing image of England as a
‘providential bulwark of Protestantism’, she points to the narrow, provincial, self-satisfied attitude of a church that defines god and the universe in its own limited terms. Here too she alludes to the cleric’s condescending attitude towards artists, who see more in the world around them than the hotel-keeper can imagine. And here too she points to the fundamental ingredient both of imagination and of religion: a faith in the unseen, which is guided by the senses and the reason but refuses to be limited by them. One of the predominant metaphors throughout Eliot’s fiction is the narrow vs. wide view, and here she gives it explicitly geographical shape in representing the smallness of English Protestantism. This is important in signalling the literal sense that grounds the imaginative journeying she is promoting; for it is significant that Eliot had herself been to Switzerland, on her first expedition away from England, and I don’t think it is pushing the point too much to say that her analogy about the Swiss hotel-keeper gains imaginative power from its being based on actual experience. This analogy points vividly to a major idea that underlies her fiction: that imagination is the vital ingredient of faith that is lacking in the religious institutions of her time.

Eliot’s letters of the 1860s contain several significant references that map out the religious terrain she is traversing and suggest its necessary grounding in imagination. In response to two friends’ interest in Catholicism she writes that while she adheres to the view that the ‘highest “calling and election” is to do without opium’, she does not begrudge anyone else the ‘comfort’ to be found in the ‘forms and ceremonies’ of church. She goes so far as to say ‘sympathetically, I enjoy them myself. But I have faith in the working-out of higher possibilities than the Catholic or any other church has presented’ (III, 366). One of her strongest statements comes in a letter from 1862 when she refutes any propensity on her part ‘to rob a man of his religious belief’. She asserts, ‘I have too profound a conviction of the efficacy that lies in sincere faith, and the spiritual blight that comes with No-faith, to have any negative propagandism in me … I care only to know, if possible, the lasting meaning that lies in all religious doctrine from the beginning till now’ (IV, 64-65). It is this quest for the meaning of religion that takes her, if not to ‘the beginning’, at least far beyond her own space and time to Renaissance Italy and Medieval Spain.

The interrelation between Eliot’s aesthetic and religious quests is suggested by A. S. Byatt in her introduction to her edition of Eliot’s writings: ‘The long nineteenth-century debate about the precise meaning, or lack of meaning, of the Christian concept of the Incarnation … is inextricably connected, consciously and unconsciously, to the development of the form of the novel’. Eliot’s intense attention at this time to the question of form, and specifically the problem of incarnating her ideas, certainly bears out Byatt’s claim. Interestingly, Rosemary Ashton articulates the common criticism of Eliot’s works of this period in these very terms, stating that they ‘suffered from insufficient incarnation of ideas’. Indeed, though evidently quite different from each other, the three major works of this period – Romola, Felix Holt, and The Spanish Gypsy – have in common this manifestation of Eliot’s aesthetic experimentation with the question of, as she puts it, ‘how to make certain ideas thoroughly incarnate’ (IV, 15). While Eliot has written before about this question – notably in Chapter 17 of Adam Bede – during this period she is unusually forthcoming about her struggles, both the problem of trying to incarnate her ideas and the related problem of trying to express religious ideas in a new form. The major works of this period see her encountering new difficulties and expressing new griefs and doubts over her work, frequently in terms of a failure of incarnation.
Her journals and letters of this time confirm this period to be her deepest slough of despond, and the ‘unspeakable pains’ she refers to regarding her writing of Romola, for example (IV, 300) are in fact literal – physical and psychological. While her writing is always a painful process, this period is one of unprecedented suffering, and her journals are riddled with references to debilitating ‘headache and sickness’ and ‘feebleness of head and body’, frequently ‘producing terrible depression’ (Harris & Johnston, 109, 108; Diary 1863, 1862). Eliot’s experience of suffering actually provides the crucial link between the Incarnation as religious concept and incarnation as an aim of her fiction. For it is in experiencing the pain involved in investing her creations with life as ‘breathing, individual forms’, that she experiences the power of Incarnation as a divine force. As she notes to Blackwood about writing The Spanish Gypsy, it is a new experience for her to create something out of nothing, as it were (IV, 354).

It is tempting to say that Eliot learned how to suffer with integrity and at the same time to profit from her suffering by making Maggie a martyr for the cause of George Eliot, writer. But this novel is more accurately seen as a kind of culminating and turning point: it is in writing this novel that Eliot learns how to bring her life into her work without killing her self. Her earlier works had drawn heavily on memory, yet she was so unconscious of this dependence that she was genuinely surprised to find people identifying her characters with actual people. The ensuing battle over her identity and that of her characters – dubbed the Liggins affair, after the man who was credited with authorship of Adam Bede – is dramatic enough to have earned much critical attention, with the most interesting element being her telling silence when it becomes evident that she has been found out. Her own surprise smacks of the astonishment that comes from having kept her knowledge even from herself. The anguish involved in having to fight for her authorial identity gives her a better understanding of the intimacy between her work and her life. And it is this that empowers her to write Maggie and to kill her, as she enacts the painfully paradoxical experience of embracing her past and separating herself from it forever. The Mill on the Floss thus represents – pun intended – a watershed because it is also, to change metaphors, a point of intersection between her self and her life, which she had until now determined to keep separate.

Crucial to this process is her abiding but ever-deepening engagement with the topic of suffering. Early on, Eliot becomes aware that her task as a writer is actually the ‘vocation’ of an ‘artist’ charged with an ethical responsibility to arouse sympathy in her readers for the sufferings and shortcomings of their fellow mortals. From the beginning incarnation has always been central, and she has taken as her model the suffering Christ. ‘No wonder [man] needs a Suffering God’, the narrator of Adam Bede had said, and that whole novel is built on the struggle to believe in the transformative power of suffering and to show what it means to enter into the sorrows of others. In this context too Maggie’s death is enormously significant in that it leaves painfully open the question of the meaning of individual suffering, but it is also marks a crucial difference: from talking about the suffering of others in her fiction and talking about her own suffering to herself in her journal and letters, The Mill on the Floss has her integrating the two. For in this novel she participates in the sufferings of her characters, making them her own in a way that might be seen as masochistic or narcissistic – as we see in her intense grieving over Maggie’s terrible and necessary death. In this she is beginning to understand the relation between writing and suffering in a new way that takes her model of
sympathy beyond the level of ethics and aesthetics so that, without being her own story, the text is constituted of her own suffering. By the end of this decade of sorrows, I believe, she has begun to understand, or consciously to acknowledge, that rather than accomplishing her writing in spite of her suffering, she is suffering for her writing and writing out of her suffering.

This is tricky ground because, as she herself is so aware and as some critics have explored, there could be seen to be a morbid or superstitious element, carried over from her evangelical experience perhaps, whereby she is only permitted to achieve success by suffering, thereby paying for her happiness as all sinners must do. As Byatt notes, Eliot passionately hated the ‘doctrine of Compensation’, the cheap idea that one’s sorrows will be compensated by future reward or an improvement of character (xvi). She is aware of the danger that in seeming to preach about the redeeming power of suffering the writer risks minimizing the suffering and giving it a ‘meaning’ that is insulting both to the sufferer and to any presumed god. Even more, however, she deplored the idea of meaningless suffering. And all of this is such tricky ground in fact that except in occasional passing hints Eliot defers conscious acknowledgement – some would say represses her knowledge – that her own suffering has served the purpose of shaping not only her writing but her very self, until she has finished with fiction and produces the exquisite poem, ‘Self and Life’.

This separation between self and life was an essential survival tactic throughout Eliot’s writing life. The obvious manifestation of this split is of course in her self-naming, primarily in her pseudonym but as well, as Rosemarie Bodenheimer has explored, in the abundance of names she had for herself. Eliot’s self-naming was a fructifying force for her writing, but it is also an element of the self-construction which Paul Ricoeur claims is vital to the ‘narrative identity’ that all humans need to create for themselves. Eliot’s self-construction is part of the narrative habit of mind by which she constructs her own life in retrospect as a succession of narrative moments. As discussed above, her journal of the 1860s is a kind of litany of sorrows, and it is crucial to her writing life both that she construct such a text and that she then re-read it, for it is in the process of interpretation that the sorrows become an energizing force. This returns us to the poem and the Note on Feeling with which I began, and the notion that an observer – in this case her self – is energized to work for good by the display of ‘a fine excess’ of ‘feeling’ in an act of ‘magnificent futility’. In rereading her Journal, Eliot frequently encounters a suffering self that she has forgotten. This habit of self-reading continues to the end of her fiction-writing and indeed facilitates it. Having recorded in her diary some heartening responses to Daniel Deronda, for example, she writes: ‘I record these signs, that I may look back on them if they come to be confirmed’ (147). This reconfiguring of her own words (and those of others) into ‘signs’ reflects the crucial reinterpretation that established Eliot’s narrative identity. Whereas she begins by seeing her ailments of body and mind primarily as inhibiting her writing, she comes to see them as a sign of the value of her work and even as its substance. It is crucial to the power of this symbiosis, however, that the source of her energy remain hidden from herself: her suffering must retain the tenor of ‘futility’ in order to produce the energy of excess.

It is difficult to imagine a gesture more expressive of excess of feeling than Maggie’s very literal ‘generous leap of impulse’ into the raging Floss. Within the text it illustrates the futility that defines the magnificence of such gestures in that, had they waited, Maggie and Tom would
have been rescued; outside of the confines of the text it also raises the question of futility in that the novel has sparked endless debate as to its success and meaning. In the context of my argument this is interesting in that it shifts the discussion of suffering to the question of Eliot’s success or failure, whose terms are radically changed for her during this period of rethinking her aesthetic. Crucially important here is her religious imagination, which is further marked at this time by what she calls a ‘yearning affection towards the great religions of the world’ (IV, 472). While she had always thought of her work as religious, in this period she is consciously working out the implications of this claim. The obvious beginning to this is in her venture into church history to write about the martyr Savonarola. But her revision of the story of his martyrdom is vital to her revisioning of the idea of religion in that she rejects the idea of his sense of personal triumph in his martyrdom, instead pointedly having him die doubting his own worthiness, that is, conscious of his own failure. In this way Eliot enrols him in the more select group of heroes who have died in what seems ‘magnificent futility’.

Eliot’s deeper attention in this decade is to what she has always presented as the true enemy in her religion: egotism. As she states in a letter of 1863: ‘The contemplation of whatever is great is itself religion and lifts us out of our egotism’ (IV, 104). *Romola* represents her most ambitious attempt to date to animate this idea. Like Maggie, Romola is subject to the will of several powerful men, all of whom, regardless of their religious position, are tainted by their own egotism. And the novel’s most compelling character, Tito, is characterized as consumed by ego, as a believer in nothing, a man who lacks faith along with imagination. Eliot uses him to explore the possibility of a conscience-free egotism, and one can easily imagine Tito’s mocking response to Maggie’s sacrifice, since he knows the meaning of sacrifice only in so far as he can sacrifice the needs and even the lives of others.

As the obverse of egotism, Eliot is intent in these works to propose the deeply religious value of suffering for others, particularly on the part of young women, and to show its undergirding by the sympathetic imagination. A true descendant of Maggie, Romola seeks to bring together the suffering she knows and the promise of transcendent meaning. In this decade Eliot continues to explore a central theme from *The Mill on the Floss*: ‘[t]he great problem of the shifting relation between passion and duty ... the question [of the appropriateness of] renunciation’. In *Romola* she is taking this great problem to another level by having her heroine ponder ‘the problem where the sacredness of obedience ended and where the sacredness of rebellion began’ (442). This is crucial within the text and also in Eliot’s career. For Romola herself this awareness is a sign of maturity, as she realizes that despite her disillusionment with Savonarola, his ‘inspiring consciousness’ that ‘had exalted even the minor details of obligation into religion’ had been nonetheless genuine (442), and that, further, she could undergo the same kind of spiritual struggle as her mentor. For Eliot it is equally important here that she seeks to humanize the official martyr and to sanctify as martyrdom the sacrifice of an ordinary woman. In ending the novel with Romola, she affirms as the last word in holiness the saintly blessedness of a woman who dedicates her life to the other wife and family of her bigamist husband and enshrines the memory of the martyr who has taught her the sanctity of duty.

This strategy has an ironic effect, however, in that the novel is widely faulted, even by Eliot herself, for the unbelievable goodness of its saintly heroine. Yet Eliot seems to be unable to
resist the compulsion to create an ideal woman, while at the same time insisting on the worthiness of a flawed hero. Seemingly then, in trying to construct an aesthetic on the basis of the sanctity of ordinary life and the power of sympathetic imagination, Eliot ends up merely transferring the halo from within the institutional church to another religious domain of her own construction, where St Romola presides, thereby confirming the separation of secular and sacred instead of demonstrating their reconciliation in the human.

This so-called failure, however, points to the profound questions Eliot is exploring at this time, as we see in the works that follow. The importance of her geographical and aesthetic adventuring is again pronounced as she finds inspiration for her Spanish Gypsy in a painting of the Annunciation, said to be by Titian, which she sees in Italy. As she later writes in her ‘Notes on The Spanish Gypsy and Tragedy’, she saw in the idea of a young woman preparing for ‘ordinary womanhood’ and learning ‘suddenly’ that she is instead ‘chosen to fulfil a great destiny’ the potential for ‘great dramatic motive’. It is not difficult to see why the woman who senses a destiny to incarnate ideas in a new way would be inspired by the story of the girl who is destined to be the vehicle of Christ’s Incarnation. Eliot readers all see in the heroine’s dilemma a replaying of the dilemma of Maggie and of Romola, and here the extension of the question into tragedy is important. Eliot goes so far as to revision the picture of the annunciation as a story of ‘renunciation’, perhaps her favourite theme, and certainly for her a religious one, here framed in terms of classical tragedy.

Her ‘Notes on The Spanish Gypsy and Tragedy’ speak explicitly of what she has been doing throughout her whole career – illuminating the grand tragedies of ordinary human ‘renunciations’ (128) – and these works of the 1860s see her working out more consciously the meaning of the tragedy of renunciation by moving from the death of an obscure heroine of the Midlands to that of an official martyr of the historical church to consider the ordinary martyrdom of Romola and then that of a young Gypsy woman who ‘must walk an unslain sacrifice’. Her aim, these Notes suggest, is to translate what have traditionally been seen as divinely inspired acts into acts taking place within socially and naturally imposed structures wherein individuals make choices – choices that are constrained or even dictated by ‘the dire necessities of our lot’ – that shape character and destiny.

As noted above no one is more aware than Eliot herself of her failure at this time to ‘incarnate’ her ideas. Neither is anyone more capable of articulating her own difficulties or of articulating her way out of those difficulties in and through her own works. In her Notes on Tragedy she reminds readers that ‘rational reflection’ will not allow anyone to make their peace with ‘inherited misfortunes’. ‘Happily’, she goes on, ‘we are not left to that’.

Love, pity, constituting sympathy, and generous joy with regard to the lot of our fellowmen comes in – has been growing since the beginning – enormously enhanced by wider visions of results – by an imagination actively interested in the lot of mankind generally; and these feelings become piety – i.e., loving, willing submission, and heroic Promethean effort towards high possibilities, which may result from our individual life. (128-29)

This statement could serve as a fine summation of Eliot’s ethical aesthetic, and I want to pay particular attention to the understanding of imagination she expresses here. This imagination
‘enormously enhance[s]’ feelings of love by finding grounds for hope for the future, by extending these feelings beyond ourselves to humankind in general, and by at the same time giving us models of ‘heroic’ action that demonstrate the value of ‘individual life’. By this process, the imagination becomes religious just as Eliot’s aesthetic becomes incarnational, as it turns feelings into piety.

When Eliot moves back home to the England of her youth and to the secular Felix Holt, she puts an interesting spin on her idea of tragedy when the narrator comments that ‘there is no private life which has not been determined by a wider public life’. Throughout her career Eliot is analyzing the power of the key components of ‘public life’—class, gender, and race—in shaping the possibilities for goodness and happiness and heroism in private life. And yet it must be said that her most intense attention is always directed upon that site where private and public life intersect, overlap, and mutually define one another—the family. For while she analyzes how the powerful forces of public life influence a character’s private life, she is also questioning this very boundary as well as showing how what is thought of as private life may define the possibilities for what is called public life. In this respect as well, these texts of the 1860s serve as a turning point and testing ground for her future work, which will turn inward in a deeper way than ever, in taking readers further into the houses and hearts and minds of her characters.

In the terms of my discussion, we might think of this period of the 1860s in Eliot’s writing as the beginning of her return to the fraught landscape where she has buried Maggie, now equipped with a sense of the wider range of imaginative possibilities that she has gleaned from her excursion into foreign spheres. Her own love and joy in her fellow humans, to quote her Note on Tragedy again, ‘has been growing since the beginning—enormously enhanced by wider visions of results—by an imagination actively interested in the lot of mankind generally’. And she has deepened her understanding of the ‘piety’ that is grounded in ‘loving, willing submission’ and ‘heroic … effort towards high possibilities, which may result from individual life’.

I will conclude by recalling a scene involving another hopeful young soul—Tito’s son, Lillo. This comes from the epilogue, called by a generally sympathetic reviewer a ‘somewhat feeble and womanish chapter’. One can only imagine what Tito’s son could be thinking of Romola’s response to his statement that he would like to grow up to be ‘great’, ‘happy’, and have ‘a good deal of pleasure’. His ‘Mamma Romola’ replies:

> We can only have the highest happiness, such as goes along with being a great man, by having wide thoughts, and much feeling for the rest of the world, as well as ourselves; and this sort of happiness often brings so much pain with it, that we can only tell it from pain by its being what we would choose before everything else, because our souls see it is good. (547)

Eliot defines here, in this goal of a happiness that is only morally distinguishable from pain, a kind of martyrdom of ordinary life—‘a feeble and womanish’ idea indeed. Yet, while the statement may easily be seen as sanctimonious and morbid, it is also inspiring because it is spoken in the voice of a woman who has learned in much sorrow the lesson she is passing on: ‘if you mean to act nobly and seek to know the best things God has put within reach of men,
you must learn to fix your mind on that end, and not on what will happen to you because of it' (547).

At the risk of sounding sanctimonious myself, it seems to me that Eliot experiences, in trying to incarnate her ideas in this period, the pains and failures that lend credibility to the sufferings of the ordinary martyr. And it is even possible that in this life it is only through the voice of a flawed character – certainly our beloved Maggie, but even the insufferable Savonarola or the bewildering Fedalma – and through a writer such as George Eliot, likely to be mocked and scourged by many for the delusional, masochistic, and narcissistic taint of their piety, that the words of inspiration can come.

* This paper was presented at The Mill on the Floss Study Day, 22 May 2010

Notes


