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Jaqueline Bohn Donada

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GEORGE ELIOT'S BRAZILIAN CRITICAL FORTUNE AND THE CASE OF *ROMOLA*¹

By Jaqueline Bohn Donada

I would like to begin this paper with a comment by Professor Felicia Bonaparte about George Eliot's novels. In an introductory reflection, she once observed that

We have found nothing yet that Eliot did not deliberately put in her novels; [...]. Indeed, the fact is we have not yet read in these novels all that Eliot wrote. We have not yet, for example, looked carefully at what Eliot had to say about women in society. Eliot was a great feminist, and her novels, although they never stoop to mere propaganda, urge a relentless war against the conditions by which women's lives have been restrained and wasted. We do not have an adequate understanding of the poetic element in Eliot's imagination, nor of the rich symbolic structure which informs her works. We have not yet probed the mythic imagery that echoes throughout her novels. There can be no doubts that we will have to revise many of our conclusions and judgments, especially of her achievement in *Romola*, when we have further examined these aspects of her works. Similarly, we have [...] not yet explored the most thoroughly contemporary aspect of Eliot's novels, namely the existential, absurd universe Eliot perceived, a tragic universe in which man is born and dies for no purpose.²

She wrote this in 1975, but it is striking that much of it is still true. Of all these unexplored aspects of George Eliot's works, it seems to me that only the topic of women in society has since been systematically explored and has promoted deeper understanding of her novels. It is rather paradoxical that, although we have acclaimed Eliot as one of the greatest nineteenth-century novelists, we have also overlooked many aspects of this greatness. *Romola* is definite evidence of this: described by Eliot herself as the book she wrote with her best blood, it remains to this very day the least popular of her novels.

This paper has two main goals. First I present a set of numbers regarding George Eliot studies in and out of Brazil and my interpretation of these numbers. Then I proceed to comment on the particular case of *Romola*. In the end, I hope to be able to relate the two topics and to interest the reader in my perspective on George Eliot and on *Romola*. We are now celebrating *Romola*'s 150th anniversary. This is a significant amount of time: not as much as would make it too distant from our own world; not as little as would make it too close to us and too blurred to see well. I believe we are now at a moment in which we are ready to look back at Eliot's and *Romola*'s history so as to understand it and to develop on it.

In Brazil, researchers use a search engine for academic articles called *PeriódicosCAPES*. It is one of the largest virtual libraries in the world and gathers thousands of databases of academic publications around the globe. It is an indispensable tool for measuring the extent of academic production in any given area. A search at Periódicos CAPES under the headings 'Romola' and 'George Eliot' returns 486 registers. On the one hand, this is very little. A search under the headings 'Ulysses' and 'James Joyce', for instance, returns more than 7.000 registers.³ This demonstrates that there is still much room for studies about *Romola*. On the other hand, a more detailed analysis of the numbers shows that academic interest in it is certainly alive and is even growing. Of the 486 registers for 'Romola'+ 'George Eliot', 255 date from the year 2000 onwards, which represents 52.4% of the total number. The earliest

record at Periódicos CAPES is from 1895. This totals 116 years of critical fortune, slightly more than 11 decades. The fact that almost half of the existing publication appeared in the last 12 years demonstrates an increase of academic interest in relation to previous decades .

The *Networked Digital Library of Thesis and Dissertations* (NDLTD) is an academic database which reveals interesting numbers. It catalogues theses and dissertations written all over the world. A search for 'George Eliot' in it returns 1.343 results, 61.5% of which have been written from the year 2000 onwards. It is interesting to observe that none of these works are specifically about *Romola*, although 62 of them make references to it. These and dissertations specifically about *Romola* are found at the PRO-QUEST/Dissertation Abstracts International. It returns 777 results for 'George Eliot', but only 11 works are about *Romola*. Numbers in this database confirm the tendency already observed: less than 2% of items are about *Romola*, but 31.5% of all production was written in the last 12 years, thus corroborating that there is an evident growth of interest in the works of George Eliot, despite the silence that still surrounds *Romola*.

If George Eliot numbers are not exactly impressive in Europe and in North America, in Brazil they are impressive precisely for being so small. I was initially intrigued by this but now I understand this is only natural for a country in which the first university was founded in 1912 – half a century after the publication of *Romola*.

There is a great distance separating the British Isles from Brazil which translates into a great distance between English and Brazilian literatures. Naturally, a good deal of British literature is very popular in Brazil, including a number of Victorian writers. Most educated people will have heard of *Wuthering Heights*, *Jane Eyre* and *Oliver Twist*. Mary Shelley and Bram Stoker are also minor celebrities. As expected, the works of J. R. R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, George R. R. Martin and J. K. Rowling are massively popular because of their appearance on the cinema and on television. However, we, Brazilians, know very little about George Eliot and her work. When I started researching her critical fortune in the country, I created a questionnaire that was sent to several regions in Brazil and was answered by 500 people of several ages and several different cultural and educational backgrounds. It is a small number, but the results of the survey were consistent with the results of the research about academic production on George Eliot.

In the survey, people were asked whether they had ever heard about George Eliot. Where they answered in the affirmative, they were asked what they knew about her and which ones of her books they could recollect. The respondents were also asked what their professional and educational background was, since I wanted to estimate who were the people familiar with Eliot and her work. 69% of respondents answered they had never heard of George Eliot against a mere 4% who declared they knew her work well. The figures may lead us to think that there is a significant 27% which is familiar with her work. However, a qualitative analysis of these respondents' answers reveals that 19.65% of respondents who claimed to have heard of Eliot were unable to mention any one of her works, not to mention those who referred to George Eliot as 'him' or as 'escritor' (Portuguese word for a male writer). I was surprised to notice that among the respondents who claimed they had never heard about Eliot was a considerable 22% of people who actually work with English language and/or literature.

A second survey on what has been published about George Eliot in Brazil reveals that, whereas the numbers above demonstrate general unfamiliarity, there is indeed a growing interest in her work which is manifest in the increasing amount of published material (both in

paper and on line) about her work. This second survey identified a total of 31 items published, which included books, articles, webpages, thesis and dissertations. 61.29% of this total was published in an academic context, revealing that most of the knowledge acquired or produced about Eliot in Brazil is restricted to universities.

On the other hand, a look at dates shows that Eliot numbers in Brazil follow the international tendency of growth. 58.06% of the 31 items were published from the year 2000 onwards. One might say this is only a natural outcome of the increase in the number of universities. This is true. But it is also true that there clearly is enough room for George Eliot studies in the Brazilian academy. Only 7 theses and dissertations about Eliot have been published in Brazil. Only one of them deals with *Romola*,⁴ but 6 out of the 7 have been published in the past 12 years.

Among the 31 published items, 8 topics were identified, gender issues summing up 25% of the total. Items about Eliot's biography totalled 19% and those about her dealings with the novel form totalled 16%. This indicates that, for the most part, in Brazil, George Eliot is still the Victorian who wrote about the condition of women in the nineteenth-century. Most academics working on her novels still tend to limit their researches to gender studies, probably the most widespread topic of study about George Eliot. However, 16% of the production focuses on how Eliot works with the novel, which is relevant for my considerations about *Romola*. The fact that 16% of George Eliot related production is about the novel genre reveals, to my interpretation, two major assumptions: i) novel form can be considered a traditional topic of study in Eliot's novels which would indicate that a considerable portion of on-going research may be treading no new path; ii) however, having established the bases of Eliot's manipulation of the novel genre is, as I comment on the next section, the first condition for an exploration of the more modern aspects of her work, which are in evident need of exploration, as the quotation from Felicia Bonaparte in the opening of this paper indicates.

The issue of genre leads us to the case of *Romola*. After seven years of research, I have come to believe that George Eliot's manipulation of the form of the novel is a key-factor in the understanding of this novel, which has been seen as her most obscure work. The initial motivation of my work on *Romola* was the realization that there was a clash between George Eliot's own appraisal of her fourth novel and the appraisal of most of its literary critics, especially of those contemporary to it. In a famous letter to John Blackwood, Eliot once wrote that *Romola* had been the book she had written with her best blood, thus indicating a predilection for it among her other novels. However, the general tone of contemporary opinions is of disappointment and the most usual explanation for this disappointment is that *Romola* departs too much from the reality Eliot knew so well and fails to represent truthfully the *zeitgeist* of Florence and Florentine people at the close of the fifteenth century. The result of such failure is a novel constructed out of intellectual effort rather than out of poetic imagination, with an unnecessary flight to the past and a foreign setting which produced improbable events and characters.

When I set out to write about *Romola*, I was determined to investigate deeper reasons for this disappointment. In the course of the research, I came to discover quite a few of them and came to conclude that the disappointment is caused by the formal changes George Eliot introduces in *Romola*. Curiously enough, the most apparent of the changes are also the most superficial whereas the most subtle changes are those which promote some of the most radical innovations that the nineteenth-century produced in the novel form. The changes in setting and

historical background of which early critics complain so much are the most obvious ones. After having published three novels and a collection of short stories about English rural life, nobody expected Eliot to write a story set in fifteenth-century Florence. It was quite a shock for conventional George Eliot readers, many of whom failed to notice that all the essence of her previous and future novels was intact. The moral dilemmas, the tragic world, the indifferent universe, the old antagonisms between male and female, right and wrong, reason and feeling, freedom and responsibility were all still there.

It was only the most superficial layer of familiar traits that was gone. The recognizable scenery of the English countryside, the well-known historical events and, naturally, the familiar language of country people that Eliot always portrayed with such mastery were replaced with unknown landscapes and monuments, unfamiliar events, incomprehensible Italian terms and names one felt uncomfortable to pronounce. These innovations in the text may explain why *Romola* was met with such suspicion by its readers, who tended to see them as the essence and not as the superficial outlines of a much deeper change. The idea that the strange setting, the unfamiliar past, the foreign language and the supposedly improbable actions were a miscalculation on Eliot's part was soon spread by contemporary literary reviews and prevailed for more than a decade, which can be observed in comments such as Walter Allen's that '*Romola* was a mistake'⁵ or in opinions such as Harold Bloom's, for whom '*Romola* is rightly forgotten'.⁶ Rather than a mistake, *Romola* and all its details are the products of a neat aesthetic project and I believe the discomfort that has been experienced from it originates in the fact that in *Romola*, more explicitly than in her other novels, George Eliot was experimenting with the form of the novel and stretching its limits to accommodate formal conventions and aesthetic effects until then generally thought to belong almost exclusively to other genres.

When trying to account for the book's negative reception, Felicia Bonaparte observed that '*Romola* does not fit our notions of what a novel ought to be'.⁷ We are now ready to understand that this is true precisely because, in this book, George Eliot reshapes the novel form so as to contain all major literary genres within it. *Romola* does not fit our notions of what a novel ought to be precisely because it redefines these very notions. This statement bears a myriad of implications which I do not have the space to develop here. I comment only on the most apparent manifestation of such redefinition so as to demonstrate how *Romola* contains other genres within it. For this, I look at three passages in the story: i) *Romola*'s decision to open the triptych in chapter 37; ii) her return to Florence after Savonarola's command in chapter 40 and iii) her sojourn at the plague-stricken village in chapter 68. Each one of these scenes is representative of a different literary genre which Eliot incorporates into her fourth novel.

In chapter 37, Tito has just sold Bardo's library and has thus just killed every last bit of love that *Romola* could still feel for him. Utterly disappointed in him, she decides to leave Florence and everything that connects her to her husband behind. In a highly symbolic act, she opens the triptych, removes her brother's crucifix from within it, hangs it around her neck and abandons her betrothal ring. The symbolism of the scene recalls *Romola*'s epic character but I here analyse its tragic potentiality. Leaving her city and her husband is a very difficult decision for *Romola* and one that will not bring her happiness. Rather than a solution for her disillusionment, her flight from the city is the only thing left for her. When she does leave, for the first and for the second time, her conflicts go with her. *Romola* is thus set in an inescapable dilemma: if she stays, she has to face a life next to a man she has come to despise. If she leaves,

she becomes an outcast and a lonely wanderer. She is thus torn between the religious and moral commitment she assumed towards her husband and the commitment towards her own moral values and is the centre of 'an antagonism between valid claims',⁸ which is Eliot's definition of tragedy. Whenever Romola is trapped in an escapable dilemma (as she often is having to find a balance with her conflicting roles of daughter, sister, wife and woman), she is playing the part of a tragic heroine and making the book of which she is the protagonist a tragedy as much as a novel.

In chapter 40, Romola is well advanced on her escape from Florence. When she meets Savonarola on the way and he entreats her to return, she proudly states her independence by refusing to do so. However, in a few pages, we see her attitude change from rebellion to acceptance and she ends up going back to Florence. Some critics have seen this as a weak, contradictory passage, but what I see in Romola's change of attitude is the fulfilment of her role as epic heroine. At this point in the story, Savonarola has come to represent Christianity (just like Tito has come to represent paganism, specially through his association with Bacchus) and Romola's acceptance of his words represents the western world's conversion to the Christian faith which is prefigured in the proem: 'for had not the world become Christian?'.⁹ Although Romola's change of attitude has been said to be sudden and contradictory of her Bardi pride, one must remember that its possibility is made clear in a number of instances in earlier passages. One clear example is the opening of the triptych I mention above: in chapter 37, Romola takes off her betrothal ring, a symbol of her acceptance and loyalty to paganism, and puts on her brother's crucifix, the symbol of Christianity *par excellence*. Much of the alleged obscurity of the proem can also be illuminated by the understanding of *Romola* as an epic. Professor Felicia Bonaparte argues that the proem prepares us 'to see that it is not, after all, Florence in 1492 that Eliot is writing about but rather the whole history of Western civilization, of which late fifteenth-century Florence must somehow be the symbolic representation'.¹⁰ Its main function is thus to create an epic atmosphere for the story and to make it symbolically manifest to the reader so as to enable him/her to read it as an epic from the very beginning.

In chapter 68, Romola arrives at a plague-stricken village in which most of the inhabitants are dead or about to die. There she rescues a baby boy who had probably lost his mother. When she goes with him to the village well to search for water to help the sick, she is by some villagers who mistake her for the Virgin Mary with the baby Jesus. Of all the passages in *Romola* that break with traditional expectations regarding the content and form of a realist novel, this is probably the most conspicuous one. My interpretation is that, in these passages, *Romola* is responding to the conventions of the romance, which allow for a less concrete representation of time and place (the reader will notice that the village seems to exist out of time) and for supernatural events such as the apparition of the Virgin Mary or as the villager's vision of her would be. Romance conventions are also the source of so many prophecies in the text, such as the triptych with the crucifix inside, the central visual prophecy in the story. Another province of the romance which George Eliot explores well in *Romola* is the archetype. Romola is first the archetypal dutiful daughter and then the archetypal dutiful wife. Bardo is the archetypal patriarch, Tessa the archetypal natural woman and Mona Brigida, the archetypal vain woman. Girolamo Savonarola represents the archetypal failed revolutionary, who breaks a paradigm only to install another equally oppressive one. Piero di Cosimo is the archetypal artist, who reveals the truth through his paintings.¹¹ Romola's journey in a boat is the archetype

of rebirth and her sojourn in the plague stricken village resembles the archetypal descent into hell. While in the village, she plays the archetypal role of Virgin Mary.

Naturally, there is much more to the relationship between the novel, the epic and the romance than I have been able to analyse here. Similarly, there are other genres at work in *Romola* than these. The great achievement of this single book, I believe, is that it is one of the first novels in which they come together as an indissoluble whole. *Romola* is thus the converging point of old and new traditions that holds the origin of the modernist novel, for which the fragmentation of, and the play with formal conventions have become characteristic. It is also important to have in mind that this process of redefinition of the limits of the novel as a genre gradually unfolds in the text of *Romola* with much subtlety. The redefinition, although it seems radical when we focus on it, was subtle and quiet. George Eliot, although her works initiate a transition to a more modern form of novel writing, remained, throughout her career, a typical Victorian and a confirmed realist. Had she introduced to her books radical changes like those that later became characteristic of the Modernist movement, the impact on her reading public could have been devastating.

However, her conception of the novel and her theory of realism were increasingly becoming, if not radical, quite innovative. Already in her first novel, *Adam Bede*, she has her narrator pause the story to discuss his views on art, thus demonstrating an unprecedented degree of self-awareness and self-referentiality that would take a few decades to pass definitively into the English novel. With every story she wrote, Eliot advanced a small, subtle step towards implementing her innovative theories on art in her books. Eliot recognized no formal barriers to her writing: when she felt that a certain idea or feeling could only be expressed through poetry, her prose became poetic. When she felt that a given theme had a broader scope than her novel could reach, the novel became epic. It became tragic at points where Eliot felt the potentiality for tragedy. However, it is important to bear in mind that, in its outward form, *Romola* is a conventional Victorian novel. In its subtleties, however, *Romola* transcends this conventional form by incorporating conventions of the romance, the epic and the tragedy, not to mention its recreation of the historical novel and its flirting with poetry, which I do not have time to approach here.

This is only a very brief account of how I believe Eliot manipulates genre conventions in *Romola* and does not even get close to examining all the interconnections posed by it. The numbers presented in the first part of this paper show a growing academic interest in Eliot and her work but it is not difficult to notice a still largely open space on the critical fortune of *Romola* and Eliot, especially in Brazil, where very little has been written about the writer and practically nothing about the novel.

Romola's imperfections have been dwelt on for too long and it is now time to appreciate its remarkable transformation of random forms and themes into a coherent, all inclusive, fictional universe. *Romola* did not correspond to contemporary notions of novel writing and realism because, in it, George Eliot was practicing a new manner of writing and representing reality. She contributed to the development of the novel by familiarizing it with forms until then believed to be contrary to it. The same as she did with realism. Her vision grew too complex to be satisfied with scientific, objective observation. So she used symbols, metaphors and images, until then thought to provide only indirect access to reality, to reach a deeper, more meaningful view of reality.

It has not often been pointed out that *Romola* has many things in common with both A

Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man and *Ulysses*. Just like *A Portrait of the Artist*, *Romola* is a *Bildungsroman* in which the hero/heroine grows out to be a revolutionary and to question the very pillars of western society. What *Romola* comes to learn by the end of the book is what Stephen's mother prays that he will learn by the end of *A Portrait of the Artist*: 'what the heart is and what it feels'. But, in my opinion, what binds Dedalus and *Romola* so close together is the character of their epic journey: both of them set out to 'forge in the smithy of [their] soul the uncreated conscience of [their] race' (Joyce, 1995, p. 196). Each one of them does this in their historical moment, but, whereas *The Portrait* is more revolutionary in form, *Romola* seems more revolutionary in theme, for not even Joyce dared (or wished) to paint the portrait of his epic hero as a young woman.

It should be said, however, that the innovations introduced by Eliot are very subtle. What happens in *Romola*, although similar in character, is very different in appearance from what happens in James Joyce's *Ulysses*, for example, in which aesthetic changes are evident. We can see a new aesthetic procedure in practice just by browsing the pages of Joyce's book. If we take *Ulysses* as the modernist model *par excellence*, we notice that Eliot already whispered in *Romola* what Joyce shouted in *Ulysses*. Many of the features for which it became renowned are conceptually outlined in *Romola*. The epic, mythological and religious dimension, the concrete rendition of time and place and the reliance on history perfected by Joyce are made familiar to the English novel by Eliot in *Romola*. The formal liberty and fragmentation that can be evidenced simply by browsing the pages of Joyce's book are present in *Romola*, but only yield themselves to comprehension through in-depth analyses. The unrealistic ways of producing an impression of reality, the disorientation of the characters before the world that mirrors itself in the disorientation of the reader before the pages was used by George Eliot in *Romola* twenty years before James Joyce was even born. The sensorial appeal which is so characteristic of *Ulysses* is prefigured in *Romola* in its strong visual effect and in the Italian which resounds through it. Finally, Joyce's updating of the epic to his own times was also anticipated in *Romola*. Both Joyce and Eliot came to understand that, as the expression of a world that had lost its sense of totality, the novel would have to recreate the epic quest in the only forms of heroism possible in such a world: intellectual and artistic revolution, courage to search for one's identity and the ability to develop both these things in everyday, ordinary lives.

We are now celebrating the 150th anniversary of *Romola*'s publication. After so long, we are still learning to see its potential and beauty, which proves that the mind that conceived it is nothing short of a genius. We will still have to revise many of our conclusions and judgments about such a mind and its production before we can see *Romola* recognized as a landmark in the nineteenth-century English novel, as the work which began the unification of hitherto separate traditions and which launched the basis of the novel as master genre. In these 150 years, despite Eliot's recognition as a literary genius, the academic relevance of the study of *Romola* has not been insisted on despite its potentiality to illustrate the genesis of fascinating literary phenomena such as the development of the novel and its modernist outburst. There is still much we do not know about Eliot and *Romola* – this is true. If we want to master her genre theory, her poetic imagination, her use of imagery, myth and symbolism – and I believe we do want that – then we absolutely have to break the silence about *Romola*, the novel which may hold the key to the comprehension of her work as a whole. It brings together all of Eliot's thoughts and concerns about life and art, all of her theories, philosophies and insights are

carefully represented in it. Just as Eliot looked back to the Renaissance to make sense of her world, students of literature can now look back at *Romola* for an understanding of her work and of what has been happening in English literature.

Notes

- This article is the text of a paper given at the Fellowship's Annual Lecture Day in Bedworth, 15 December 2012.
- 2 Felicia Bonaparte, *Will and Destiny. Morality and Tragedy in George Eliot's Novels* (New York: New York University Press, 1975), p. viii.
 - 3 Numbers from November 2012.
 - 4 The only doctoral dissertation so far published in Brazil was written by me and is entitled '*The Tree that Bears a Million of Blossoms*': *A Revaluation of George Eliot's Romola* (2013).
 - 5 Walter Allen, *The English Novel – A Short Critical History* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1975), p. 278.
 - 6 *George Eliot: Modern Critical Views*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986), p. 4.
 - 7 Felicia Bonaparte, *The Triptych and the Cross: The Central Myths of George Eliot's Poetic Imagination* (New York: New York University Press, 1979), p. 13.
 - 8 George Eliot, 'The Antigone and its Moral', in *Selected Essays, Poems And Other Writings* (London: Penguin Books, 1990), p. 365.
 - 9 *Romola* by George Eliot (London: Penguin Books, 2005), 5.
 - 10 *The Triptych and the Cross*, p. 13.
 - 11 Piero was one of the first characters to grasp Tito's true mean nature, which he reveals in his observation that he would be a perfect model for a traitor and in his painting of the frightened Tito in chapter four when he wants to have Tito's likeness for his portrait of Sinon deceiving Priam.