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ROMOLA'S RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

By Alain Jumeau

Romola can be seen as a landmark in George Eliot's career, when we bear in mind her striking confession to her second husband, John Cross: 'I began it a young woman –, I finished it an old woman' (Haight [1968] 362). Many of her readers, indeed, felt it represented a new departure, far from the world of Adam Bede, Mrs Poyser and Silas Marner. It was a more ambitious novel, with more refined and educated characters, set in a foreign country, in a distant past. Her first works of fiction were also set in the past, but only one or two generations before, and some of them ('Mr Gilfil's Love-Story', *Adam Bede* and *Silas Marner*) might have been given the same subtitle as Walter Scott's *Waverley*, "'Tis sixty years since'. Because she had such a great admiration for Scott, George Eliot was bound sooner or later to write a truly historical novel. And this was *Romola*, dealing with the political and religious situation in Florence at the very end of the fifteenth century, and introducing the complex historical character of Savonarola, the controversial Dominican friar who regarded himself as a prophet, although his enemies declared that he was a liar and a hypocrite, and whose death George Eliot saw as a possible redefinition of the idea of martyrdom (Carroll [1998]).

The political theme here is something new, which she was to develop in her late novels. But, because of the intricacies between politics and religion in the life of Savonarola, it is given secondary importance compared with religion, a familiar theme of her early novels. What is new in this respect, however, is that it is the first and last time Eliot deals with Roman Catholicism, instead of Anglicanism, Evangelicalism, Methodism and other varieties of Nonconformity. Here, Eliot's reader is confronted with aspects of religion with which he is not necessarily familiar, because they belong to Catholicism in its earlier form: popular religious festivals, processions, bonfires of vanities, a corrupted papacy, excommunications, etc. Against this exotic historical background, it is interesting to see what religion represents in the lives of the characters, particularly in the experience of *Romola*, the heroine of the novel.

The novel starts with characters whose lives remain aloof from religion. These are the Renaissance scholars who turn to the humanist values of Antiquity. Bardo, an old man, now blind, who has devoted all his life to the study of Greek and Latin texts, scorns religion and feels betrayed by his son Dino who has joined the Dominican friars in the convent of San Marco. After such heartbreaking frustration, his idea of religion is close to caricature: 'If my son had not forsaken me, deluded by debasing fanatical dreams, worthy only of an energumen whose dwelling is among tombs...' (*R* 5: 98). Since the term *energumen* means 'an enthusiast, possessed by the demon', these are indeed very strong words. Bardo cannot understand why his son has left his liberal pursuits 'that he might lash himself and howl at midnight with besotted friars – that he might go wandering on pilgrimages befitting men who know of no past older than the missal and the crucifix' (*R* 5: 99). He has obviously turned his eyes away "from the clear lights of reason and philosophy" in favour of a 'dim mysticism' (*R* 12: 180). To Bardo, religion is simply a 'grovelling superstition' (*R* 15: 209).

The old man is ready to welcome Tito as a second son who might help him, a substitute for the lost one, because he takes him for another humanist. And Baldassarre, another scholar who has introduced Tito, his adopted son, to the classics, also shares the same culture. As for *Romola*, Bardo's daughter, who has been brought up in that Renaissance humanism, she shares her father's abhorrence of religion.

Such philosophy, however, cannot curb egotism and the demands of the self. For example, it can do nothing to put an end to Tito's quest for pleasure to the detriment of others. In the same way, it cannot resist Baldassare's passionate thirst for revenge, once he realizes that his own son has betrayed him. 'Once like Bardo a man of reason and a scholar, Baldassare is now consumed by a passion that has replaced both his reason and his knowledge' (Bonaparte 150). Such philosophy has no reference whatever to any superior deity who could support and comfort men in times of trouble. Pain and sorrow have to be endured with as much resignation and stoicism as possible, as Romola discovers during her trials: 'The grand severity of the stoical philosophy in which her father had taken care to instruct her, was familiar enough to her ears and lips' (R 36: 392). Because this stoicism can bring her little comfort, she is tempted to leave her husband and Florence altogether instead of enduring the hard realities of her wrecked marriage.

Ironically, Romola's misery, coming from her disappointment with Tito as a husband, has been foretold by a prophetic vision of her religious brother, just before his death. On his deathbed, and in the presence of Savonarola, the Prior of San Marco, he warned her against this marriage. He saw her at the altar in Santa Croce, 'and the priest who married you had the face of death; and the graves opened, and the dead in their shrouds rose and followed you like a bridal train' (R 15: 215). Dino wanted his sister to renounce this marriage and her whole way of thinking:

'I believe it is a revelation meant for thee: to warn thee against marriage as a temptation of the enemy; it calls upon thee to dedicate thyself – ... to renounce the vain philosophy and corrupt thoughts of the heathens: for in the hour of sorrow and death, their pride will turn to mockery, and the unclean gods will... ' (R 15: 216)

After this her brother gave her his crucifix, urging her to change her life and turn to Christianity. As Savonarola puts it, 'He has left you the crucifix, in remembrance of the heavenly warning – that it may be a beacon to you in the darkness' (R 15: 217). Yet she ignored the warning that was in the message and she married Tito who ruined her life.

This crucifix, a symbol of the central mystery of Christianity, which Tito hides in the triptych decorated with pagan myths, presented to her on their betrothal, reappears when she decides to leave Florence secretly, wearing the robe of a poor Franciscan nun. In spite of her disguise, Savonarola recognizes her, stops her and according to the teaching of the Cross, he urges her to bear her own suffering, return to married life, and help all those who need her assistance:

... and at the sound of Fra Girolamo's voice again, Romola, with a quick involuntary movement, pressed the crucifix against her mantle and looked at him with more submission than before.

'Conform your life to that image, my daughter; make your sorrow an offering: and when the fire of Divine charity burns within you, and you behold the need of your fellow-men by the light of that flame, you will not call your offering great.' (R 40: 433)

Indeed she decides to devote her life to helping the poor and the sick, and in Florence she becomes a 'Visible Madonna', praised and thanked by those she succours: 'Romola cared a great deal for that music. She had no innate taste for tending the sick and clothing the ragged, like some women to whom the details of such work are welcome in themselves, simply as an

occupation' (R 44: 463). Urged by this new sympathy for suffering, she considers that her own happiness matters little, compared with the needs of others:

All that ardour of her nature, which could no longer spend itself in the woman's tenderness for father and husband, had transformed itself into an enthusiasm of sympathy with the general life. She had ceased to think that her own lot could be happy – had ceased to think of happiness at all: the one end of her life seemed to her to be the diminishing of sorrow.

Her enthusiasm was continually stirred to fresh vigour by the influence of Savonarola. (R 44: 463)

This experience of conversion clearly hinges on the word *sympathy*, which George Eliot regarded as the essence of Christianity. But this *sympathy* is combined with *enthusiasm*, which could mean 'supernatural inspiration', but also 'intensity of feeling', a suspicious reaction for Eliot. Romola's experience here has much in common with the conversion of another frustrated wife in 'Janet's Repentance'. It is based on a special trust in a Christian spiritual guide rather than on an adherence to Christian dogmas. Hence its weakness; for, if the spiritual guide proves to be disappointing, the conversion loses its enthusiasm and its strength. This is what happens when Romola fails to secure an appeal for her godfather who has been sentenced to death as a supporter of the Medici. Savonarola might save his life, but he prefers not to, for political reasons. Then, Romola loses faith in him: 'and as he went on, his words only fed that flame of indignation, which now again, more fully than ever before, lit up the memory of all his mistakes, and made her trust in him seem to have been a purblind delusion' (R 59: 578). In fact, her rejection of this spiritual guide brings about her complete rejection of Christianity, which he embodies. And when he justifies his terrible decision by saying: 'The cause of my party is the cause of God's kingdom' (R 59: 578), she replies passionately: 'God's kingdom is something wider – else, let me stand outside it with the beings that I love' (R 59: 578).

After this rejection, in the last part of the novel (Book III), Romola does not return to the philosophy of her upbringing. Disillusioned with everything, she wants to die and so she commits her life to a little boat in which she goes out to sea. 'Instead of bringing her to death, it had been the gently lulling cradle of a new life' (R 68: 641). She wakes up on the coast near a little village, which is apparently plague-stricken. And then she realizes that she has to take care of a little boy whose parents seem to be dead, and to organize the healthy villagers in order to tend the sick and bury the dead. When the acolyte of the local priest sees her carrying the little boy in her arms, he takes her for the Madonna carrying the Child: 'Only a little while ago, the young acolyte had brought word to the Padre that he had seen the Holy Mother with the Babe, fetching water for the sick: she was as tall as the cypresses, and had a light about her head, and she looked up at the church' (R 68: 646). Such mythic exaggeration underlines the special significance of this image, which was chosen as the emblem of the Religion of Humanity by Auguste Comte, the French positivist philosopher whose influence on George Eliot is often perceptible, particularly in this novel. In her insightful study of *Romola*, Felicia Bonaparte warns us that we should be careful not to read the novel simply as an exposition of Positivism, but she notices that the influence of Comte's philosophy here is undeniable (Bonaparte 59).

The charitable action of Romola transcends the borders between religions, because it is first meant for the victims she initially sees in the plague-stricken village, a few miserable

Jews trying to escape the Spanish or Portuguese Inquisition, and 'put ashore many weeks ago, some of them already ill of the pestilence' (R 68: 648). Eventually, with the help of the healthy villagers, she manages to rescue some victims, and among them, the child she carried in her arms, who is baptized Benedetto (R 68: 649), which means first that he is blessed and also, possibly, that he will turn out to be a blessing for the villagers who have adopted him. Throughout this episode, Romola is identified with the Madonna. But her charitable action has no reference to Christianity as such. It is meant for the benefit of mankind in general. It seems to be part of a new creed, which in fact could well be Comte's Religion of Humanity. It comes naturally, as if it were simply the continuation of her charitable work in Florence, but this time, without any influence of Savonarola and Christianity. And yet it is described in religious terms:

The experience was like a new baptism to Romola. In Florence the simpler relations of the human being to his fellow-men had been complicated for her with all the special ties of marriage, the State, and religious discipleship, and when these had disappointed her trust, the shock seemed to have shaken her aloof from life and stunned her sympathy. But now she said: 'It was mere baseness in me to desire death. If everything else is doubtful, this suffering that I can help is certain; if the glory of the cross is an illusion, the sorrow is only the truer. While the strength is in my arm I will stretch it out to the fainting; while the light visits my eyes they shall seek the forsaken.' (R 69: 650)

In this context, the notion of a 'new baptism' sounds rather strange and paradoxical. We don't even know when her first baptism took place. From what we know of her father's beliefs, we cannot be sure that she was ever baptized, unless it was necessary then to be baptized to have one's birth registered by the parish authorities. The phrase probably refers to an experience of spiritual rebirth, after a 'plunge' into suffering, which brings about a genuine sense of fellowship with suffering mankind. Thus it is an essential experience, almost a new sacrament, in the Religion of Humanity.

There is apparently good reason to describe Romola's progress from unbelief, through Christianity, to the Religion of Humanity as 'a spiritual odyssey', according to Bonaparte's apt phrase (Bonaparte 54). The meaning of this spiritual odyssey is encapsulated in the Epilogue, where Romola seems to have come to terms both with Christianity, reinterpreted in symbolic terms, and with Savonarola himself, as Bonaparte points out:

These characters gather in the Epilogue on the twenty-second of May 1509, to commemorate on its eve the anniversary of Savonarola's death. Although Romola had long ago altered her estimate of and her relationship to Savonarola, his heroism once more inspires her, as the memory of the great inspires mankind, as indeed Eliot meant Romola herself to inspire the reader. (Bonaparte 234)

Romola, who is now a widow, is living with her cousin Brigida and also with Tessa, Tito's illegitimate wife, and Tessa's two children, Nello and Ninna. At the beginning of the scene, she is seen decorating a small altar, which has a small portrait of the Dominican Prior on it. This is perhaps another reference to Comte's Religion of Humanity, for the French philosopher wanted to keep special festivals to honour the memory of great men whose contribution to Humanity was essential.

Romola is still aware that the Dominican had his own weaknesses, for she describes him as 'a man who had sought his own glory indeed' (R 71: 664), but she makes this final

confession to Lillo: "There are many good people who did not love Fra Girolamo. Perhaps I should never have learned to love him if he had not helped me when I was in great need" (*R*, Epilogue: 676). Though she can no longer share his Christian faith, she is still bound to him by a precious bond, which comes from the fellow-feeling that unites those who devote themselves to others. Of course, there is something rather melancholy about this domestic ending, an anticlimax after the scene of the Madonna with Child, the symbol of the Religion of Humanity. Romola, whose name might be a feminine version of Romulus, the mythical founder of Rome, as we learn in a letter of George Eliot to Alexander Main, dated August 3, 1871 (*Letters V*, 174), turns out to be 'a foundress of nothing', like Dorothea (*M*, Prelude: 3). Yet, it is possible to say of her as of Dorothea: "But the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive" (*M*, Finale: 515).

Thus, we see that George Eliot's only real historical novel has several points in common with her other novels. What remains exceptional, after all, is perhaps its special treatment of religion. In his general study on the impact of Comte's Positivism on Victorian Britain, Terry Wright, referring to an article by Bullen on the subject, makes this statement about the novel: '*Romola* has also been seen as a Positivist allegory in which the heroine passes through all three of Comte's stages, thereby tracing in her own life the history of Humanity' (Bullen 1975: 425-35)" (Wright 189). However, I am not sure that the three Books of the novel exactly correspond with Comte's three stages, the theological, the metaphysical and the positive, for the first stage of the novel, Renaissance humanism, has nothing theological about it. Yet, what cannot be disputed is the influence of Comte's thought, which is more perceptible here than in any other novel by George Eliot, even *The Mill on the Floss*.

As the perceptive Victorian critic R. H. Hutton pointed out in an unsigned review of *Romola*, published in *The Spectator* on 18 July, 1863, there are many similarities between Renaissance Florence and the Victorian Age (Carroll [1971], 200), an idea that was suggested and developed by the novelist herself in her 'Proem'. Thus, it is possible to suppose that George Eliot used the setting of her historical novel as a mirror for Victorian England, seeing Romola's spiritual odyssey as a parable to show her readers the need to find new values and beliefs for the 'honest doubters' of the present, without losing the sense of human sympathy, brought about by Christianity, which she regarded as an essential contribution to the evolution of mankind.

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