

CHAPTER 3 : THE MILL ON THE FLOSS.

If it is misleading to describe Adam Bede as inspired by imagination working through memory, this is certainly not the case with The Mill On The Floss. Though many of the novel's most emotionally significant features, such as the river, the description of the flood<sup>1</sup> and Maggie's parents<sup>2</sup> were researched, the emotional core of the first book is closely bound up with remembered experience. As well as the profound evocation of memory we find in the text itself, the scholastic evidence for this view is convincing. It would appear that the childhood scenes of the first volume were probably created independently. Haight notes that they had all been written before George Eliot could find a suitable river to flow beside Dorlcote Mill.<sup>3</sup> In a letter she wrote to Blackwood during the early stages of composition, we find a strong hint that the conception of the novel evolved to a certain extent:

My stories grow in me like plants, and this is only the leaf-bud. I have faith that the flower will come.<sup>4</sup>

When George Eliot had finished the novel she regretted that because the first two books were too long and perhaps too self-sufficient, they did not sort well with the latter part of the novel:

My love of childhood scenes made me linger over them so that I could not develop as fully as I wished the concluding 'Book' in which the tragedy occurs, and which I had looked forward to with much attention and premeditation from the beginning.<sup>5</sup>

It is interesting to note that the tragedy had been looked forward to from the beginning, rather than being hastily improvised by George Eliot at the end.<sup>6</sup> But it is also clear that it was never quite understood in terms of the first two books which the author seems to think were a little too self-sufficient. This degree of autonomy suggests strongly that the emotional direction of the first two books owes more to memory as an autonomous structuring principle than to concerns which shape the later books. George Eliot was uneasily conscious of structural inconsistencies herself:

I can see nothing in it just now but the absence of things that might have been there. In fact the third volume has the material of a novel compressed in it.<sup>7</sup>

But if the author shows herself only too aware of the artistic inconsistency or the failure to reconcile two different sorts of material within an artistic whole, she does not point out that this inconsistency is a reflection of a born emotional duality.

This novel is quite unique in George Eliot's fiction because it portrays its heroine on two levels of consciousness, first as a child and then as an adult. The two experiences are of a vastly different order and I believe

it was George Eliot's failure to grasp the full implications of this which makes the second half of the book relatively unsatisfactory. Nevertheless the novel is a brilliant achievement and far superior to Adam Bede which was generally preferred to it in George Eliot's day.<sup>8</sup> George Eliot's very genius in capturing so entirely the first order of experience means that the first half of the book seems to be dominated by a world view profoundly child-like, expressing itself with its own characteristic images and motifs. So when we see Maggie as a young adult, with an adult's needs and an adult's awareness, a basic restructuring of the novel is required, with different images and motifs - and above all, a different process.

I should now like to examine the first half of the novel which shows the world of Maggie as a child.

As Book I commences we see not the characters but the physical landscape:

A wide plain where the broadening Floss hurries on between its green banks to the sea and the loving tide rushing to meet it, checks its passage with an impetuous embrace.<sup>9</sup>

We see how

...the black ships laden with fresh scented fir planks, with rounded sacks of oil-bearing seed, or with the dark glitter of coal - are borne along to the town of St. Ogg's which shows its aged fluted red roofs and the broad gables of its wharves between the low wooded hills and the river brink tinging the water with a soft purple hue under the transient glare of this February sun.<sup>10</sup>

The remembered landscape has nothing to do with the higher articulation of a character grappling with a moral problem. It remains immediate and physical. It is autonomous and we must be lost in the memory of its hot days and summer drowsiness:

The rush of the water and the booming of the mill, bring a dreamy deafness, which seems to heighten the peacefulness of the scene. They are like a great curtain of sound shutting one out from the world beyond.<sup>11</sup>

The narrator distances the tale as a memory and frames it within the primitive logic of a dream. We know that what is to be narrated has already come to pass long ago and that whatever tragedy may have once occurred the landscape is just as inviolate as ever. The poetic element in The Mill On The Floss, the vivid presentation of landscape, natural detail, natural rhythms and of course the Floss itself, is closely identified with an apprehension of the inevitability of life and the inexorability of our fate:

Snow lay on the croft and river bank in undulations softer than the limbs of infancy;...no sound or motion in anything but the dark river, that flowed and moaned like an unresting sorrow.<sup>12</sup>

In this description of Christmas, it is remarked how

His kindness fell but hardly on the homeless... but the fine old season meant well; and if he has not learnt the secret how to bless men impartially, it is because his father Time, with ever-unrelenting purpose, still hides that secret in his own mighty slow-beating heart.<sup>13</sup>

The Dodsons and the Tullivers are forever displaying their blind rituals against such a backdrop, and as George Eliot

speaks of time and the impartiality of the seasons, we hear Mr. Tulliver complaining of Wakem and Pivart, blindly working out the tragic consequences of his own paranoia.

We get the sense that there is no help against fate because in this world there is no one capable of detaching himself in any way from his environment or of realizing the determined chain of cause and effect which moves people to behave as they do. St. Ogg's itself is described as

...one of those old, old towns which impress one as a continuation and outgrowth of nature as much as the nests of the bower birds or the winding galleries of the white ants; a town which carries the traces of its long growth and history like a millennial tree.<sup>14</sup>

St. Ogg's has a history, shrouded in the myth of its patron saint whose simple goodness is contrasted strangely with the savagery of the 'long haired sea Kings',<sup>15</sup> who also passed up the river in search of plunder. However

The mind of St. Oggs did not look extensively before or after...the present time was like the level plain where men lose their belief in volcanoes and earthquakes, thinking tomorrow will be as yesterday and the giant forces that used to shake the earth are forever laid to sleep. The days were gone when people could be greatly wrought upon by their faith still less change it.<sup>16</sup>

There is no potential in this world, the promise of goodness enshrined in the myth of Ogg, the saintly ferryman, can never be realised. The meaning of St. Ogg's past is wasted on the primitive minds of the Dodsons and Tullivers, trapped through their ignorance of the treadmill of the present.

Their religion can never be an expression of heart-felt endeavour, it can never enshrine the possibility of perfection or of true brotherhood, rather it is pagan in its superstitious reverence for incidental material circumstances:

...a vigorous superstition that lashes its gods or lashes its own back seems to be more congruous with the mystery of the human lot than the mental condition of these emmet-like Dodsons and Tullivers.<sup>17</sup>

There is almost no escape from 'the sense of oppressive narrowness',<sup>18</sup> there is no choice, no hope, their 'religion' is pagan in that it is morally neutral, being a primitive reaction to what is felt as an inevitable state of affairs:

Their religion was of a simple semi-pagan kind, but there was no heresy in it - if heresy properly means choice - for they didn't know there was any other religion.<sup>19</sup>

Mrs. Tulliver's retreat to her precious linen cupboard 'seated there with all her laid up treasures',<sup>20</sup> while her husband lies apoplexed on his bed after the first news of their ruin, is an instance of how human beings must behave like mere non-human puppets because of this narrow grasping superstition.

The Dodsons and Tullivers are material for comedy during their normal interaction, but the humour is of an entirely different order from that which we associate with the Poyzers. We can laugh freely at Mrs. Pullet's peculiar blend of grief with her 'Hottentot' grandeur of appearance and her care to preserve its nattiness in spite of the grief. We are amused by Uncle Pullet's 'great natural faculty for ignorance',<sup>21</sup>

and Mrs. Glegg's vulgar, overbearing self-righteousness, and the way Mr. Tulliver can be relied upon to fire up at it. Each adult Dodson and Tulliver acts rigidly in accord with the few natural faculties for ignorance which he or she possesses and their clashes or interactions are mechanically consistent and grimly humorous. The impression is reinforced by the frequent identification of them with imagery suggesting a totally determined animal activity.

In fact this sort of imagery is used in relation to the functioning of the whole St. Ogg's world. For example in the opening conversation of the book, Mr. Riley sings the praises of Mr. Stelling as an educator to his friend Tulliver. The suggestion is that Riley's qualifications for recommending Mr. Stelling's establishment above all others are suspect. However

...a man with the milk of human kindness in him can scarcely abstain from doing a good-natured action, and we cannot be good-natured all round. Nature herself occasionally quarters an inconvenient parasite on an animal towards whom she has otherwise no ill-will. What then? We admire her care for the parasite. <sup>22</sup>

This is developed in Book II when Tom is confronted with a system of education which is determined to implant within him a body of 'knowledge' which has as much relation to him as Mr. Broderip's beaver has to the London room in which he constructs his dam:

Mr. Broderip's amiable beaver, as that charming naturalist tells us, busied himself as earnestly in constructing a dam, in a room up three pairs of stairs in London as if he had been laying his foundation in a stream or lake in upper Canada. It was 'Binny's'

function to build: the absence of water or of possible progeny, was an accident for which he was not accountable. <sup>23</sup>

In fact, the impression we get of people acting rigidly in accord with a tissue of superstitions overlaying primitive survival mechanisms suggests an explanation of life as survival of the fittest. We know that in November 1859 while she was writing this novel, George Eliot was reading Darwin's The Origin Of Species which had just been released. Though she does not accept the determinism which many contemporary thinkers, Huxley among them, felt was an inescapable corollary of Darwin's explanation of the evolutionary process, there is a definite suggestion that the St. Ogg's world is one with 'the generations of ants and beavers':

...human life, - very much of it - is a narrow ugly grovelling existence, which even calamity does not elevate, but rather tends to exhibit in all its bare vulgarity of conception; and I have a cruel conviction that the lives these ruins are the traces of, were part of a gross sum of obscure vitality. That will be swept into the same oblivion with the generations of ants and beavers...which even sorrow hardly suffices to lift above the level of the tragicomic. <sup>24</sup>

When Mr. Tulliver ruins himself and his family through his own stupidity we find the Darwinian observation that

...certain seeds which are required to find a nidus for themselves under unfavourable circumstances have been supplied by nature with an apparatus of hooks, so that they will get a hold of very unreceptive surfaces. The spiritual seed which had been scattered over Mr. Tulliver had apparently been destitute of any corresponding provision and had slipped off to the winds again, from a total absence of hooks. <sup>25</sup>

George Eliot was criticized by a contemporary review of the novel in The Times for the harshness with which it was felt she had treated the Dodsons and Tullivers. But in defence of her objectivity she wrote:

So far as my own feeling and intention are concerned, no one class of persons or form of character is held up to reprobation or to exclusive admiration. Tom is painted with as much love and pity as Maggie, and I am so far from hating the Dodsons myself, that I am rather aghast to find them ticketed with such very ugly adjectives. <sup>26</sup>

I think we must agree with her. Though, like Hetty Sorrel, the Dodsons and Tullivers are shown as creatures whose actions are beyond their understanding or control, there is no questionable personal antipathy marring the subtlety of their portraits. In fact there is an indescribable poignancy attached to them, as we see them not only as they are but through the experience of the child Maggie. It is paradoxical, but this world must be loved because it is her world and the only one which she has known. It is sacred and its sacredness is primitive but unquestioned, a fact of life as palpable as the stupidity of the Dodsons and Tullivers, the river or the land itself:

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. Our delight in the deep bladed grass today, might be no more than the faint perception of wearied souls, if it were not for the sunshine and the grass in far-off years, which still live in us and transform our perception into love.<sup>27</sup>

It is very much this experience which determines the poetic form in which the first two volumes are cast. Through this feeling the retrospective author and her creations Tom and Maggie are identified. The voice is basically unified, and the experience of love and nostalgia interpenetrates the meaningless and threatening world out of which Tom and Maggie grow. The physical landscape and the river, remembered with love, are given a human definition while remaining forms of the uncontrollable eternal destiny. They are uncontrollable, but felt and known in the language of the feelings:

...above all, the great Floss along which they wandered with a sense of travel, to see the rushing spring-tide, the awful Eagre come up like a hungry monster or to see the great Ash which had once wailed and groaned like a man - these things would be always just the same to them... And Maggie, when she read about Christians passing 'the river over which there is no bridge', always saw the Floss between the green pastures by the great Ash.<sup>28</sup>

The objects of Maggie's love and sympathy in these early years are particularly precious and more than anything else serve to form her human identity and character. Her relationship with Tom especially shows her growing from the child who blindly drives nails into a fetish to someone who is acutely aware of the sanctity of other human beings whom she loves or who depend on her in some way. It is not so much that Maggie's impulsiveness becomes restrained, it

becomes transformed through progressive awareness of other suffering besides her own. Maggie's generous impulsiveness is both her strength and her weakness, and is what marks her out from the Dodson-Tulliver world. In some ways we can liken her and her tragedy to the tragedy of Tess in Tess Of The D'Urbevilles. Tess is beautiful and innocent because she was born that way, her tragedy is that she is unable to protect herself from the attentions of unscrupulous or irresponsible men. Her tragedy is one of fate, she herself is not responsible for it, she just cannot escape it. When she kills Alec D'Urbeville, we are not meant to see her as personally responsible. She is acted upon rather than acting.

As a child Maggie's generosity and impulsiveness are not in any way moral attributes, but natural attributes which hold the promise of a wider consciousness. Tom is quite differently constituted, and though we must see him as inferior, his attributes like Maggie's are purely 'natural':

Maggie rushed to her deeds with passionate impulse and saw not only their consequences but what would have happened if they had not been done, with all the detail and exaggerated circumstance of an active imagination. Tom never did the sort of foolish things as Maggie, having a wonderful instinctive discernment of what would turn to his advantage or disadvantage.<sup>29</sup>

The children, Tom and Maggie, are 'still very much like young animals';<sup>30</sup> Maggie's nature can inspire her to cut off her hair to spite her aunts and uncles, or to push Lucy into

the water when exasperated by Tom. It can move her to deep childish gratitude towards her father when he takes her side against the censures of the rest of her small world; or it can move her to make much of Philip Wakem when she visits Tom at school. Thus Maggie's early attachments are formed in the childish world of ungoverned impulse, fears and curiosity. The original friendship she forms with Philip at Mr. Stelling's school owes much to the fact that at last she finds someone who will respond to her sympathy and make her feel really needed. But all these things belong to the innocence and inviolateness and irresponsibility of childhood, like her promise to kiss Philip when they meet as grown-ups:

The promise was void, like so many other sweet illusory promises of our childhood; void as promises made in Eden before the seasons are divided, and when the starry blossoms grew side by side with the ripening peach - impossible to be fulfilled when the golden gates had been passed. <sup>31</sup>

Maggie has not yet been tested by circumstance, she has not yet had to come to terms with her world in the sense that she will either try to explain her world to herself or to make a responsible choice between two alternatives. She is not yet responsible for her nature, her gifts or her character. But when she and Tom leave Mr. Stelling's school with her father bankrupt:

They had gone forth together in their new life of sorrow, and they would never more see the sunshine undimmed by remembered cares. They had entered the

thorny wilderness and the golden gates of their childhood had forever closed behind them.<sup>32</sup>

The sight of her father is for Maggie

One of those supreme moments in life when all we have hoped or delighted in, all we can dread or endure, falls away from our regard as insignificant - is lost like a trivial memory, in that simple primitive love that knits us to the beings who have been nearest to us, in their times of helplessness or of anguish.<sup>33</sup>

It is a moment of truth which separates her from her past, and we note that she relates to this moment differently from her mother and Tom, who are inclined to let the narrow Dodson habit of blaming others cloud their love for Mr. Tulliver. But we are told that Maggie is free of the moral vulgarity of blaming others.

Thus the seed begins to grow. Maggie is capable of more and her sympathies and passionate nature inclines her to 'answer' for things herself but as yet she is lonely and ignorant; still at the mercy of her loneliness:

...unhappily quite without that knowledge of the irreversible laws within and without her, which governing the habits becomes morality, and developing the feelings of submission and dependence, becomes religion.<sup>34</sup>

When Tulliver is bankrupt and Tom is forced to go out and work Maggie is only thirteen, but George Eliot tells us that

The early experience of struggle, of conflict between the inward impulse and the outward fact, which is the lot of every imaginative and passionate nature<sup>35</sup>

makes her 'strangely old for her years'.<sup>36</sup> As she witnesses

the metamorphosis of her father from 'the somewhat profuse man',<sup>37</sup> into 'the keen eyed grudger of morsels',<sup>38</sup> we are to understand she is becoming even more matured by suffering. Her passionate nature begins to develop a 'wide hopeless yearning for...something',<sup>39</sup> some sense of intense inner life to compensate for the barrenness of her home. When Bob Jakin, an old childhood friend, gives her The Imitation of Christ by Thomas à Kempis her yearning channels itself into a devout renunciation of the world.

In the very next chapter Maggie is seventeen and sitting in her front parlour when Philip Wakem comes to visit with his father. We are to assume that Maggie has spent the intervening four years in a state of renunciation, for when she finally gives way to the temptation of meeting Philip again she is 'forcing her memory to recall snatches of old hymns'.<sup>40</sup> George Eliot does not describe their meeting but passes straight to a description of Maggie meeting Philip in 'The Red Deeps'.

In three short chapters we witness the transformation of Maggie from childhood into womanhood. The idiom dealing with her has subtly altered. Where before we felt with Maggie we now think with her, as for the first time in the novel she is related to as an adult by another young adult, Philip Wakem. We notice a deep and sensitive awareness of psychological ambiguities here. When Maggie justifies her resolve not to

see Philip again by an appeal to renunciation, Philip is clearly aware that 'there was not the slightest promise of love towards him in her manner'.<sup>41</sup> Philip's pose of sympathizing with her and helping her solve her problems is marked by self interest and the hope of getting Maggie to love him.

George Eliot also makes us aware of an uncertainty in Maggie about her devotion to the ascetic life. If renunciation 'makes the mind very free when we give up wishing',<sup>42</sup> why does she look forward to seeing Philip again? 'It was so much easier to renounce the interest before it came'.<sup>43</sup> For the first time in her life Maggie is challenged to choose between two alternatives; she is challenged to be responsible to herself and to others. Later Philip brands Maggie's attitude 'a narrow, self-delusive fanaticism';<sup>44</sup> but Maggie is not deceived by this into betraying her duty to choose:

Maggie's lips trembled; she felt there was some truth in what Philip said, and yet there was a deeper consciousness that, for any immediate application it had to her conduct, it was no better than falsity. Her double impression corresponded to the double impulse of the speaker.<sup>45</sup>

This suggests the sophistication of George Eliot's later fiction. The problem of how Maggie will relate to the world and to her family has become the problem of how she will relate to Philip - which is partially dependent on how Philip relates to her. She is aware that he is trying to deceive her, to

blind her to the fact that by seeing him she will have introduced 'doubleness' into her life. Philip's facile rationalization of his rhetoric to himself suggests the way in which many future characters of George Eliot's more mature fiction would deliberately distort the glass of their intellects to justify a pressing need:

...by adopting the point of view of a providence who arranges results, or of a philosopher who traces them, we shall find it possible to obtain perfect complacency in choosing to do what is most agreeable to us in the present moment.<sup>46</sup>

So Philip justifies 'that savage impulse to snatch an offered joy',<sup>47</sup> and manages to get Maggie to kiss him, having a vague sense that this proof of affection will be binding to a person of Maggie's honour. Maggie herself kisses him for a number of reasons but basically because she does not wish to hurt him. When Tom brutally forces her to break with Philip she is relieved almost in spite of her acute sense of the injury to Philip. We suspect that her relief is not entirely due to 'the sense of deliverance from concealment'.<sup>48</sup> After this 'Red Deeps' episode we are jolted back into the harsh primitively felt world of the first two Books. Tom restores the Tulliver pride by paying off all his father's creditors, but as we feel his triumph George Eliot let us know that 'Tom never lived to taste another moment so delicious as that'.<sup>49</sup> The tone of the 'Red Deeps' episode, with its emphasis on ambiguity and choice, has disappeared.

We are back in the Hardy-esque universe where destiny plays with men and considerations of choice do not arise. Mr. Tulliver's triumph in his son's recovery of his name brings savage dreams of revenge: "Ah! - I was dreaming -- did I make a noise? I thought I'd got hold of him".<sup>50</sup> The next day the insane old man who 'might plead like Oedipus that his deed was inflicted on him rather than committed by him',<sup>51</sup> senselessly gives Wakem a brutal horsewhipping and dies soon after. In the face of such blind tragedy, Tom and Maggie dissolve their differences, as they had done once before leaving Mr. Stelling's school hand in hand, like Adam and Eve leaving the Garden of Eden in Paradise Lost: "Tom, forgive me, - let us always love each other", and they clung and wept together'.<sup>52</sup> The next volume sees Maggie as a young lady of eighteen almost totally detached from the primitive world of her childhood, from the elemental emotion which drew her to Tom. Nevertheless there is a skilful interweaving of the sense of her grown-up presence in Lucy's drawing room with the world of her past. We find her looking at the river through the drawing room window:

...memory and imagination urged upon her a sense of privation too keen to let her taste what was offered in the transient present: her future, she thought, was likely to be worse than her past, for after her years of contented renunciation, she had slipped back into desire and longing: she found joyless days of distasteful occupation harder and harder - she found the image of the intense and varied life she yearned for, and despaired of, becoming more and more importunate.<sup>53</sup>

We follow Maggie into this new world with its new needs with reservations, but we follow her. If there is an inevitable connection between the two sections; between 'the love of childhood scenes' and the material for a novel; between the two experiences of Maggie, the two modes of articulation, the two universes; the meaning of the connection is to be found in that intangible sense of close personal identification of the author with Maggie - best felt as poetry. Maggie's history must mirror George Eliot's own experience of breaking with the past and coming to terms with the present in a way that keeps the past sacred. But George Eliot herself is aware of the difficulty of adequately reconciling the two senses of Maggie, the primitive and the 'philosophic':

You have known Maggie a long while and need to be told not her characteristics, but her history which is a thing hardly to be predicted from the completest knowledge of characteristics. For the tragedy of our lives is not created entirely from within. 'Character' says Novalis in one of his more questionable aphorisms - 'character is destiny'. But not the whole of our destiny...Maggie's destiny, then, is at present hidden, and we must wait for it to reveal itself like the course of an unmapped river: we only know that the river is full and rapid and that for all rivers there is the same final home.<sup>54</sup>

The view of life which was to emerge from George Eliot's mature fiction is focussed on the 'politics' of human interaction. It implies that men are very largely responsible for their individual moral destinies and for the destinies of each other. It is concerned with men coming to terms with a community, a social polity which has been determined by the

collective experience, the ignorance or the wisdom and courage of other men before them. Within such a framework, an abstract embodiment of fate was not relevant, and the history of a character was rarely referred to a purely arbitrary, Hardy-esque destiny. A man may mar the destiny of another by being irresponsible, but that irresponsibility will be visited on the offender by some combination of individual or social repercussions, or may be borne to some degree by maintaining one's own sense of duty.

George Eliot realises that the picture we have of Maggie so far belongs to a universe in which people are so ignorant and mechanical that human destiny has not been articulated in terms of human responsibility within a morally-political framework, but more in terms of a harsh unknowable fate. Life within such a framework can only be known on a more primitive level - the level of needs and earliest associations. There are instances of generous acts bringing unforeseen consequences - such as Tom's gift of a pocket-knife to Bob Jakin issuing in Bob's suggestion of private trading which itself leads to the financial recovery of the Tullivers. But the end of it is still in the hands of a hopelessly uncontrollable tragic destiny for Mr. Tulliver.

George Eliot has now shifted Maggie from this primitive world into a morally responsible world, in which Maggie, Lucy, Philip and Stephen, and to some extent Tom, are sufficiently aware to be able to determine their own destinies

and to be responsible for their relationships to each other. To all intents and purposes character is 'not the whole of our destiny' in this world. But George Eliot must maintain a link with the more primitive first section of the book and hint darkly that 'the tragedy of our lives is not created entirely from within' - the extra dimension is symbolized by the unmapped river which, though its particular course will remain unknown, will end in the sea.

In spite of the difficulty of passing from one articulation to another, the episode of Maggie and Stephen, Philip and Lucy is skilfully handled. The ambiguities which were suggested by 'The Red Deeps' episode are here further explored. With Stephen we have another and perhaps more reliable indication of Maggie's nature than that provided by Philip. Philip has had an interest in stressing Maggie's 'goodness' rather than her animal nature. Stephen however sees in her 'an alarming amount of devil there'.<sup>55</sup> A subtle awareness of ambiguities enters into the narrative tone at this moment as it becomes apparent that Maggie and Stephen are strongly attracted to each other. Maggie is pleased that Stephen should blush with surprise at her beauty. Stephen wishes that she will look at him again. Neither will directly admit being attracted by the other, though both are uneasily conscious of being compromised by their instincts. Their mutual unease makes them adopt an attitude of apparent hostility

towards each other. When Lucy divines that there is some attachment between Philip and Maggie and attempts to bring them together, Maggie's confusion of passion and duty is deepened. When questioned by Lucy whether she loves Philip, her fear of her own passion for Stephen leads her to commit herself in a way she would not have done in 'The Red Deeps':

'Yes Lucy I would choose to marry him. I think it would be the best and highest lot for me - to make his life happy'.<sup>56</sup>

Maggie is lulled into a false sense of security by this admission. The combination of renunciation and devotion gives her the confidence to dance with Stephen at the ball shortly after. When he chooses her as a partner she feels 'a glowing gladness',<sup>57</sup> in which the pain of renunciation is submerged:

She was ready to welcome it as a part of life, for life at this moment seemed a keen vibrating consciousness poised above pleasure or pain.<sup>58</sup>

But when Stephen takes her outside and kisses her arm she feels punished '...for the sin of allowing a moment's happiness that was treachery to Lucy, to Philip, to her own better soul'.<sup>59</sup>

When she sees Philip the next day she is conscious of a revival of her old child-like affection for him, and this time, when he asks her whether her love of Tom is the only thing which is to keep them apart, she answers yes: 'And she believed it. At that moment she felt as if the enchanted cup had been dashed to the ground'.<sup>60</sup> But the 'calm decision' of her answer is not the result of real knowledge:

The reactionary excitement that gave her a proud self-mastery had not subsided, and she looked at the future with a sense of calm choice'.<sup>61</sup>

Given the confused state of Maggie's feelings it is not hard to understand how she could have been seduced by Stephen. However contemporaries of the author reacted very strongly to what they regarded as Maggie's treachery to Philip and Lucy and a sordid seduction by Stephen. Bulwer Lytton, whose criticism was the mildest, said that the act constituted

...a treachery and a meanness according to the ethics of Art and nothing can afterwards lift the character into the same hold on us.<sup>62</sup>

George Eliot very sensibly replied that if this was the case 'the ethics of Art are too narrow, and must be widened to correspond with a widening psychology'.<sup>63</sup> The criticism and reply are indicative of the problems George Eliot faced in producing enduring works of art. What the Victorians deplored as a lowering of moral tone in the seduction of Maggie appears understandable, even trivial to us. As Gordon Haight remarks:

The difficulty lies not in believing that Maggie was 'borne along by the tide' but that she could have turned back when she did.<sup>64</sup>

But the difficulty Haight points to is a real one. George Eliot clearly expects the reader to regard Maggie's decision to leave Stephen as the right one. To a modern reader however it would be quite unthinkable to give up all prospect of future happiness purely out of a scrupulous desire not to desecrate relationships in which one could not honestly continue. However, though the

change in sensibility complicates matters, the question is basically one of art and human understanding rather than sensibility. I believe that there is a confusion both of art and human understanding in the novel. Stephen is honest in recognizing that he and Maggie feel for each other in a way which makes their respective ties to Lucy and Philip no longer humanly viable:

'It is unnatural... We should break all these mistaken ties that were made in blindness and determine to marry each other... We can't help the pain it will give'.<sup>65</sup>

However, like Philip, we are not to regard Stephen as a trustworthy observer. This is emphasized in the text by the ease with which he 'feels for' Maggie in spite of his knowing of her attachment to Philip and in spite of what he regards as his duty, as a gentleman, towards Lucy. There is a touch of coxcombry about him, and when George Eliot shows him scenting himself we are to understand that he is vainer than he should be. In addition to this he is identified with symbols of passion and moral enervation, such as music and dancing and the river. It is significant that in arguing this perfectly reasonable case he should use deterministic terms such as 'natural' and 'instinctive' to emphasize the ultimate rightness of their love. Thus, artistically speaking, George Eliot is justified in showing Maggie rejecting Stephen, not on the grounds of rationality of his argument, but on moral grounds:

Maggie was silent. If it were not wrong - if she were once convinced of that and need no longer beat and struggle against this current, soft and yet strong as the summer stream.<sup>66</sup>

What Maggie is fighting against preeminently is the temptation to take the easy course of allowing Stephen to make love to her when two other very close friends will be deeply hurt by it:

'Many things are difficult and dark to me; but I see one thing quite clearly - that I must not, cannot seek my own happiness by sacrificing others. Love is natural; but surely pity and faithfulness and memory are natural too. And they would live in me still and punish me if I did not obey them'.<sup>67</sup>

When Maggie allows herself to be led to the boat by Stephen she becomes alienated from herself and the plaything of natural forces:

Maggie felt she was being led down the garden among the roses, being helped with firm tender care into the boat, having the cushion and cloak arranged for her feet, and her parasol opened for her...all by this stronger presence that seemed to bear her along without any of her own will, like the added self that comes with the sudden exalting influence of a strong tonic - and she felt nothing else. Memory was excluded...thought did not belong to that enchanted haze in which they were enveloped - it belonged to the past and the future that lay outside the haze.<sup>68</sup>

Just as the residents of St. Oggs, she has abdicated the responsibility of looking before and after, not like them through simple ignorance but through weakness. The real moral defect George Eliot was trying to portray in Maggie was the act of yielding itself:

All yielding is attended with a less vivid consciousness than resistance; it is the partial sleep of thought; it is the submergence of our own personality by another. Every influence tended to lull her into acquiescence...<sup>69</sup>

It is unfortunate that one of the 'influences' identified with momentary abdication of responsibility is itself eminently reasonable. But the logic of the debate has momentarily taken flight. Maggie is continually being identified with images of drowning in the river. The primal, poetic statement becomes more noticeable in her dream in which she is in the boat with Stephen and they see a star which turns into the virgin in St. Ogg's boat, who becomes Lucy with Philip for her boatman; then her brother, who rows past without looking at her. She tries to reach him but capsizes her boat and sinks. Then she dreams that she wakes up as a child again and Tom is not really angry. But then she really wakes '...to the plash of water against the vessel, and the sound of a footstep on the deck and the awful starlit sky'.<sup>70</sup>

Modern sensibility notwithstanding, I think we must grant that George Eliot has understood her material so far. Maggie would be yielding to Stephen to remain with him and she would be desecrating past ties which should not be ignored. And if the author shows a psychological and moral grasp of her material her sense of artistic form is no less impressive. By the use of the powerful imagery of natural forces she has

blended the sense of character as destiny or as a river which must end in the sea with the sense of destiny being subject to moral choice.

However it is after Maggie leaves Stephen that the author's grasp over her material weakens. Philip and Lucy write to Maggie forgiving her and informing her that both she and Stephen are now free agents. Stephen also writes to Maggie begging her to marry him, justifying himself on much the same rational grounds as before. However Maggie still refuses him on the grounds that she must retain the sacredness of her past ties. But Maggie has been absolved from those ties and, in the act of yielding, she showed she could not honour them as real propositions for the rest of her life. Surely the injury to others has now been done. It is no longer a question of whether to injure people or not, but of who to injure. Stephen rightly points out that he has as much claim on Maggie's benevolence as Philip or Lucy and he has a far greater power of making her happy. Certainly they have fallen, but they should now accept the implications of the fall rather than pretend it has not really taken place and done all the damage it could have done.

By her inability to accept the adult view of life in which compromise must be accepted and lived with, Maggie resembles the unreasoning child who clung passionately to the bare objects around her and would not allow their sacredness

to be impinged. But the childhood is over, the sacredness has been desecrated and no amount of wishful thinking or self-denial will bring it back. By failing to make this clear, George Eliot shows that she identifies so closely with Maggie that for her, too, the sacred loves of childhood must be preserved even when the passion of womanhood has swept them irrevocably into the past.

But if George Eliot shows a failure of penetration in clinging to an insufficiently understood value, she is merely doing something that human beings have done always and everywhere. Perhaps it is because of such flaws in humanity that the tragic vision grew out of life in the first place. In The Mill On The Floss Maggie's quite substantial and noble attempt to understand, to choose and to love, has been defeated by the intractability of her universe in general. Her childhood had been one long subjection to a tyranny of things not quite understood, and now after having fought it as a woman she is crushed by it.

Under these circumstances, the tragedy has to end in Maggie's death in the river. Death is necessary because life is impossible as an integral moral whole without becoming ridiculous. Artistically, the river is the only way out and is, symbolically, the final triumph of the primitive over the articulate in The Mill On The Floss:

What quarrel, what harshness, what unbelief in each other, can subsist in the presence of a great calamity, when all the artificial vesture of our life is gone and we are all one with each other in primitive mortal needs.<sup>71</sup>

1. Haight, George Eliot: A Biography, op. cit., p. 302.
2. George Eliot, The Mill On The Floss, edited by G.S. Haight, Riverside Editions, Cambridge, 1961, p. VI.
3. George Eliot: A Biography, op. cit., p. 302.
4. G.E.L., III, 133.
5. Ibid., 374.
6. In his criticism of The Mill On The Floss in The Novels of George Eliot, art cit., Henry James asks 'Did such a dénouement lie within the author's intentions from the first or was it a tardy expedient for the solution of Maggie's difficulties?' (Quoted by W.J. Harvey in The Art of George Eliot, op. cit., p. 321).
7. G.E.L., III, 285.
8. Comparing The Mill On The Floss with Adam Bede Lewes writes 'Neither the story nor the characters take so profound a hold of the sympathies'. See his Journal, May 5th 1860, in G.E.L., III, 292.
9. The Mill On The Floss, ed. cit., p. 7.
10. Ibid., p. 7.
11. Ibid., p. 8.
12. Ibid., p. 136.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid., p. 104.
15. Ibid., p. 119.
16. Ibid., p. 106.
17. Ibid., p. 238.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid., p. 239
20. Ibid., p. 179.
21. Ibid., p. 63.

22. Ibid., p. 24.
23. Ibid., p. 122.
24. Ibid., p. 238.
25. Ibid., p. 241.
26. G.E.L., III, 299.
27. The Mill On The Floss, ed. cit., p. 38.
28. Ibid., p. 37.
29. Ibid., p. 58.
30. Ibid., p. 35.
31. Ibid., pp. 165-6.
32. Ibid., p. 171.
33. Ibid., p. 176.
34. Ibid., pp. 252-3.
35. Ibid., p. 241.
36. Ibid.
37. Ibid., p. 243.
38. Ibid.
39. Ibid., p. 252.
40. Ibid., p. 260.
41. Ibid., p. 269.
42. Ibid., p. 264.
43. Ibid., p. 265.
44. Ibid., p. 286.
45. Ibid., pp. 286-7.
46. Ibid., p. 289.
47. Ibid.

48. Ibid., p. 305.
49. Ibid., p. 309.
50. Ibid.
51. Ibid., p. 117.
52. Ibid., p. 315.
53. Ibid., p. 326.
54. Ibid., p. 351.
55. Ibid., p. 328.
56. Ibid., p. 384.
57. Ibid., p. 386.
58. Ibid.
59. Ibid., p. 387.
60. Ibid., p. 389.
61. Ibid.
62. Letter to John Blackwood, April 11th 1860, National Library of Scotland, reproduced in The Mill On The Floss, ed. cit., p. XV.
63. G.E.L., III, 318.
64. The Mill On The Floss, ed. cit., p. XIV.
65. Ibid., p. 393.
66. Ibid.
67. Ibid., p. 394.
68. Ibid., p. 407.
69. Ibid., p. 410.
70. Ibid., p. 413.
71. Marion Evans' translation, The Essence of Christianity, ed. cit., p. 64.
72. The Mill On The Floss, ed. cit., p. 453.

CHAPTER 4 : SILAS MARNER.

George Eliot's use of the pastoral form is nowhere clearer or more perfectly realized than in Silas Marner. The ease with which a complex sense of reality is reduced to an apparently simple form, and the delicacy with which life is orchestrated so as to express a distinct, homogeneous idea of its meaning are characteristic of the parable.

Like Adam Bede, Silas Marner had its genesis in the single distinct image. In a letter dated 12th January 1861 George Eliot informs Blackwood:

I am writing a story which came across my other plans by a sudden inspiration... It is a story of old-fashioned village life, which has unfolded itself from the merest millet seed of thought.<sup>1</sup>

In a letter dated 24th February she is more explicit about this 'merest millet seed of thought':

It came to me first of all quite suddenly, as a sort of legendary tale suggested by my recollection of having once, in early childhood, seen a linen-weaver with a bag on his back.<sup>2</sup>

From the beginning the image seems to have invited treatment as a 'legendary tale' for which George Eliot suggests verse as the appropriate medium:

I have felt all through as if the story would have lent itself best to metrical rather than to prose fiction, especially in all that relates to the psychology of Silas...but as my mind dwelt on the subject, I became inclined to a more realistic treatment.<sup>3</sup>

Thus Silas Marner treads the line between realistic fiction and the 'legendary tale'. When, after reading the first hundred pages, Blackwood finds the realism 'oppressive', much as he had in 'Janet's Repentance', he finds relief in 'the most exquisite touches of nature and natural feelings'.<sup>4</sup> He goes on to say:

I wish the picture had been a more cheery one and embraced higher specimens of humanity, but you paint so naturally that in your hands the veriest earthworms become the most interesting perfect studies in fact.<sup>5</sup>

While Blackwood objects to the idea of a Silas Marner being taken seriously as a fit representative of the human race, he is finally charmed by the talented pastoralist who is able to present 'the veriest earthworms' as mediators of essential human truths. George Eliot confirms his judgement:

I don't wonder at your finding my story, as far as you have read it, rather sombre: indeed, I should not have believed that anyone would have been interested in it but myself (since William Wordsworth is dead) if Mr. Lewes had not been strongly arrested by it. But I hope you will not find it at all a sad story, as a whole, since it sets - or is intended to set - in a strong light the remedial influences of pure natural human relations. The Nemesis is a very mild one.<sup>6</sup>

Silas Marner is a parable illustrating something which is natural to all men. Like Wordsworth's 'Michael', from which its motto is borrowed, it is a metaphor of something understood to be essential or 'natural' to the human condition. In the metaphorical statement of the 'legendary tale', what is real is not primarily the circumstances of the tale or of

the poem but the realities or the vision of which it is the expression. The 'legendary tale' as we find it in George Eliot's 'The Legend of Jubal' or 'The Spanish Gypsy' is a highly formalized expression of a vision - of a sense of life which the poems will state or illustrate but by no means test. The poems cannot be 'experiments in life' like the novels because they are expressions of ideas to which a full commitment has been made outside of the nexus of the story or parable which is to illustrate them. As illustrations or metaphors expressing ideas they cannot be concerned with testing ideas against the contingencies and misleading, confusing paradoxes of the actual, with what Joyce referred to as 'the ineluctability of the visible'. One assumes that the testing of the idea against reality has already been made in the mind of the author. The purpose of the 'legendary tale' is to give life to the idea in a quasi-moralistic fashion for the edification of humanity, not to confuse humanity by a contract with the contingent and autonomous surfaces of actuality. Thus with Wordsworth and, to an extent, with George Eliot, realism is not necessarily wedded to naturalism because the world as constituted in the present may not be an adequate picture of what is truly natural to the human condition.

In this work however the realistic treatment takes its place with the pastoral idiom or Wordsworthian

'naturalism' which George Eliot adopts as a means of showing 'the remedial influences of pure natural human relations'. It remains to show how Silas Marner attained a successful mediation between the pastoral as an extension of the mode of the 'legendary tale' and the dangers of a realism which in Adam Bede had shown itself capable of creating uncomfortably autonomous characters and situations, challenging the vision of their creator.

To begin with, the question which Silas Marner explores is a profound and necessary one - a question for which every culture and religion must find its appropriate answer. One could say that Silas Marner is a fictionalized meditation on the meaning of the inevitable impact of impersonal forces on the lives of human beings with their need for love and happiness. One finds an anticipation of this inevitable clash in the Christian warning 'He who would find his life will lose it'.<sup>7</sup> Again, in the Indian notion of Karma we find an attempt to reconcile the impersonal with the personal by accounting for the seemingly inhuman face of destiny in terms of the level of cosmic responsibility achieved by the individual in his previous life.

In Silas Marner the meditation is reflected in its most obvious formal characteristic - the balancing of plots, of the story of Silas with the story of Godfrey. However we find no mere passive reflection of a fully worked out idea

but an active enquiry, via the device of contrasting plots, into the conditions of human happiness as it is pursued through the tyrannous circumstances of loss and gain by the desperate grasping of human desire.

The story begins with a meditation on the image that had first inspired it - the image of the seemingly homeless, displaced linen weaver:

In that far-off time superstition clung easily round every person or thing that was at all unwanted, or even intermittent and occasional merely, like the visits of the peddler or the knife-grinder. No one knew where wandering men had their homes or their origin; and how was a man to be explained unless you at least knew somebody who knew his father and mother.<sup>8</sup>

We are told that because of this superstition the linen weavers and other emigrants from the town into the country usually 'contracted the eccentric habits that belong to a state of loneliness'.<sup>9</sup> In a further explanation of the peculiarity of linen weavers in the country we find an equally perceptive observation on the nature of the people who reject them and attribute occult powers to them:

A shadowy conception of power that by much persuasion can be induced to refrain from inflicting harm, is the shape most easily taken by the sense of the invisible in the minds of men who have always been pressed close by primitive wants and to whom a life of hard toil has never been illuminated by any enthusiastic religious faith. To them pain and mis-hap present a far wider range of possibilities than gladness and enjoyment: their imagination is almost barren of the images that feed desire and hope, but is all overgrown by recollections that are a perpetual pasture to fear.<sup>10</sup>

Though passages of such incisive realistic comment do occur throughout Silas Marner the prevailing manner is pastoral but

not idealistic. While the work is not concerned with the rustics as such, passages such as the one quoted above do give a realistic grounding to the ideas appropriate to the more formal treatment of the legendary tale element. The transition from the realistic observations of the general life to the particular history of Silas Marner is entirely successful.

Silas' history up to his first fifteen uneventful years in Raveloe is quickly told. We are told how his life had been wholly taken up by weaving and by the religious society of Lantern Yard. We learn of his betrayal by William Dane and of Silas' consequent loss of faith in God and in life. His total acceptance becomes total denial:

To people accustomed to reason about the forms in which their religious feeling has incorporated itself, it is difficult to enter into that simple untaught state of mind in which the form and the feeling have never been severed by an act of reflection. <sup>11</sup>

We next learn how Silas has moved to Raveloe and how the complete break with the scenes with which he had unthinkingly identified his life acts upon him so as to deaden all sense of fellowship with the world in which he finds himself. The bitterness of his betrayal also keeps him from inquiring into the meaning of his loss:

The little light he possessed spread its beams so narrowly, that frustrated belief was a curtain broad enough to create for him the blackness of night. <sup>12</sup>

In this way he comes to lose himself in satisfying the immediate mechanical demands of fetching water and preparing food: '...all these immediate promptings helped, along with the weaving, to reduce his life to the unquestioning activity of a spinning insect'.<sup>13</sup> Silas' one attempt at responding to other human beings comes to nothing when his cure of Sally Oates by his skill with herbs wins him a reputation as a person with mysterious powers, causing him to shrink from further contact. Into the vacuum of objects to satisfy human desire and feeling come the mute, unquestioning guineas. Marner's dependence on his loom and his gold ensures that his nature becomes thoroughly moulded into correspondence with theirs:

His loom, as he wrought in it without ceasing, had in its turn wrought on him, and confirmed more and more the monotonous craving for its monotonous response. His gold, as he hung over it and saw it grow, gathered his power of loving together into a hard isolation like its own.<sup>14</sup>

Passive and harmless though he may be, Marner has sinned by allowing his nature to deteriorate to this extent. It is just this fact that brings yet another nemesis upon him, that of having his gold stolen, which is actually a blessing as it removes the mainstay of his degraded clinging. He had hoped to 'find his life' through clinging to a base object. Now he must lose it again. The growth of his hoard had reassured Marner with a false sense of constancy in the face

of the unpredictable forces of change. Change is the way of life and it is significant that Marner is robbed in the one instance in fifteen years of vigilance when he leaves his door unfastened in his absence, when 'his mind is at ease, free from the presentiment of change'.<sup>15</sup> Silas' imagination has become so corrupted by fifteen years of routine that it cannot conceive of change. It is important to stress Marner's culpability in this because the impression of his total passivity may lead us to assume that he is blameless, unlike Godfrey whose attempts to engineer events to fit his expectations make him appear more obviously blameful. The comparison of Godfrey and Silas yields a more subtle meaning.

We initially see Godfrey and his family in much the same perspective as we first see Silas Marner. We are told that the Casses are a species of squirearchy flourishing in 'That glorious war-time which was felt to be a peculiar favour of providence towards the landed interest',<sup>16</sup> when

The fall of prices had not yet come to carry the race of small squires and yoemen down that road to ruin for which extravagant habits and bad husbandry were plentifully anointing their wheels.<sup>17</sup>

They lord it over a community 'aloof from the currents of industrial energy and Puritan earnestness'.<sup>18</sup> Just as the history of Silas Marner is an imaginative reconstruction from the race of pale weavers, so that of Godfrey Cass is an attempt to understand the earlier years of

The lives of those rural forefathers, whom we are apt to think very prosaic figures - men whose only work was to ride round their land, getting heavier and heavier in their saddles, and who passed the rest of their days in the half-listless gratification of senses dulled by monotony<sup>19</sup>

but who 'had a certain pathos in them nevertheless'.<sup>20</sup>

Godfrey's worry that Dunsey will betray his marriage with the barmaid to his father and so ruin any hope of his winning Nancy Lammeter is a drearily common spectacle:

The subtle and varied pains springing from the higher sensibility that accompanies higher culture, are perhaps less pitiable than that dreary absence of impersonal enjoyment and consolation which leaves ruder minds to the perpetual urgent companionship of their own griefs and discontents.<sup>21</sup>

Both Godfrey and Silas are rude minds, incapable of taking a broader, more philosophical view of their predicaments and of making the necessary sacrifices or adjustments. In a sense they are both quite passive beings. Godfrey is helplessly entangled:

He had made ties for himself which robbed him of all wholesome motive and were a constant exasperation.<sup>22</sup>

He is thus more acted upon than acting: 'The yoke a man creates for himself by wrong-doing will breed hate in the kindest nature'.<sup>23</sup> He is

...visited by cruel wishes that seemed to enter and depart, and enter again, like demons who had found in him a ready-garnished home.<sup>24</sup>

By such visitations, his nature deteriorates as Marner's does. His resolution to confess to his father after Dunsey fails

to return from the hunt with Wildfire collapses as he falls back on 'the old disposition to rely on chances which might be favourable to him and save him from betrayal'.<sup>25</sup> We are reminded that this is a quite common trait:

In this point of trusting to some throw of fortune's dice, Godfrey can hardly be called old-fashioned. Favourable chance is the God of all men who follow their own devices instead of obeying a law they believe in.<sup>26</sup>

Silas, too, is culpable in having renounced the law he believed in. But the concern in both cases is less moral than existential, and it is on an existential plane that Godfrey and Silas are so similar, and so typical of most men:

Let even a polished man of these days get into a position he is ashamed to avow, and his mind will be bent on all the possible issues that may deliver him from the calculable results of that position.<sup>27</sup>

Silas hides from 'that same cunning complexity called chance',<sup>28</sup> while Godfrey, for want of something stronger in himself, trusts in it. Both reap the consequences of their respective surrenders:

The evil principle deprecated in that religion, is the orderly sequence by which the seed brings forth a crop after its kind.<sup>29</sup>

The robbery shatters Silas but also drives him to seek the help of his fellow men. Though they prove to be quite useless in recovering the gold, Silas is driven by desperation to trust in them without really being aware of it:

Our consciousness rarely registers the beginning of a growth within us any more than without us: there

have been many circulations of the sap before we detect the smallest sign of the bud.<sup>30</sup>

He is checked in his eagerness to blame the poacher Jem Rodney by the memory of his own unjust condemnation. The demands of human society force him to remember and, by so doing, he begins to recollect himself:

...there was a slight stirring of expectation at the sight of his fellow men, a faint consciousness of dependence on their goodwill.<sup>31</sup>

But even the concern of Dolly Winthrop is not enough to unlock

...the fountains of human love and of faith in a divine love...and his soul was still the shrunken rivulet, with only this difference that its little groove of sand was blocked up, and it wandered confusedly against dark obstruction.<sup>32</sup>

Silas' salvation lies in the arrival of the homeless child - an event which is the product of Molly's hatred and Godfrey's cowardliness. But the event is only incidentally the work of human wills; ultimately it is fate that works through the human beings involved. Molly is a passive agent of nemesis, in the grip of a bitterness for which she is not to be blamed:

Just and self-reproving thoughts do not come to us too thickly, even in the purest air and with the best lessons of Heaven and earth; how should those white winged delicate messengers make their way to Molly's poisoned chamber inhabited by no higher memories than those of a barmaid's paradise of pink ribbons and gentleman's jokes?<sup>33</sup>

Molly is also in the physical grip of opium, which leaves her to die in the snow. Marner who is no less passive is in the grip of catalepsy when Eppie crawls into his cottage.

For Godfrey a moment of choice is at hand, but deep within him the decision has already been made. On hearing of Molly's probable death, his one great fear is that she is not dead. Once he is reassured on this point it is a light matter for him to abdicate responsibility for his child to Silas Marner. Perhaps the best account of the matter is given by Dolly Winthrop:

It's like the night and the morning, and the sleeping and the waking, and the rain and the harvest - one goes and the other comes, and we know nothing how nor where. We may strive and scrat and fend, but it's little we can do arter all - the big things come and go with no striving o' ourn...<sup>34</sup>

The little we can do is to accept our lot and the consequences of our actions. Godfrey rejects and Marner accepts. Godfrey gets what he has wanted, Silas rediscovers himself by accepting the terms of change when he does not know what he wants.

Eppie draws Silas out into the world again, 'reawakening his senses with her fresh life'.<sup>35</sup> He rediscovers the fields and the once familiar herbs:

As the child's mind was growing into knowledge his mind was growing into memory: as her life unfolded, his soul, long stupefied in a cold narrow prison, was unfolding too, and trembling gradually into full consciousness. <sup>36</sup>

Eppie's needs also draw Silas into participating in the life around him and becoming part of the community:

He had himself come to appropriate the forms of custom and belief which were the mould of Raveloe life; and...he had begun to ponder over the elements of his old faith and blend them with his new impressions, till he recovered a consciousness of unity between his past and present. <sup>37</sup>

Silas Marner is about change and how it can tyrannously alter the forms of affection upon which one depends for life. Only endurance in the face of change and loss can confer the ability to accept change: 'He who would lose his life... shall find it'.<sup>38</sup> Silas now has the wisdom to adjust to the forms of life adopted by his fellow men, because by accepting Eppie he regains the gift of life.

The moral if any - for Silas Marner is not an exercise in moralizing but an enquiry into change - is that while Godfrey gets what he wants, he becomes dissatisfied because in order to get it he has to compromise out of an inability to accept the consequences of his actions. The wise course is to be open to change, as Marner becomes, and to make the gesture of trust and acceptance, however minimal. Dolly Winthrop does much to articulate this viewpoint to Marner:

Eh there's trouble i' this world and there's things as we can niver make out the rights on. And all we've got to do is to trusten, Master Marner - to do the right thing as fer as we know and to trusten ... And if you could but ha' gone on trustening, Master Marner, you wouldn't ha' run away from your fellow-creatures and been so lone.<sup>39</sup>

From this Dolly Winthrop infers that 'there's a good and a rights bigger nor what we can know'.<sup>40</sup> Silas accepts this explanation hesitantly: 'That drawing o' the lots is dark; but the child was sent to me: there's dealings with us - there's dealings'.<sup>41</sup> Though some things yet remain 'dark', Silas

shows that he has fully realized the wisdom of acceptance because he recognizes the necessity of change. Thus he does not stand in the way of Eppie's marriage, and even when Godfrey comes to claim Eppie as his child Silas does not hinder Eppie's free choice: 'Things will change whether we like it or no'.<sup>42</sup>

It is significant that the patterns of acceptance with reward and selfishness with retribution are never absolutely proclaimed as all-embracing truths, as answers to the nineteenth century debate over determinism and responsibility. The answers are relative and are worked out by the characters themselves but are not always endorsed by the author. Thus Godfrey's feeling that fate has repaid him for his earlier cowardice by making his marriage barren of children is played down by the author:

I suppose it is the way with all men and women who reach middle age without the clear perception that life can never be thoroughly joyous: under the vague dullness of the grey hours, dissatisfaction seeks a definite object and finds it in the privation of an untried good.<sup>43</sup>

It is significant, too, that Silas' attempt to enquire further into the meaning of the drawing of the lots by returning to what used to be Lantern Yard should meet with failure. As Dolly says:

It's the will o' them above as many things should be kept dark to us; but there's some things as I've never felt i' the dark about, and these mostly what comes i' the day's work.<sup>44</sup>

When Eppie promises to stay with Silas even when she is married he realizes that he was right to trust even though his attempts at further exploring the riddle of his destiny ended in failure: "...I've had light enough to trusten by; and now she says she'll never leave me, I think I shall trusten till I die"<sup>45</sup> Silas does not seek to know all purely for the satisfaction of speculation but simply wonders at the universe as he had when his money was found with Dunsey Cass's skeleton at the bottom of the stone pit: "It's wonderful - our life is wonderful"<sup>46</sup>

Thus, in its seeming simplicity, Silas Marner preserves the many-sidedness of life. The secret of its success is empiricism, the refusal to draw abstract conclusions of a metaphysical or moralistic nature from the process it reveals so clearly. Definite wisdom is to be gained from Silas Marner, but not of a kind that lends itself to systematic statement. Its total effect is concrete and very close to the 'moral' or the 'wisdom' of a Chinese short story of the T'ang period, 'The Curly-bearded Hero', which concludes with this statement:

From this history we may know that not even a hero, far less a common being, may expect to come forward as the One Man. The subject who harbours foolish thoughts of rebellion is like the mantis which would stop a Chariot with its feelers.<sup>47</sup>

As in this T'ang short story, morality in Silas Marner amounts to no more than adjusting oneself to the way things happen,

and so discovering oneself. In this context the value of 'pure natural human relations' is demonstrated.

Silas Marner anticipates Middlemarch in the fine balance it achieves between the representation of the character and the medium in which he moves. In this case George Eliot fulfils her ambition 'to strive after as full a vision of the medium in which a character moves as of the character itself'.<sup>48</sup> The way that Godfrey and Silas are expressive of particular social types has already been demonstrated. Godfrey's world is particularly finely drawn and his motivations could not be understood apart from it. Squire Cass, the Lammeters, Dunsey and the dance at the Red House are masterfully done. The representatives of the lower echelons of Raveloe society as we find them in the Rainbow scene are also vividly portrayed. There is no idealization as one might have expected from the Wordsworthian emphasis on the importance of memory and the 'pure natural human relations'. However, the total impression of the Rainbow scene, as one of the dramatic portraiture of rustic existence elsewhere in the book, is pastoral, and contrasts with the hard-eyed description of the people who are 'pressed close by primitive wants',<sup>49</sup> to whom 'pain and mishap present a far wider range of possibilities than gladness and enjoyment'.<sup>50</sup> The Rainbow scene does not contradict this harsh impression, but neither does it confirm it with the same vigour of thought and analysis. It provides

a softened picture of rural life, not because it idealizes the curiously ritualistic patterns underlying the rustic conversation but because it tends to present them as the characteristic rustic situation and, as such, susceptible to a humorous treatment. I think John Bayley is correct in observing that George Eliot's attempt at 'Flemish' realism yields a result closer to the effect of the Victorian genre painters because of this very emphasis on what is characteristic rather than 'the contingent incongruous and unframed'.<sup>51</sup> Viewed in this light, even the dance at the Red House has the air of a set piece, 'characteristic' of life in the country, when one suspects, after reading Hardy and remembering George Eliot's own comments on the harshness of the real Milby of 'Janet's Repentance', that such jolly episodes were not at all characteristic of actual rustic existence. From our present vantage point we may suspect that the truth of rustic existence belongs to a story different from what we find in Silas Marner, a story which we find in Cobbett and Hardy.

Nevertheless, Silas Marner succeeds because it is not primarily about rustic society and because its author is careful to place it in a preindustrial society untouched by the great forces of change which altered the face of nineteenth century England. It is significant that at this time the only real interpreter of rustic society was Wordsworth, who idealized it in the interests of 'nature'. Thus George Eliot's

own criteria for dealing with this society could be measured against no models stricter than those she devised herself. While this picture may be ultimately inadequate, because selective of the quaint aspects of rustic life, she makes us aware that this existence is harder than it is painted. But the realism which we find in the description of rustic superstition never openly challenges the assumptions of the naturalistic pastoral mode; it coexists with it and extends it. The realistic descriptions and realistically rendered scenes fall neatly into place about the central conception, which is thereby extended and given a depth, subtlety and total validity such as it could never have gained from treatment in verse.

1. G.E.L., III, 371.
2. Ibid., 382.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid., pp. 379-80.
6. Ibid., 382.
7. Matthew 10 : 39, Revised Standard Version.
8. George Eliot, Silas Marner, introduction by Jerome Thale, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, N.Y., 1962, p. 1.
9. Ibid., p. 2.
10. Ibid., p. 3.
11. Ibid., p. 14.
12. Ibid., p. 17.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid., p. 50.
15. Ibid., p. 48.
16. Ibid., p. 25.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid., p. 35.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid., p. 36.
23. Ibid., p. 38.
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid., p. 82.
26. Ibid., p. 90.

27. Ibid., p. 91.
28. Ibid.
29. Ibid.
30. Ibid., p. 69.
31. Ibid., p. 100.
32. Ibid., p. 106.
33. Ibid., p. 135.
34. Ibid., p. 153.
35. Ibid., p. 158.
36. Ibid., p. 160.
37. Ibid., p. 177.
38. Matthew 10 : 39, R.S.V.
39. Silas Marner, ed. cit., pp. 180-1.
40. Ibid., p. 180.
41. Ibid., p. 181.
42. Ibid., p. 186.
43. Ibid., p. 198.
44. Ibid., p. 224.
45. Ibid.
46. Ibid., p. 206.
47. Ch'in jan K'O Chuan, 'The Curly-bearded Hero (Tu Kuang-T'ing)' in C. Birch (ed.), Anthology of Chinese Literature, Penguin Press, 1965, pp. 323-31.
48. Letter to R.H. Hutton in Cross (ed.), George Eliot's Life as Narrated in Her Letters and Journals, p. 366.
49. Silas Marner, ed. cit., p. 3.
50. Ibid.

51. J. Bayley, 'The Pastoral of Intellect' in Critical Essays on George Eliot, ed. cit., p. 201.  
Because of the complexity of his argument, the relevant passage is reproduced in full:

'George Eliot's comprehension of life cannot allow for the contingent, the incongruous, the unframed, the indefinitely questioned and receding aspects of experience, which are not only what we have round us all the time, but which writers as various as Jane Austen, Shakespeare and Tolstoy are able without apparent effort to represent in and through the artificiality of their forms. It is not artifice that threatens "life" in this sense, but the pastoral attempt to secure too characteristic and comprehensive a picture of it.

In making its ideas "thoroughly incarnate", the intellect makes a picture. George Eliot herself courts the pictorial analogy, as if it afforded a proof of successful incarnation, emphasizing the "Flemish" realism she strove for, in the scenes at the Rainbow Inn in Silas Marner, and more studiously still in the Poysers and the Dodsons. Perhaps a closer resemblance, however, is with the Victorian genre painters, with Bastien Lepage and Liebl, Rossiter and Holman Hunt, even with the historical weltge schichtliche Bilder of Kaulbach, though she did not admire them. Flemish genre in fact makes an impression very different from hers, an impression in which objects and people appear to have been left over, as if by accident, in the created area of isolated tranquillity. Be that as it may, it is with the pictorial art of her own time and not that of any earlier period, which lay such emphasis on what is characteristic for its own sake'.

CHAPTER 5 : ROMOLA.

There is much evidence to suggest that the writing of Romola brought George Eliot to a closer and fuller consideration of her scope as a novelist and her fictional methods than she had yet attempted. In a letter written by John Blackwood to his wife we are given a second-hand but illuminating account of George Eliot's thoughts on character during the time of writing Romola:

Her description of how she realised her characters was very marvellous. I never heard anything so good as her distinction between what is called the real and the imaginative. It amounted to this, that you could not have the former without the latter and greater quality. Any real observation of life and character must be limited, and the imagination must fill in and give life to the picture. <sup>1</sup>

Blackwood then passes to an account of how imagination filled out the picture of Silas Marner and Adam Bede. It would appear, however, that the 'imagination' was not so easily forthcoming in Romola as in the previous works. We know that the book gave her more trouble than any of her English novels. Indeed, she began it as a young woman and finished it an old woman. The difficulty of filling out a background for fifteenth century Florence by painstaking research and pressing on despite continual misgivings prompted her to say:

There is no book of mine about which I more thoroughly feel that I could swear by every sentence as having been written with my best blood, such as it is, and with the most ardent care for veracity of which my nature is capable. <sup>2</sup>

She was often painfully aware of her unfitness for the task:

Well then, consider the sort of agonising labour to an English-fed imagination to make out a sufficiently real background for the desired picture - to get breathing individual forms, and group them in the needful relations, so that the presentation will lay hold on the emotions as human experience.<sup>3</sup>

Her grave doubts about how far she could infuse life into a largely artificial background stimulated her conscientiousness in other directions. Her journal records that she was to make several drafts of the plot before beginning the story. She tried to think the novel out beforehand, to make it as precisely articulated as possible. However, her difficulties were not only caused by the unfamiliarity of her 'English-fed imagination' with the details of Florentine life. She was attempting something far more ambitious than she had yet done. In a letter to Richard Holt Hutton, in which she replies to his perceptive criticism of the novel in The Spectator, George Eliot gives a very clear idea of the aims of Romola and the relation of its method to previous works. Applauding his perception of the novel's scope, of what she had intended 'in the presentation of Bardo and Baldassarre; and also the relation of the Florentine political life to the development of Tito's nature',<sup>4</sup> she continues:

There is scarcely a phrase, an incident, an allusion, that did not gather its value to me from its supposed subservience to my main artistic objects...it is the habit of my imagination to strive

after as full a vision of the medium in which a character moves as of the character itself. The psychological causes which prompted me to give such details of Florentine life and history as I have given, are precisely the same as those which determined me in giving the details of English life in Silas Marner, or the 'Dodson' life, out of which were developed the destinies of poor Tom and Maggie. But you have correctly pointed out the reason why my tendency to excess in this effort after artistic vision, makes the impression of a fault in 'Romola' much more perceptibly than in my previous books. And I am not surprised with your dissatisfaction with Romola herself. I can well believe that the many difficulties belonging to the treatment of such a character have not been overcome and that I have failed to bring out my conception with adequate fulness. I am sorry she has attracted you so little; for the great problem of her life, which essentially coincides with a chief problem in Savonarola's is one that readers need helping to understand. <sup>5</sup>

What the chief problem of Romola and Savonarola's existences is, she does not explicitly say. But she does tell Hutton that her 'predominant feeling' with regard to both this problem and the book itself is not that she has achieved anything, but that '...great, great facts have struggled to find a voice through me, and have only been able to speak brokenly'.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, she is thankful that the novel has been seen in its full significance by a mind replete with 'that religious and moral sympathy with the historical life of man which is the larger half of culture'.<sup>7</sup>

Another mind not exactly deficient in these qualities found the book 'the noblest and most heroic prose poem I have ever read'.<sup>8</sup> This was Browning; and his response is significant. Whereas Hutton had appreciated the scope of the

book, he had shown himself dissatisfied with it as a novel in as much as he objected to the character of Romola. In praising the work as a prose poem, however, Browning seems to find nothing objectionable about it.

It has already been made clear how much affinity Silas Marner has with the mode of the prose poem and, indeed, how it was originally conceived as a legendary tale. We also know that George Eliot had already been in Florence collecting details for a possible novel on her first Italian journey in 1860, before she had finished Silas Marner. It is therefore reasonable to assume that both books were probably being thought of at once. How far the conceptions of both books illuminated each other at the stage of conception will never be certain, but we have seen how each made a very strong impression as a sort of prose poem. This is ironic because whereas Silas Marner may have been conceived as a legendary tale, Romola was thought of as a novel from the very first. Indeed, in justifying it to Hutton George Eliot emphasizes its strong resemblance to The Mill on the Floss, her most accomplished novel to date.

We have seen, then, that in Romola George Eliot is consciously dealing with big things. She wishes to convey a sense of 'the historical life of man' as well as to analyse the political life of the Florentine State, in an overall attempt to understand the moral life of mankind. She

also makes it clear that in realizing this attempt she is guided by 'the psychological causes' which had guided her conception of character and its medium in Silas Marner and The Mill on the Floss. And there is a suggestion in Blackwood's letter that her conception of character recognizes both a realistic and an imaginative dimension. At a conceptual level, then, Romola is more than an historical romance: it is an attempt, as was every novel by George Eliot, to articulate the problem of man's coming to terms with himself and with the world. However, the most obvious characteristic of the novel is its failure. Hutton's reaction to it is typical of the sympathetic but unenthusiastic reception the book has had among the most generous of George Eliot's critics, who have never regarded the novel as anything less than an important failure. In 1866 Henry James called it

The most important of George Eliot's works... not the most entertaining nor the most readable, but the one in which the largest things are attempted and grasped... The Book strikes one less as a work of art than as a work of morals.<sup>9</sup>

James' criticism is important because he grasped what Romola is fundamentally about: 'Romola is preeminently a study of the human conscience in an historical setting which is studied almost as much'.<sup>10</sup> But his explanation of the novel's failure, though extremely perceptive, is perhaps oversimplified and misleading. In a comparison with earlier novels he remarks 'It was in Romola, precisely, that the equilibrium

I spoke of just now was lost, and that reflection began to weigh down the scale'.<sup>11</sup> The equilibrium James notes had been between imagination, reflection and 'the moral consciousness'. Thus for James the failure of Romola is due to a preponderance of 'reflection', indicating that

More than any of her novels, it was evolved... from her moral consciousness - a moral consciousness enriched by a prodigious amount of literary research. <sup>12</sup>

Virtually all attempts to understand the book's failure from Henry James to the present day<sup>13</sup> have been in terms of James' explanation of it as over-reflective and over-moral. But when one takes into consideration its acknowledged similarity with Silas Marner and the obvious delight that Browning felt in reading it as poetry when it was intended as a novel, one suspects that the failure may be due to a confusion of genres. Certainly I do not think it would be accurate to describe Silas Marner as less 'a work of morals' than Romola. But whatever the reasons the novel does fail to compel.

No character in the novel can be said to live in the way that the creations of her earlier English novels live. The most autonomous creation is probably Tito, but even he gives the impression of a puppet whose every move is carefully manipulated and whose every slip is laboriously and predictably analysed by the 'omniscient' author. The analyses themselves are often shrewd and profound, but we become far

more interested in them than in what they describe. The painstaking and minutely exact visual descriptions are often interesting but never 'felt' in the way that the landscape of The Mill on the Floss is felt as a primitive reality. It is reconstructed from early books and maps and never loses the musty sense of its derivation.

The same can be said of the dialogue of all the characters. The dialogue of the minor characters shows many efforts on the part of the author at an easy colloquialism, into which Italian exclamations and constructions are judiciously sprinkled. But, as Joan Bennett remarks, the result is a stilted artificiality: a language which was never spoken at any time, either in fifteenth century Florence or nineteenth century England.<sup>14</sup> The language of the pedant Bardo, too, remains oppressively non-alive even though we are aware of a continual slight irony infusing his pedantry:

'It is true, Romola,' said Bardo when she had finished; 'it is a true conception of the poet; for what is that grosser, narrower light by which men behold merely the petty scene around them, compared with that far-stretching lasting light, which spreads over centuries of thought and over the life of nations and makes clear to us the minds of the immortals who have reaped the great harvest and left us to glean in their furrows?'<sup>15</sup>

Since the failure of Romola has been generally agreed upon, I will not concern myself so much with the failure itself as with the reasons for it which, as I have indicated, are most likely to involve questions of language or an

insufficiently understood mixture of genres rather than sensibility or moralism.

As James pointed out, Romola is not primarily an historical novel, if by that term we mean a fictional attempt to bring to life an area of history and give it an autonomous existence and meaning peculiar to itself. George Eliot does not conceive of history in this way. She does not operate by the sort of historical negative capability that enables a Shakespeare to understand so well the political gamesmanship of Richard II, for example. For this sort of history we must expect of an author an admission that the historical situation is a primary reality in itself. We would also expect of the author a very marked ability to allow the contours of the particular historical situation to express themselves with only a minimum of infusion of extra-historical ideas. Though George Eliot shows in her article on Riehl an immense respect for history, it is a respect grounded in an intense realization of the value of history as an illustration of the larger life of man. Thus she praises Riehl for his awareness of the value of tradition and community as means of historically understanding German society. Riehl's work is not only history but 'incarnate history', the perfect embodiment of history as an idea. Similarly, in Romola history is not quite itself but an illustration of something larger and truer:

The great river courses which have shaped the lives of men have hardly changed; and those other streams, the life currents that ebb and flow in human hearts, pulsate to the same great needs, the same great loves and terrors. As our thought follows close in the slow wake of the dawn, we are impressed with the broad sameness of the human lot, which never alters in the main headings of its history - hunger and labour, seed-time and harvest, love and death.<sup>16</sup>

We are reminded that 'we still resemble the men of the past more than we differ from them'.<sup>17</sup>

The resurrected spirit of an 'old Florentine' of 1492, who is invoked in the Proem, has learned by experience of the mercenary army of the republic 'to distrust men without bitterness; looking on life mainly as a game of skill'; he is also 'not dead to traditions of heroism and clean handed honour'.<sup>18</sup> But George Eliot does not allow this quality to be a peculiarity only of fifteenth century Florence:

For the human soul is hospitable and will entertain conflicting sentiments and contradictory opinions with much impartiality.<sup>19</sup>

We notice that the images invoked to explain the larger truth behind the historical situation - 'great river courses', 'hunger and labour', 'seed-time and harvest', 'love and death' - have already been used extensively in her fiction up to this time. 'Seed time and harvest' seems to suggest particularly Silas Marner, while 'love and death' recalls The Mill on the Floss. To this extent there is probably some truth in the description of Romola as a 'historic pastoral'

by John Bayley.<sup>20</sup> What Bayley means by this term is a method of imagining the past in terms of the present so that each is revealed to be an aspect of the universal process. He points out that the 'historic pastoral' grew out of an immense respect for the idea of history but he argues that

The paradox is that when history is so consciously felt as idea, it is in one sense abolished as fact. The past is always with us and not only reassures our present consciousness, but is identified with it.<sup>21</sup>

He sees Romola particularly as an instance of 'the danger of dissolving fact in idea'.<sup>22</sup>

But Bayley does not take into account the very real grasp George Eliot has of the Florentine renaissance. In spite of the ahistoricism implicit in George Eliot's stated position, the Proem of Romola, which places the action at the end of the era of Lorenzo de Medici, shows a surprising grasp of the spirit of the age:

Our resuscitated spirit was not a pagan philosopher nor a philosophizing pagan poet, but a man of the fifteenth century, inheriting its strange web of belief and unbelief; of Epicurean levity and fetishistic dread; of pedantic impossible ethics uttered by rote, and cruel passions acted out with childish impulsiveness; of inclination towards a self-indulgent paganism, and inevitable subjection to that human conscience which, in the unrest of a new growth was filling the air with strange prophecies and presentiments. <sup>23</sup>

The 'old Florentine' shade

...had smiled perhaps and shaken his head dubiously as he heard simple folk talk of a Pope Angelico, who was to come by and by and bring a new order of things.<sup>24</sup>

Nevertheless, he is uneasily aware of living at a turning point in the history of his state when the characteristic influence of Lorenzo, 'with the dim outward eyes and the inward subtle vision',<sup>25</sup> is being superseded by the influence of the fiery visionary Savonarola. The Proem ends beautifully in our identification with the spirit's uncertainty as to which sense of life will triumph, which is the more true, for in spite of the decline of the Church and the influence of rationalism George Eliot's age is yet one of hope and uncertainty:

...and men still yearn for the reign of peace and righteousness - still own that life to be the highest which is a conscious voluntary sacrifice. For the Pope Angelico is not come yet.<sup>26</sup>

One realizes why the author of Paracelsus and Fra Lippo Lippi was so moved by the work, and one may even speculate that this form of historical poem in which the past is consciously related to the present is no less valid a form of history than the simply objective variety. In spite of the obvious sense of identification then, I cannot agree that the fact of history is dissolved in the idea of it.

It is significant that the old Florentine shade is imagined to have died before Lorenzo, whose death opens up new possibilities for the state. On the one hand the quixotic hope for a Pope Angelico suggests a movement towards government by the Church, which Savonarola hopes to purge of impurities in anticipation of this high office. On the other there is a political urge towards free government:

Already the regrets for Lorenzo were getting less predominant over the murmured desire for government on a broader basis, in which corruption might be arrested and there might be that free play of jealousy and ambition, which made the ideal liberty of the good old quarrelsome struggling times when Florence raised her own great buildings, reared her own soldiers, drove out would-be tyrants at the sword's point, and was found to keep faith at her own loss.<sup>27</sup>

It is on this midsummer morning of 1492 that Tito Melema in the bloom of youth and good fortune first sees the 'face in the crowd'<sup>28</sup> which will bring the summons for help from Baldassarre, his foster-father. He has already rationalized his selfishness and his reluctance to commit himself to the arduous search for Baldassarre by deciding that he is probably already dead. Almost unknowingly 'he ha[s] chosen his colour in the game, and ha[s] given an inevitable bent to his wishes...'.<sup>29</sup> George Eliot turns from the consideration of the state itself to a detailed analysis of the moral evolution of Tito, who is to become more and more representative of the state and the time of Macchiavelli:

The contaminating effect of deeds often lies less in the commission than in the consequent adjustment of our desires - the enlistment of our self-interest on the side of falsity; as on the other hand, the purifying influence of public confession springs from the fact that by it the hope in lies is forever swept away, and the soul recovers the noble attitude of simplicity'.<sup>30</sup>

Tito's public life, wherein the young Niccolo Macchiavelli is to be one of his colleagues, is meant to mirror the deception of his private life. At one point in the novel

Macchiavelli is made to say: 'Veracity is a plant of paradise and the seeds have never flourished beyond the walls'.<sup>31</sup>

Clearly, then, even in the early quotation relating to Tito 'the noble attitude of simplicity', being incompatible with Tito's private life, may also tend to be incompatible with a life of commitment to the state. This is an attitude which, I hope to show, emerges more fully and explicitly as the novel progresses. George Eliot is suspicious of political commitment, while admiring it if, as in Savonarola's case, it is commitment to a great non-selfish cause. Tito's original commitment has nothing laudable in it:

...in this first distinct colloquy with himself the ideas which had previously been scattered and interrupted had now concentrated themselves; the little rills of selfishness had united and made a channel, so that they could never again meet with the same resistance.<sup>32</sup>

His rationalization that Baldassarre is dead is an example of how unconscious or semi-conscious factors can influence decision and bring about an act which will impede freedom of choice on a future occasion in which a choice must be made. Thus Tito's future decline is foreshadowed from the very first choice he makes. When he learns that Baldassarre is alive, he still refuses to help him:

Having once begun to explain away Baldassarre's claim, Tito's thought showed itself as active as a virulent acid, eating its rapid way through all the tissues of sentiment.<sup>33</sup>

The sentiment that Tito shows so little regard for

is the only thing binding men to a life of moral responsibility.

Like Macchiavelli's:

His mind [is] destitute of that dread which has been erroneously decried as if it were nothing higher than a man's animal care for his own skin... Such terror of the unseen is so far above mere sensual cowardice that it will annihilate that cowardice; it is the initial recognition of a moral law restraining desire, and checks the hard bold scrutiny of imperfect thought into obligations which can never be proved to have any sanctity in the absence of feeling. <sup>34</sup>

Tito moves into political intrigue as into a deadly game in which he is pleurably 'conscious of his own adroitneſs';<sup>35</sup> it is a game because it has loſt the ſanctity of moral feeling by an incremental proceſs of dehumanization:

...our lives make a moral tradition for our individual ſelves, as the life of mankind at large makes a moral tradition for the race; and to have once acted greatly ſeems a reaſon why we ſhould always be noble. But Tito was feeling the effect of an oppoſite tradition: he had won no memories of ſelf-conqueſt and perfect faithfulness from which he could have a ſenſe of falling. <sup>36</sup>

In the ſame way the Macchiavellian politics of the Florentine ſtate itſelf are judged and found lacking by the ſentiment growing from the moral tradition of the race:

Altogether this world, with its partitioned empire and its roomy univerſal church, ſeemed to be a handſome eſtabliſhment for the few who were lucky or wiſe enough to reap the advantages of human folly: a world in which luſt and obſcenity, lying and treachery, oppreſſion and murder, were pleaſant, uſeful and when properly managed, not dangerous. <sup>37</sup>

However, this world of godleſs political opportunism is alſo the world of Savonarola. If Tito Melema embodies one

extreme of political life, Savonarola embodies the other in his vision of a state free of tyranny and corruption and united under a pure church. His influence is massive but unconscionably diverse, reflecting inner contradictions which are magnified by his position of extraordinary personal power:

One secret of his massive influence lay in the highly mixed character of his preaching...there were strains that appealed to the very finest susceptibilities of men's natures, and there were elements that gratified low egoism, tickled gossiping curiosity, and fascinated timorous superstition. His need of personal predominance, his labyrinthine allegorical interpretations of the scriptures, his enigmatic visions, and his own false certitude about the divine intentions never ceased, in his own large soul, to be ennobled by that fervid piety, that passionate sense of the infinite, that active sympathy, that clear-sighted demand for the subjection of selfish interests to the general good which he had in common with the greatest of mankind. <sup>38</sup>

The point is driven home when Baldassarre interprets Savonarola's exhortation to virtue as a call for revenge.

The touchstone by which we can divine George Eliot's own position within this world of spiritual and political ambiguities is to be found in the growing awareness of Romola herself. It is in her development that the author tests and 'experiences' the continuum of personal, social, political and spiritual ambiguities interpenetrating character and environment. At first, like Maggie, she is encased in the gloomy world of her home seclusion - committed by her sense of filial duty to aid a blind man in an endless commentary on his collection of ancient manuscripts. Bardo's blindness is both physical

and symbolic of a fixed attitude of subservience to past authorities. Romola is consequently painfully aware of limited horizons for herself. Like Maggie, she longs to break out. But Romola is not frankly imagined as being driven by a passion for life and love as Maggie. While Maggie is forever passionately misinterpreting events, Romola makes what is perhaps a too balanced estimation of them. Certainly she makes mistakes, but her mistakes are not due to a lack of care in her approach but to a lack of experience. With Maggie there is an indefinable and very human sense of always being too young, too loving, too passionate, ever to understand the world.

Romola's awareness is first aroused and expanded by her love for Tito and then by her visit to her dying brother and her first impression of the religious faith which Bardo's classical humanism taught her to despise. The two experiences are irreconcilable, as the clarity of her intelligence admits of no easy rationalization of either. The sense of duality intrudes on the day of her betrothal to Tito:

Strange bewildering transition from those pale images of sorrow and death to this bright youthfulness, as of a sungod who knew nothing of night! ...or was there never any reconciling of them, but only a blind worship of clashing deities, first in mad joy and then in wailing: Romola for the first time felt this questioning need like a sudden uneasy dizziness and want of something to grasp; it was an experience hardly longer than a sigh, for eager theorizing of ages is compressed, as in a seed in the momentary want of a single mind. <sup>39</sup>

Her mind is questioning, active and outward-tending, and she

is not lulled into complete ease of mind by Tito's gesture of locking her brother's key into the 'tomb of joy' with which he presents her as a wedding gift. The latter touch is typical of the sort of Gothic allegory whereby the sense of inner and outer ambiguities is symbolized - as, for example, in 'the face in the crowd' and Baldassarre's presence in Savonarola's church - and suggests the portentousness of the legendary tale. But unlike the symbol of the coins in Silas Marner, which we feel contain the miser's very life's blood, the 'tomb of joy' remains an abstraction. The passion of life is missed, as is its dramatic complexity. Instead of feeling the process of ambiguity as we do (or do not, depending on our own perception) in Philip Wakem's dealings with Maggie, we get the sense of characters posing in a genre portrait with the 'tomb of joy' in centre frame. The symbol embodies neither character nor medium.

With her growing alienation from Tito and her concern for what is to become of her father's library, Romola's interest comes to be focussed on the drama which is being played out in the Florentine state. The dualities and ambiguities with which she grapples in her personal life, she sees reflected in the context of the state. Consequently, she becomes disillusioned with the whole political process, and as she becomes alienated from both personal and social existence, she feels herself drawn to Savonarola. The potential of her mind for growth into a wide spiritual vision has at last found sustenance:

All of Romola's ardour had been concentrated in her affections...Romola had had contact with no mind that could stir the larger possibilities of her nature; they lay folded and crushed like embryonic wings, making no element in her consciousness beyond an occasional vague uneasiness...

...this new personal interest of hers in public affairs had made her care at last to understand precisely what influence Fra Girolamo's preaching was likely to have on the turn of events. 40

Her respect for Savonarola becomes something like spiritual dependence after he persuades her that she must not run away from Tito and her 'duty'. During the lean periods of Florence's existence, when it is threatened with famine and the Frate's austere influence spreads, Romola's own long acquaintance with the austere in life draws her into closer sympathy with Savonarola's ideals. Her dislike for the narrowness he represents is temporarily obscured. However, she becomes disillusioned with him, too, when he refuses to use his influence to save Bernardo Del Nero, her uncle, from execution. Because Bernardo Del Nero is a Medicean and therefore opposed to Savonarola's party, Savonarola explains that it would be better for the state if he should die, even though he may in fact be a man of personal integrity. Romola becomes disgusted with this rationalization of a double standard in the interests of political expediency, and she flees the city.

If it were possible to ignore the generally weak impression of characterization in Romola, the implausible dialogue, the clumsy symbolism and the laborious sense of scholastic research which marks description of the background,

we could probably say that the plot as a whole is believable and meaningful up to this point. A real sense of connection between private and public life has been established and the perception of the continuum of ambiguities by Romola has been intelligently if not compellingly handled.

Romola has been brought out of her father's narrow world by her love of a false person. Since Tito has political connections she comes to see how the state operates and rejects both it and Tito as morally impossible. Now Savonarola, the one person who has been able to stimulate her hunger for a wider and truer existence, is also found lacking. In both cases Romola's 'noble simplicity' meets with frustration and alienation. To a degree we could regard her as being at that same crucial point in her life as Maggie: when a true existence has become impossible in the context of personal and social duties. But where The Mill on the Floss justifiably ends in tragedy because Maggie is unable to live meaningfully in her world, Romola begins to degenerate into unreal symbolizing of an untested and dubious solution to ambiguities.

In a notably unreal episode George Eliot shows Romola leaving strife-torn Florence in a boat which floats unguided down the Arno. She sleeps, and when she wakes up the boat is in a strange region. She goes ashore and finds a village stricken with plague. She nurses the sick and so finds herself again. Throughout this episode the treatment is

uniformly poetic. Romola is likened by the plague-stricken villagers to the Virgin Mary. The language of analysis which had previously been employed to make us aware of ambiguities is no longer used. Consequently, when Romola sees she must return and fulfil her duties, the reader is unconvinced. The means by which the value of 'duty' has been arrived at, resemble the poetic statement of the legendary tale which puts forward a value without testing it. Thus in Romola George Eliot falls into the trap which she had managed to avoid in Silas Marner, the trap of untested, ideal commitment.

Romola returns to Florence and witnesses the harassment and death of Savonarola, and though she passionately hopes for a last unequivocal message from him before his death, she is disappointed. Nevertheless, her 'noble simplicity' or integrity remains whole. She finds Tessa and takes care of her and Tito's children, thus fulfilling every possible obligation she could be said to owe Tito.

Romola's final solution, then, is resignation and withdrawal from active involvement in anything public. The ambiguities she had seen in both idealistic and Macchiavellian politics have been banished from consideration and left unreconciled. This constitutes an artistic weakness because Romola is consciously concerned with broad, normally abstract, issues of a social, historical and political nature, as well as with the deeply personal issue of how to live a morally

satisfying existence. Indeed, the novel shows a certain strength precisely in giving the reader a sense of the mutual interdependence of these aspects of life.

Romola provides its author with a unique opportunity for showing the interdependence and personal relevance of these normally remote and impersonal questions of history, politics and community, in that its scene of action is a city-state. As the Proem informs us, the fifteenth century Florentine shade has a personal interest in how the state is governed:

...his politics had an area as wide as his trade, which stretched from Syria to Britain, but they had also the passionate intensity and the detailed practical interest, which could belong only to a narrow scene of corporate action; only to the members of a community, shut in close by the hills and by walls of six miles circuit, where men knew each other as they passed in the street, set their eyes every day upon the memorials of the commonwealth, and were conscious of having not only the right to vote but the chance of being voted for.<sup>41</sup>

We could hope that from a situation in which historical tradition, culture, the political life of the state, community life and the life of the individual are naturally and closely connected, the treatment of these issues could end on a more real note. But it would appear that George Eliot herself is uncertain of how to resolve the very substantial difficulties she points out by way of an idiom of nuance and ambiguity, and shows her final uncertainty by relying on a simplistic, unambiguous and stylized mode of statement.

1. G.E.L., III, 427.
2. G.E.L., VI, 335-6.
3. G.E.L., IV, 300-1.
4. Ibid., 97.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid., 96.
9. Henry James, 'The Novels of George Eliot', Atlantic Monthly, XVIII, 1966, quoted by W.J. Harvey, 'The Art of George Eliot, op. cit., p. 22.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. From this generalization I would exclude John Bayley's 'The Pastoral of Intellect' in Critical Essays on George Eliot, ed. cit., pp. 198-215.
14. Joan Bennett, George Eliot: Her Mind and Her Art, op. cit., p. 143.
15. George Eliot, Romola, Introduction by Rudolph Dircks, Dent (Everyman), London, 1965, p. 47.
16. Ibid., p. 1.
17. Ibid., p. 2.
18. Ibid., p. 5.
19. Ibid.
20. Bayley, loc. cit., p. 199.
21. Ibid., p. 200.
22. Ibid.
23. Romola, ed. cit., p. 6.

24. Ibid.
25. Ibid., p. 7.
26. Ibid., p. 8.
27. Ibid., p. 82.
28. Ibid., p. 84.
29. Ibid., p. 99.
30. Ibid.
31. Ibid.
32. Ibid.
33. Ibid., p. 114.
34. Ibid.
35. Ibid.
36. Ibid., p. 340.
37. Ibid., pp. 263-4.
38. Ibid., p. 229.
39. Ibid., p. 117.
40. Ibid., p. 239.
41. Ibid., p. 4.

CHAPTER 6 : FELIX HOLT THE RADICAL.

Just as George Eliot had turned aside from the exacting and finally unrewarding task of writing Romola to produce the seemingly effortless Silas Marner, she discontinued work on The Spanish Gypsy at the beginning of 1865 to start another 'English' novel. This was to become Felix Holt The Radical, and as had been the case with the earlier English novels it relied to some extent on memory. However, unlike her previous English novels which are set in a historically indeterminate period ranging from the beginning of the century to some time before the passage of the First Reform Bill, Felix Holt is definitely and very consciously set in the period of 1832-3 immediately prior to the First Reform Bill. Haight notes that George Eliot scrupulously researched this period and the historical and political implications of the Bill, reading among other things Mill's Political Economy, Fawcett's Economic Position of the British Labourer and Samuel Bamford's Passages in the Life of a Radical.<sup>1</sup> The role of memory was crucial nonetheless:

...the vivid touches that illuminate the novel were drawn from her childhood memories of Nuneaton at the time of the Reform Bill, when she was a schoolgirl at Mrs. Wallington's. She had clear recollection of the soup kitchens for unemployed weavers and miners, and of the excitement of the election riots in December 1832.<sup>2</sup>

But the effect of memory is not to soften, to rusticize or to distance the events described. *Felix Holt* is George Eliot's first 'English' novel in which the historical past is used to illuminate the present. Indeed the novel was published only a year before the passing of the Second Reform Bill in 1867 and there is every suggestion that it was intended partly as a means of social and political persuasion. In this capacity it could be regarded as part of a tradition of generally reform-minded social and political realism incorporating Mrs. Gaskell, Dickens and Disraeli. But whereas Mrs. Gaskell in Mary Barton and Dickens in Bleak House had pointed to the general need for social and institutional reform; and Disraeli in Coningsby and Sybil had exposed electioneering malpractices, none of these novelists had any real notion of social and political philosophy. Felix Holt therefore is different to the degree that it concerns itself with formulating a philosophy of integrated personal, social and political existence. But to label the novel as a disguised tract would be quite misleading. What we must realize is that though the novel is set in an exact historical past, its focus is contemporary and it is heuristic in intent.

However, if Felix Holt is a conscious analysis of the period of social agitation preceding the First Reform Bill, it is also the personal tragedy of Mrs. Transome. From a study of George Eliot's reflections on classical tragedy during

the period in which she contemplated her English novel, it has been convincingly argued that the original conception of Felix Holt was probably the tragedy of Mrs. Transome rather than the political plot.<sup>3</sup> If this is so, we could justly expect that the author of Romola would again be faced with the problem of fusing two aspects of life, the tragic personal vision and the wider social aspect.

In this chapter I will be concerned with the artistic quality of this fusion of perspectives, with how deeply it is understood at the level of character and plot.

As had been the case with the Proem in Romola, the Prologue of Felix Holt provides an overview of the social events and concerns which are to be further explored in the novel. But unlike the devices by which we are made aware of the past in Adam Bede there is little hint of poignant recall in the imagined coach journey across the English Midlands of 1832, which forms the Prologue of Felix Holt. The purpose of the coach journey is informative rather than sentimental, as we are shown a cross section of the social structure of the English Midlands at that time. In place of the Wordsworthian sensibility which distinguishes an Adam Bede from a softened rural background, George Eliot employs a uniform and uncompromising realism to show a panorama of social fragmentation, the effect of the Industrial Revolution. We are shown a shepherd 'his glance accustomed to rest on things very

near the earth', for whom the 'mail or stage coach... belonged to that mysterious system of things called "Gover'nment"'.<sup>4</sup> We pass from the sheep country into regions of 'Protestant dirt' where 'the big bold gin breathing tramps were Protestant tramps' who, because of their illiteracy and their lack of contact with dissenting miners and weavers, are kept safely in 'the via media of indifference'.<sup>5</sup> The coach passes by 'trim cheerful villages too' into a 'district of protuberant optimists, sure that old England was the best of all possible countries'.<sup>6</sup> But 'the land would begin to be blackened with coal pits, the rattle of handlooms to be heard in villages', and we see the miners 'powerful men walking queerly with knees bent outward from squatting in the mine'.<sup>7</sup> The view we get of the industrial town recalls Turner rather than the genre painting which George Eliot's earlier English novels had sometimes resembled:

The breath of the manufacturing town, which made a cloudy day and a red gloom by night on the horizon, diffused itself over all the surrounding country filling the air with eager unrest.<sup>8</sup>

The population of the town differs so much from the shepherd and the landed farmers surrounding the 'trim cheerful villages' that we might almost be in another country:

Here was a population not convinced that old England was as good as possible; here were multitudinous men and women aware that their religion was not exactly the religion of their rulers, who might therefore be better than they were, and who, if better, might alter many things which now made the world perhaps more painful than it need be, and certainly more sinful.<sup>9</sup>

Not only do we get the sense of an uneasy coexistence of two nations but of two times. It is as if English society is being shaped by two profoundly different forces:

The busy scenes with the shuttle and the wheel, of the roaring furnace, of the shaft and the pulley, seemed to make but crowded nests in the midst of the large spaced slow-moving life of homesteads and far-away cottages and oak-sheltered parks. <sup>10</sup>

Even the 'genial' coachman through whose eyes we see all of this is not unaffected by the sweeping changes of the Industrial Revolution for 'the recent initiation of railways had embittered him'.<sup>11</sup>

As the coach passes by Transome Court, obscured by one of the many 'oak sheltered parks' with which the country abounds, the coachman's reflections become particular rather than general, conjectural rather than historical. The transition from public to private life begins here on the limits of rumour, which whether it be true or false in its particular invention, must reflect general internal events quite as real as those of the Industrial Revolution:

For there is seldom any wrong-doing which does not carry along with it some downfall of blindly-climbing hopes, some hard entail of suffering, some quickly satiated desire that survives, with the life-in-death of old paralytic vice, to see itself cursed by its woeful progeny - some tragic mark of kinship in one brief life to the far stretching life which went before, and to the life which is to come after, such as has raised the pity and terror of men ever since they began to discuss between will and destiny. But these things are often unknown to the world; for there is much pain that is quite noiseless; and vibrations that make human agonies are often a mere whisper in the roar of hurrying existence. <sup>12</sup>

Thus the tragic vision of the secret, untold pains of individual human lives, is placed within the wider context of 'the roar of hurrying existence'.

The novel itself begins with the personal tragedy with the microcosm which the plot swiftly develops to include the macrocosm of social and political issues. The opening chapter, describing the passage of a crucial moment in the life of Mrs. Transome is almost the equal of anything George Eliot was to write. On the morning that we first see Mrs. Transome she is waiting, as she has been for fifteen years, for the return of her son Harold who is to restore the failing Transome fortunes and fulfil his mother's only remaining hope of happiness:

Such pride, such affection, such hopes as she cherished in this fifty sixth year of her life must find their gratification in him or nowhere.<sup>13</sup>

But at the moment of Harold's arrival the sight of his dark face through the window of the post chaise is enough to convince her that he is a stranger to the youth of nineteen she remembers as her son: 'The sense of strangeness came upon her like a terror'.<sup>14</sup> Instead of being frank and affectionate as she had remembered him, Harold is now brusque and insensitive. When he announces his intention of becoming a Radical candidate instead of a Tory as his mother had hoped she finds 'a distinct confirmation of the vague but strong feeling that her son was a stranger to her'.<sup>15</sup> To Mrs.

Transome Harold's decision to stand as a Radical means that he sees her as part of the old order which is to be replaced. She finds Harold's manner even worse than his politics, and his insensitivity is such that her despair and the bitterly ironic remarks in which it finds expression pass unnoticed. Mrs. Transome sees 'with all the quickness of demonstration that her son's return had not been a good for her in the sense of making her any happier'.<sup>16</sup>

Throughout this first chapter the breath-taking drama of the situation is reinforced by economical use of passages of fine psychological observation and imagery. The psychological prehistory of the moment is quickly and effectively related, as George Eliot describes Mrs. Transome's reflections when she retreats to her room. The tone of observation is at once deeply sympathetic and objective:

The mother's early raptures had lasted but a short time, and even while they lasted there had grown up in the midst of them a hungry desire, like a black poisonous plant feeding in the sunlight - the desire that her first rickety, ugly imbecile child should die and leave room for her darling of whom she could be proud...such desire makes life a hideous lottery where every day may turn up a blank...<sup>17</sup>

The observation is continually withdrawing from the personality of the mother to be expanded by an image of an alien process and then qualified within an ethical frame of reference. But in each case the ethical comment is fully supported by the observation and imagery, and in turn gives them an added weight of meaning. For example we are told that the mother's

love is thwarted by the child who now has 'a much keener consciousness of his independent existence than of his relations to her'.<sup>18</sup> This is followed by a harsh bestial image, which while being withdrawn from the personalities of Harold and his mother, serves to redefine them in terms of a remote inhuman activity: 'The lizard's egg, that white rounded passive prettiness, had become a brown, darting, determined lizard'.<sup>19</sup> Because of this image we can fully appreciate why a mother's love is initially 'an expansion of the animal existence; [as] it enlarges the imagined range for the self to move';<sup>20</sup> and so why

...it can only continue to be a joy on the same terms as the other long-lived love - that is, by much suppression of self and power of living in the experience of another.<sup>21</sup>

Thus in the first chapter imagery, statement and dramatic presentation form the powerful blend so typical of George Eliot's mature fiction. We see that the tragedy relates essentially to a failure of the moral self. Mrs. Transome and everything about her - her husband, her relation to her son, to her maid Denner and to Jermyn - gives force to an image of moral doom which frames the rest of the novel:

Her life had been like a spoiled shabby pleasure-day in which the music and the pleasure are all missed and nothing is left at evening but the weariness of striving after what has been failed of.<sup>22</sup>

The technique is far superior to anything George Eliot had

yet written. By combining the use of imagery, psychological observation and ethical reflection her morality finds a language adequate to expressing it as an essentially intelligent activity.

In addition to the fine sense of drama and psychological insight that George Eliot displays in these first few chapters a sense of dramatic irony is developed. While Mrs. Transome sees that Harold bears no resemblance to her image of him she is struck by a resemblance in his manner and appearance to some person she does not yet mention. But it soon becomes apparent that Harold resembles no one so much as the family lawyer Jermyrn whom he despises with a true Tory superciliousness as a common bred pretender to gentility. Both men are sleek and plump and calculating. Mrs. Transome can only look on in horrified awe as her son proves to be quite the equal of Jermyrn in cunning and perhaps his superior in ruthlessness. To both these men, one of whom was her lover and the other her baby son, she is of little consequence. But there is a clear implication that she has not yet lost everything and that even her present insignificant place in her son's esteem is threatened by some impending disclosure. Mrs. Transome's state of mind is hidden to everyone but herself, and not even the reader, who has been told her history, is aware of what she is ultimately afraid of:

No one said...anything like the full truth about her, or divined what was hidden under that outward life - a woman's keen sensibility and dread, which

lay screened behind all her petty habits and narrow notions, as some quivering thing with eyes and throbbing heart may be crouching behind withered rubbish. The sensibility and dread had palpitated all the faster in the prospect of her son's return; and now that she had seen him she said to herself, in her bitter way, 'It is a lucky eel that escapes skinning. The best happiness I shall ever know will be to escape the worst misery'.<sup>23</sup>

As well as being extremely compelling on its own terms then, the opening section of the novel is outwardly as well as inwardly directed. By suggesting that Harold's relationship with Jermyan holds a mysterious secret, George Eliot directly links the microcosm of personal tragedy with the wider plot. But as the novel focusses more and more on Harold's political candidature, Mrs. Transome fades into the background.

In the figure of Harold Transome, George Eliot develops an insight she had already explored in Tito Melema: that a man's politics can only be as valid as his personality. Harold's political campaign is hypocritical and self-interested in direct proportion as he is so in his private life. His egoism keeps him from being consciously dishonest just as it prevents him from understanding his real motives for going into political life as a radical:

He was addicted at once to rebellion and conformity and only an intimate personal knowledge could enable anyone to predict where his conformity would begin. The limit was not defined by theory, but was drawn in an irregular zig zag by early disposition and association; and his resolution of which he had never lost hold, to be a thorough Englishman again some day, had kept up the habit of considering all his conclusions with reference to English politics and English social conditions.

In fact Harold Transome was a clever, frank, good-natured egoist; not stringently consistent, but without any disposition to falsity; proud, but with a pride that was moulded in an individual rather than an hereditary form, unspeculative, un sentimental, unsympathetic; fond of sensual pleasures yet disinclined to all vice, and attached as a healthy clear-sighted person, to all conventional morality, construed with a certain freedom, like doctrinal articles to which the public order may require subscription. <sup>24</sup>

Harold's radicalism is glib and calculating. When his Tory uncle Lingon raises some objections to the implications of his radical stand, Harold reassures him that he will be radical only in the sense of 'rooting out abuses':<sup>25</sup> "I remove the rotten timbers" said Harold, inwardly amused, "and substitute fresh oak, that's all."<sup>26</sup> His uncle's doubts are overcome and he applauds this remark as "a spool to wind a speech on."<sup>27</sup> The implication is that it is little more as far as either of them is concerned. Harold's whole attitude to his campaign is frankly pragmatic and so he does not stop at employing Jermy, a man whom he personally distrusts and dislikes, to be his agent. Indeed Harold resembles Jermy in almost every aspect of his behaviour. Not only is each ruthless and pragmatic but each behaves with almost exactly the same amount of insensitivity towards Mrs. Transome. This description of Jermy's reaction to a reproach from Mrs. Transome could almost equally well be applied to Harold:

Jermy felt annoyed - nothing more. There was nothing in his mind corresponding to the intricate meshes of sensitiveness in Mrs. Transome's. He was anything but stupid; yet he always blundered when he wanted to be delicate or magnanimous; he constantly sought to soothe others by praising himself. Moral<sup>28</sup> vulgarity cleaved to him like an hereditary odour.

The very term 'moral vulgarity' indicates how deeply George Eliot's sense of morality reflects her sensitivity to character and to psychological nuance.

However, the novel is not uniformly so intelligent. As it passes from the Transome world or from a world understood in terms of egoism and personalities into the impersonal world of social and political issues its manner becomes considerably less sophisticated. The vision of character as self-ignorant and subject to ambiguity and the ironies of destiny no longer entirely predominates. In Felix Holt, who is imagined as a man of almost perfect integrity, we find a conception of character as heroically responsible rather than determined. In the figure of Rufus Lyon we find yet another attitude to character. The little parson is a humorous figure whose pedantic Evangelicalism and verbosity are to be taken with a grain of salt. However his faith is plainly regarded by the author as sacrosanct and is not called into question by the humorous irony to which the reverend's personal oddities are subject. Indeed George Eliot takes pains to justify it:

...what we call illusions are often, in truth, a wider vision of past and present realities - a willing movement of a man's soul with the larger sweep of the world's forces - a movement towards a more assured end than the chances of a single life. We see human heroism broken up into units and say, this unit did little - might as well not have been. But in this way we might break up a great army into units; in this way we might break the sunlight into fragments and think that this and the other might be cheaply parted with. Let us raise a monument to the soldiers whose brave hearts only kept the ranks unbroken and met death - a monument to the faithful who were not famous and who are precious as the continuity of the sunbeams is precious, though some of them fall unseen and on barrenness. 29

It is clear that Felix Holt and Rufus Lyon are meant to be regarded as men of integrity, while Harold Transome and his associates are not. The result of their debate on the validity of the ballot then, is a foregone conclusion.

The irreproachable Felix Holt sees that Harold's agents are bribing workers with alcohol, and is determined to confront him with the fact. As we would expect, a situation develops in which Harold's political attitudes are put to the test. But it is not only Harold's selfish and pragmatic approach to political responsibility which is questioned, but the efficacy of radical politics itself. Indeed the first question is understood in terms of the latter, and the question of the value of politics arises before Harold's personal integrity is questioned. While Felix is on his way to speak to Harold the Reverend Rufus Lyon has already entered the Transome campaign headquarters to hold forth on the uselessness of extending the ballot in the first place. The author frames Lyon's attack within an attack of her own on the vanity of hoping for anything from politics:

At that time, when faith in the efficacy of political change was at fever-heat in ardent Reformers, many measures which men are still discussing with little confidence on either side, were then talked about and disposed of like property in near reversion. Crying abuses - 'bloated paupers', 'bloated pluralists', and other corruptions hindering men from being wise and happy - had to be fought against and slain. Such a time is a time of hope.

Afterwards, when the corpses of those monsters have been held up to the public wonder and abhorrence, and yet wisdom and happiness do not follow, but rather a more abundant breeding of the foolish and unhappy, comes a time of doubt and despondency.<sup>30</sup>

Consequently Lyon's argument is supported, its verbosity notwithstanding:

'You grieve me, sir; you grieve me much. And I pray you to reconsider this question, for it will take you to the root, as I think, of political morality. I engage to show to any impartial mind, duly furnished with the principles of public and private rectitude, that the ballot would be pernicious, and that if it were not pernicious it would still be futile. I will show, first, that it would be futile as a preservative from bribery and illegitimate influence; and secondly, that it would be in the worst kind pernicious, as shutting the door against those influences whereby the soul of a man and the character of a citizen are duly educated for their great functions. Be not alarmed if I detain you, sir. It is well worth the while'.<sup>31</sup>

Though Lyon is not meant to be regarded with the same respect as Felix Holt, his brand of illusion is to be preferred to Harold Transome's:

At present, looking back on that day at Treby it seems to me that the sadder illusions lay with Harold Transome, who was trusting in his own skill to shape the success of his own morrows, ignorant of what many yesterdays had determined for him beforehand.<sup>32</sup>

But we wonder why Lyon's destiny should not be subject to the same inevitability as Harold's, even if his brand of illusion is morally superior because less selfish. The vision which validates morality by seeing it as coextensive with psychological process is not in evidence here, and in its absence

such passages of unsupported moral reflection seem crude. It is significant that Lyon does not get the chance to develop his argument before Felix Holt arrives to drive home the point about the futility of the ballot by informing Transome that his agents are exerting that 'illegitimate influence' on his behalf. Though Harold denies knowledge of this and offers to take Felix and Lyon to his office to prove it, he gives himself away by defending the unscrupulous practice of electioneering bribery on pragmatic grounds:

'If you had lived in the East, as I have, you would be more tolerant. More tolerant, for example of an active industrious selfishness, such as we have here, though it may not always be quite scrupulous: you would see how much better it is than an idle selfishness. I have heard it said, a bridge is a good thing - worth helping to make, though half the men who worked at it were rogues'.<sup>33</sup>

Felix however sees the hypocrisy behind this rationalization of pragmatism:

'I'll tolerate no nuisance but such as I can't help...and the question now is, not whether we can do away with all the nuisances in the world but with a particular nuisance under our noses'.<sup>34</sup>

In the next chapter we see that Felix's suspicion of the widespread corruption of electioneering is borne out in the case of Harold Transome, who for all practical purposes now becomes representative of the English political process. When Jermyn is asked by Felix to explain the actions of their agents in bribing the miners and colliers, he does not even bother to lie about it but justifies it as a matter of course.

Harold, who feels humiliated by this admission in front of Felix, demands that the practice be stopped, but when Felix leaves and his agent explains to him the impossibility of stopping it he withdraws his demand and merely transfers the blame to his agents: "It's a damned unpleasant ravelled business that you and Mr. Jermyn have knit up between you. I've no more to say."<sup>35</sup>

Up to this point then when we witness the transition of Harold Transome from egoist with political aspirations to active representative of what is felt to be universal electioneering corruption the manner of the novel is largely adequate to its material. But the introduction of two characters who seem to belong to a superior moral and destinal order than Harold is unnecessary. One feels that their point would have remained valid even without their uniform integrity.

As the novel progresses this dichotomy of character is emphasized. Felix Holt is built up as a moral and social contrast to Harold Transome. Consequently the idiom of the Transome section, which combines moral and psychological awareness, fragments. Where originally the plot had been an organic extension of characters working out their interpersonal destinies in a world both private and public it now tends to become an exercise in juxtaposition. The juxtaposition is not in itself a dynamic process because it is already clear that Felix Holt's individual and social morality is superior

to Harold Transome's. Felix moves in a world of free moral choice, whereas Harold moves inevitably towards a destiny which has been prepared for him by the combined sins of Jermyn, Mrs. Transome and himself. The plot does not explore this situation so much as illustrate it, much in the way that a parable is designed to illustrate a previously decided truth.

During the whole second half of the novel there is only one character who could be said to develop in awareness and who is forced to choose her destiny. This is Esther, Lyon's adopted daughter. All the other characters are incapable of further development. We gather that Felix Holt has made his essential choice in life before we meet him in the novel. He has already decided to shape his own destiny by devoting himself to the service of the people:

'I have to determine for myself, and not for other men. I don't blame them or think I am better than they; their circumstances are different. I would never choose to withdraw myself from the labour and common burthen of the world; but I do choose to withdraw myself from the push and scramble for money and position. Any man is at liberty to call me a fool, and say that mankind are benefited by the push and scramble in the long run. But I care for the people who live now and will not be living when the long run comes.' 36

During the whole course of the novel he shows not the slightest sign of departing from his ideal or of being influenced by circumstances. Even the love he is supposed to feel for the wayward Esther does not affect his essential approach to life.

During the first part of the novel, up to the point

at which Harold Transome's political opportunism is made apparent by his failure to stop the bribery, Esther is seen as a capricious female egoist. She imagines herself greatly superior to the largely working-class people among whom she lives, and is ashamed of her father's lack of refinement and his oddities. Consequently when she meets Felix Holt who refuses to pander to her illusions, she is considerably shaken. But the blows to her self-esteem that Felix inflicts stimulate the better possibilities of her nature:

There was another day for her to think of him with unsatisfied resentment, mixed with some longings for a better understanding, and in our spring-time every day has its hidden growths in the mind, as it has in the earth when the little folded blades are getting ready to pierce the ground. <sup>37</sup>

Gradually she develops a capacity for choice, an ability to see and judge which the moral imbecility of egoism had made impossible. As in the case of Romola and Maggie, George Eliot uses a female consciousness as a touchstone to reconcile moral ambiguities, by showing Esther deciding between Harold Transome and Felix Holt. However Esther is weaker than either Romola or Maggie and she shows some hesitation in choosing Felix over Harold. Harold excites her egoism by courteous flattery and promises to fulfil all her girlish hopes of grandeur. But when she is familiar with the Transome way of life she becomes bored by its triviality:

And yet this life at Transome Court was not the life of her daydreams: there was dullness already in its ease and in the absence of high demand. <sup>38</sup>

After having benefited by the example of Felix Holt's uncompromising idealism, she finds Harold sadly lacking in any sort of real integrity:

It is terrible - the keen bright eye of a woman when it has once been turned with admiration on what is severely true; but then the severely true rarely comes within its range of vision. <sup>39</sup>

Furthermore, she is impressed by the apparent lack of purpose or enjoyment in Mrs. Transome's life, whereas previously she would not even have considered the possibility that someone so highly placed could be unhappy. Nevertheless we are not to regard her choice as an easy one:

It seemed a cruel misfortune of her young life that her best feeling, her most precious dependence had been called forth just when the conditions were hardest, and that all the easy indications of circumstances were towards something which that previous consecration of her longing had made a moral descent for her. <sup>40</sup>

However as a character she fails to compel because she is finally passive. She is too much a barometer registering the moral validity of opposed and static positions. The subtlety and awareness of psychological nuance that George Eliot displays in her portrait of Mrs. Transome is lacking here.

The fundamental weakness of this whole section of the novel is reflected in the inordinate amount of melodramatic scheming and unexpected revelation that we find in the plot. By an elaborate chain of coincidence and legal skullduggery reminiscent of Bleak House we discover that Harold Transome is not the legal heir to Transome Court but that Esther is.

This whole development is only incidentally relevant to our understanding of the characters involved. While it does give the final touch to Mrs. Transome's tragedy by precipitating a confrontation during which Harold learns that Jermyn is his father, one cannot help feeling that, in spite of the drama it supplies, this revelation adds little to our understanding of Mrs. Transome's essential dilemma. The failure of Mrs. Transome's life is a moral failure and is understood in essentially moral and psychological terms. The development of the tragedy in the plot, however, is dependent on ideas of hubris and destiny which do little towards developing our understanding of Mrs. Transome. The fact that Esther is the heir to Transome Court is merely a pale reflection of the dramatic ironies and as such is quite irrelevant to the moral issues involved.

It is interesting to note that the reason Esther finally chooses Felix over Harold is that Felix does not flatter her and tries to save her from the consequences of her own egoism:

'I want you to have such a vision of the future that you may never lose your best self. Some charm or other may be flung about you - some of your atta-of-rose fascinations - and nothing but a good strong terrible vision will save you.' 41

In so doing Felix is fulfilling exactly in his private life what he sees as his public role; that is to be

'...a demagogue of a new sort; an honest one if possible, who will tell the people they are blind and foolish, and neither flatter them nor fatten on them.' 42

To Esther, Felix shows about as much sentimentality as he does when in playing with the infant, Job Tudge, he observes that Job is likely to become metamorphosed as he grows up into a vulgar representative of the working class:

'Job's limbs will get lanky; this little fist that looks like a puff-ball, and can hide nothing bigger than a gooseberry, will get large and bony and perhaps want to clutch more than its share; these wide blue eyes that tell me more truth than Job knows, will narrow and narrow and try to hide truth that Job would be better without knowing...' 43

If this means that Felix is displaying a consistent approach to what he regards as his public vocation and his personal morality it also may account for why he is so unconvincing as a character. In his case, George Eliot appears to think that for a man of integrity there are no ambiguities and no compromises. We would even be forgiven for assuming that she has forgotten what she once recognized in Feuerbach as a fundamental truth of life: that love and morality belong to humanity and limitation and that they are not to be understood in terms of perfection but of imperfection.

I would suggest that, as in Romola, the burden of understanding the public and private spheres fully in terms of each other forces George Eliot to overlay a complex awareness of ambiguity with a simplistic idiom of solution and reconciliation. In searching for a moral philosophy which will be true at both the individual and social levels she creates a simplistic morality which is felt to be true in the degree to which it dissociates itself from what is now an enervating awareness of human and social limitation.

We have already seen how at the individual level the subtle idiom which describes the Transomes is replaced by a simplistic assumption that Felix Holt is good and heroic and that is that. At the social level, too, the delicate exposition of Harold's egoism invalidating his politics gives way to an inadequate attempt to understand the complexity of the political issues themselves, in terms of a social philosophy grounded in a personal morality.

And we have seen also that not only is Harold's personal unscrupulousness attacked but the nature of the political process itself. In this way the attack on Harold is framed within a broader and more technical attack on the extension of the ballot. And not only does George Eliot allow her main character to make a direct and specific attack on the efficacy of the franchise but she backs him up with a comment of her own. In Felix Holt's address to the working men she commits her hero still further to a social criticism of the political process. Attempting to direct his appeal solely to the moral energies of his hearers Felix makes a distinction between an idea of reform as political (or mechanistic) and social (or substantive):

'The way to get rid of folly is to get rid of vain expectations, and of thoughts that don't agree with the nature of things. The men who have had true thoughts about water, and what it will do when it is turned into steam and under all sorts of circumstances, have made themselves a great power in the world: they are turning the wheels of engines that will help to change most things. But no machines would have done if there had been false notions about the way water

would act. Now all the schemes about voting and districts and annual Parliaments and the rest, are engines, and the water or steam - the force that is to work them - must come out of human nature - out of men's passions, feelings and desires. Whether the engines will do good work or bad depends on those feelings.' 44

To the man in the crowd who remarks that this is all very fine but how are they to 'get power without votes?' - Felix answers that 'the greatest power under heaven' is

'...public opinion - the ruling belief in society about what is right and what is wrong, what is honourable and what is shameful. That's the steam that is to work the engines.' 45

But Felix also admits that it is precisely because public opinion is degraded that the engines of political change will not work. And we have already had ample demonstration throughout the text of the novel that the workers are too ignorant and selfish to work towards their own collective good. We can only conclude then that Felix and George Eliot have based their quite just criticism of the efficacy of the ballot on an assumption that is equally open to criticism. For how is 'public opinion' the 'greatest power under heaven' to be won from an ignorant 'blind and foolish' populace? Obviously some form of political and institutional reform is needed to raise the level of popular understanding because it would be too much to expect that wisdom and virtue can come from ignorance and vice.

To understand why George Eliot should be so intent on the obviously inadequate social and political position she

adopts, we must ask ourselves if it is a necessary consequence of her privately felt morality. This is no idle question for, as I have endeavoured to show throughout this chapter, many of the novel's artistic weaknesses can be understood in the light of George Eliot's attempt to erect a moral philosophy which will be as true in its public as it is in its private manifestations.

I think we must answer that the public morality that we see in Felix is only consequent on private morality to the degree that it forbids a dishonest compromise in order to attain a political end. But this is not all that Felix is arguing for. Both he and George Eliot make it clear that a specific means of social reform, reform by political means by the extension of the franchise, is to be distrusted and even avoided because of the absence of those very conditions of social awareness in which, he argues, lies the only true hope.

It would be as well to reflect here that in the elections of 1832 a number of radical candidates, preeminently among whom was John Arthur Roebuck, stood for election only on the condition that no electioneering malpractices were to be used on their behalf. They were also returned. In other words, during this period, there were men who plainly did not compromise themselves in the electioneering process. Indeed the general attitude of the philosophic radicals, Mill, Roebuck and Buller among others, was quite different to that expressed

by Felix Holt. They were optimistic about the chances of effecting social change by gaining political power and would certainly have regarded Felix Holt's distrust of both the political process and the populace as reactionary. As Raymond Williams points out Cobbett (for one) would not have thought him an 'honest demagogue' for telling the people they were 'blind and foolish': 'He would have thought him rather a very convenient ally of the opponents of reform'.<sup>46</sup>

If these reflections suggest that Felix Holt's radical philosophy is not that of the period in which the novel is set we must ask ourselves again why it takes such a peculiar form. Raymond Williams points out that in his insistence on the valuelessness of political reform, the ignorance of the people, the necessity of an all pervasive moral regeneration and the undesirability of the workers determining their own reforms and so threatening the established order, Felix Holt is reflecting 'the mood of the 60's - of Shooting Niagara (Carlyle) and Culture and Anarchy (Arnold) - holding an incompetent post mortem on the earlier phases of Radicalism'.<sup>47</sup> To what extent Felix's low opinion of the working class is a direct echo of Carlyle's definitive dismissal of them in terms of 'blockheadism, gullibility, bribeability, amenability to beer and balderdash';<sup>48</sup> is uncertain. But there is evidence to suggest that Felix's interpretation of politics and social reform would be better understood in terms of the 1860's rather than the 1830's, and in terms of a middle class structure of

feeling rather than a working class awareness. Indeed, Felix's position bears so little resemblance to that of a working class radical - or for example the trades unionist whom he disagrees with in the text of the novel - that the staunch Tory Blackwood identified with him: 'I suspect I am a radical of the Felix Holt breed and so was my father before me'.<sup>49</sup> Haight notes that Felix's brand of radicalism was so appealing to middle class readers and publishers alike that Blackwood persuaded George Eliot to publish the address to 'Us Workingmen' separately as the opening article in Maga for January 1868.<sup>50</sup> This was shortly after the Second Reform Bill in 1867 when there was a prevailing fear that instead of using their franchise to support liberal politics, the working class might form a separate party.

How far the mood of the 1860's was, as Williams argues 'an incompetent (my italics) post mortem on the earlier phases of Radicalism' inspired largely by fear, must be left to the decision of those whose business it is to decide standards of competence in politics. With the benefit of hindsight it is easy to point to ambiguities in the politics of anyone who died a century ago. However the hindsight itself may be no more 'competent' ultimately than what it focusses upon, for standards of political competence must be notorious for their variability according to time and place. Thus a criticism of George Eliot's objective political views must remain indefinite.

But the criticism of George Eliot's validation of her politics in terms of her philosophy of public and private morality remains valid. By justifying her criticism of the extension of the franchise on moral grounds she is guilty of confusing a particular tactical issue with a general approach. 'Morality' is a big word and can be used to rationalize most particular courses of action, but as George Eliot herself makes clear in her analyses of egoism, this may not make the action any truer.

To the degree that she attaches such weight of meaning to a political issue which is relevant to only one time and place George Eliot makes her novel overspecialized. She courts interpretation of it as a disguised political tract when, in the Transome sections, it is so much more. Thus, what to contemporaries would have seemed a vital social and political philosophy must take on the remoteness of a period source in political history for twentieth century readers.

In conclusion, it would appear that in her attempt to reach an understanding of the public life of a particular political epoch in terms of an individually based morality, George Eliot fails in fully comprehending the individual sphere itself. At the individual and social levels a sense of divided worlds emerges consequent on a split in the conception of character as noble and free, and character as subject to the equivocations of egoism and destiny. The irreproachable

Felix Holt is juxtaposed against the doomed egoistic Transomes, and in spite of the use of Esther and a train of melodramatic revelations, the plot reflects a basically static state of affairs.

After the success of The Mill on the Floss and Silas Marner in which love, morality and egoism are understood as part of the same human process; in Felix Holt, as in Romola, a split in artistic idiom leaves us with the sense of a dual human process reflected in the hero and the egoist.

1. George Eliot: A Biography, op. cit., p. 381.
2. Ibid., pp. 381-2.
3. F.C. Thomson, 'The Genesis of Felix Holt', Publications of the Modern Language Association, 74, Dec. 1959, pp. 576-84, and 'Felix Holt and Classical Tragedy', Nineteenth Century Fiction, June 16th 1961, pp. 47-58.
4. George Eliot, Felix Holt The Radical, introduction by F.R. Leavis, Dent (Everyman), London, 1966, p. 2.
5. Ibid., p. 3.
6. Ibid., pp. 3-4.
7. Ibid., p. 4.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid., p. 5.
11. Ibid., p. 6.
12. Ibid., p. 8.
13. Ibid., p. 12.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid., p. 15.
16. Ibid., p. 19.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid., p. 20.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid., p. 27.
24. Ibid., p. 102.

25. Ibid., p. 39.
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid.
28. Ibid., p. 106.
29. Ibid., p. 170.
30. Ibid., p. 166.
31. Ibid., p. 167.
32. Ibid., p. 171.
33. Ibid., p. 169.
34. Ibid., p. 170.
35. Ibid., p. 177.
36. Ibid., p. 241.
37. Ibid., p. 84.
38. Ibid., p. 396.
39. Ibid., p. 379.
40. Ibid., p. 397.
41. Ibid., p. 244.
42. Ibid., p. 245.
43. Ibid., p. 211.
44. Ibid., p. 273.
45. Ibid., p. 274.
46. Raymond Williams, 'The Industrial Novels' in The Victorian Novel: Modern Essays in Criticism, Ian Watt (ed.), Oxford University Press, London, 1971, p. 159.
47. Ibid., p. 161.
48. T. Carlyle, Shooting Niagara: And After? Critical and Modern Essays in Seven Volumes, Chapman and Hall, London, 1872, Vol. 7, 207.
49. G.E.L., IV, 246.
50. George Eliot: A Biography, op. cit., p. 395.