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THE LABYRINTH OF LIFE: GEORGE ELIOT  
AND THE LIMITS TO FREEDOM

THE LABYRINTH OF LIFE: GEORGE ELIOT  
AND THE LIMITS TO FREEDOM

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A Thesis

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies  
in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements  
for the Degree  
Master of Arts

McMaster University

May 1979

MASTER OF ARTS (1979)  
(English)

McMASTER UNIVERSITY  
Hamilton, Ontario

TITLE: The Labyrinth of Life: George Eliot and the Limits  
to Freedom

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NUMBER OF PAGES: vi, 106

## ABSTRACT

Chapters one to four of this thesis provide background material relevant to George Eliot's thought about the limits to human freedom. In chapter one, Eliot's loss of faith and her relationship to Hennell's position are considered. Chapter two deals with her indebtedness to Feuerbach, and his doctrine of the religious centrality of man. The nature of Eliot's views on ethical obligation is discussed in chapter three. Chapter four ends this section with a consideration of the view of life which pervades Eliot's novels, an essentially deterministic one which nonetheless insists upon the need for responsible moral action.

Chapters five to nine analyze the weight of determining factors in the lives of a number of Eliot's characters. These are: chapters five and six -- Hetty Sorrel and Arthur Donnithorne (Adam Bede), chapter seven -- Maggie Tulliver (The Mill on the Floss), chapter eight -- Mrs. Transome (Felix Holt, the Radical) and chapter nine -- Gwendolen Harleth (Daniel Deronda).

## PREFACE

In Dickens' novels, a Christian world-view may fairly safely be taken for granted. In spite of the growing religious turmoil of his day, Dickens as a novelist accepted the old verities and sanctities without question. By the end of the century, this kind of acceptance by English writers had, for the most part, broken down. George Eliot is the first great English novelist to work explicitly outside the accepted religious traditions.

My original interest in preparing this thesis was to gain some insight into what happens to the novel when a common religious faith can no longer be taken for granted, when each writer must assume the task of creating a universe and declaring what he takes to be the true nature of reality. Inevitably my subject became narrowed down, first to the work of Eliot alone, then to a consideration of a prime element in her view of the place of man in the universe -- the determined nature of that place. The first four chapters of the thesis deal with a consideration of the building materials for Eliot's "brave new world", and of one chief result of the construction: the limits to freedom which impinge upon the inhabitants. The subsequent

chapters consider how the determining factors weigh upon a number of Eliot's characters.

I have chosen to work on Adam Bede, The Mill on the Floss, Felix Holt and Daniel Deronda. Perhaps some reason should be given for omitting a novel of such importance as Middlemarch. A good reason would be that this novel has been written upon frequently and at great length. The real reason is that I had previously worked on Middlemarch, and did not wish to respade old ground.

I should like to express my thanks to my two readers, Professor H. J. Ferns, and Professor G. Petrie.

My chief thanks I owe to my supervisor, Professor Michael Ross, who possesses the grace of patience, and whose kindness and criticism are both appreciated.

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## CHAPTER I

### THE EMPTY UNIVERSE

Running through the marketplace in his agony,  
Nietzsche's madman cries:

I seek God! I seek God! . . . Where is God gone? . . . I mean to tell you! We have killed him, -- you and I! We are all his murderers! . . . God is dead! God remains dead! And we have killed him! How shall we console ourselves, the most murderous of all murderers? the holiest and the mightiest that the world has hitherto possessed, has bled to death under our knife, -- who will wipe the blood from us? With what water could we cleanse ourselves? What lustrums, what sacred games shall we have to devise? Is not the magnitude of this deed too great for us? Shall we not ourselves have to become Gods, merely to seem worthy of it?<sup>1</sup>

In 1843, Miss Mary Ann Evans, at the age of twenty-four, having recently lost her evangelical faith, exclaims: "When the soul is just liberated from the wretched giant's bed of dogmas on which it has been racked and stretched ever since it began to think, there is a feeling of exultation and strong hope".<sup>2</sup> In Miss Evans' experience, the transition from belief to unbelief seems to lack entirely the

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<sup>1</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, The Joyful Wisdom (1882) (New York, 1964), pp. 167-169.

<sup>2</sup>George Eliot, George Eliot's Life as Related in Her Letters and Journals, ed. J. W. Cross (New York, 1885), I, 88, letter to Miss Sara Hennell, 9th Oct. 1843.



anguish and despair common to Nietzsche's madman and many of Miss Evans' doubting contemporaries. Initially, at least, it is a sense of exhilarating freedom which is uppermost in her consciousness, and she longs to communicate her new truth to others. But not for long:

. . . a year or two of reflection and the experience of our own miserable weakness, which will ill afford to part even with the crutch of superstition, must, I think, effect a change. Speculative truths begin to appear but a shadow of individual minds. Agreement between intellects seems unattainable, and we turn to the truth of feeling as the only universal bond of union.<sup>3</sup>

Miss Evans is not without hope that a concern with fellow feeling will lead men to "higher possibilities" than the churches had presented. But by 1860, now firmly established as the best-selling author George Eliot, she can still write to her friend Mme. Bodichon that our "'highest calling and election' is to do without opium, and live through all our pain with conscious, clear-eyed endurance".<sup>4</sup> The initial glad relief from the burden of belief has turned into a kind of settled resignation, a will to endure without crutch or opium the empty universe she

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<sup>3</sup>Eliot, Life, I, 88, letter to Miss Sara Hennell, 9th Oct. 1843.

<sup>4</sup>Eliot, Life, II, 206, letter to Mme. Bodichon, 26th Dec. 1860.

finds herself inhabiting. And the "truth of feeling" is to be of paramount importance in coming to terms with a godless world.

If Eliot doubted that man could attain unanimity in speculative thought, she nonetheless felt the need to come to terms with the intellectual implications of her own stance, a position which remained fairly consistent from her early twenties. German philosophical and theological thought provided the primary raw material for her thinking. She had herself already attempted to produce a chronology of early church history. Then the higher criticism, with its growing sensitivity to the relativities of historical knowledge, made a deep impact upon her, and rendered her attempts to sort out church history unnecessary. Initially, the impact of German thought was mediated through the work of one of her Coventry friends, Charles Hennell. His book, An Inquiry Concerning the Origin of Christianity (1838), was decisive in her loss of faith. Here the question of the historical validity of the gospel stories was convincingly settled for her. Hennell had undergone

. . . a gradually increasing conviction that the true account of the life of Jesus Christ, and of the spread of his religion, would be found to contain no deviation from the known laws of nature, nor to require, for their explanation, more than

the operation of human motives and feelings, acted upon by the peculiar circumstances of the age and country where the religion originated.<sup>5</sup>

Although Christianity ceased to represent a divine revelation to Hennell, it nonetheless provided a useful institution, with a moral system of "general excellence". The scriptures continue to exercise a "beneficial influence" upon mankind. Hennell had no wish to do a disservice to Christianity; rather he hoped to liberate it from outdated supernaturalism and show its true value as a "system of elevated thought and feeling". Thus, Jesus with his "attractive character" and "elevated designs" becomes a paradigm of human virtue, and religion an inspirational source of guidance for leading the higher moral life. In 1847, re-reading the Inquiry, Eliot commented that nothing in its whole tone jarred on her moral sense.<sup>6</sup>

An "encircling mysterious Intelligence" which would "ensure a provision for all the real interests of man"<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Charles Hennell, An Inquiry Concerning the Origin of Christianity (London, 1838), p. iv.

<sup>6</sup>Eliot, Life, I, 119, letter to Miss Sara Hennell, 16th Sept. 1847.

<sup>7</sup>Hennell, Inquiry, p. 370.

still remained a part of Hennell's thinking. Here Eliot followed Hennell only for a short time. Soon she would admit of no possibility of a spiritual dimension beyond the human. The universe was governed neither by a Heavenly Father, nor by a mysterious Intelligence, but by the unalterable regularities of scientific law.

Still, much of Hennell's thinking was in accord with Eliot's own. His sense of the time-conditioned nature of historical knowledge, his reliance on the known laws of nature, his respect for the moral effects of religious faith, and his emphasis on elevated feeling all become basic elements in Eliot's view of life. But to her the eclipse of God was total, and man assumed the central place in her religious thought. Man must now rely only upon himself: "Heaven help us!" said the old religion; the new one, from its very lack of that faith, will teach us all the more to help one another".<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>Eliot, Life, I, 217, letter to the Brays, Jan. 1853.

## CHAPTER II

### THE NEW HUMANISM

In 1846, Eliot published her translation of David Friedrich Strauss's Das Leben Jesu. Strauss occupied a central place in the historical critical movement. This movement involved an attempt on the part of scholars to look at historical materials from an objective point of view, and by patient, critical examination of the evidence, to recover the past. The Bible was to be subject to the same critical canons as other ancient documents. It was assumed that by this method one could discover the correct interpretation of the text, and establish what really happened. Strauss's wholesale Germanic approach to the gospel histories sickened Eliot. His technique was to take each incident in the life of Jesus, exemplify both the supernaturalistic and the rationalistic interpretations, and point out their inadequacies. In true Hegelian fashion, he would then introduce as the synthesis his own (in his view, correct) mythological interpretation. To the translator, the beautiful poetry of the stories was destroyed by Strauss's analytic technique. She could, she said, only tolerate the dissection of the crucifixion stories by

gazing at the image of Christ over her desk.<sup>1</sup>

In the biblical stories she loved, Eliot saw exemplary tales of human struggles towards goodness and understanding. Dogma she repudiated, but she cared for what is "essentially human in all forms of belief".<sup>2</sup> A strong interest in dogmatic beliefs is, in her novels, generally associated with the self-deluding tendencies of the egoist. But beneath the beliefs, she sought the "lasting meaning"<sup>3</sup> which she thought lay in all religious doctrine. This meaning she found in the need for a "more deeply awing sense of responsibility to man, springing from sympathy with . . . the difficulty of the human lot".<sup>4</sup>

When she began translating Ludwig Feuerbach's The Essence of Christianity (1841), Eliot discovered a mind and a way of thinking which was altogether more congenial to her own. For Feuerbach effected the translation of theology into anthropology. Qualities of the divine were simply human qualities writ large, projections of man's

<sup>1</sup>Eliot, Life, I, 100, letter from Mrs. Bray to Miss Sara Hennell, 14th February 1846.

<sup>2</sup>Eliot, Life, II, 86, letter to Charles Bray, 5th July 1859.

<sup>3</sup>Eliot, Life, II, 249, letter to Mme. Bodichon, 26th November 1862.

<sup>4</sup>Eliot, Life, III, 62, letter to Mrs. H. B. Stowe, 8th May 1869.

own ideals. Religious expressions about God, to be understood in their true sense, had to be translated into expressions about man. As Feuerbach understood it, ". . . faith in God is therefore the faith of man in the infinitude and truth of his own nature: the Divine Being is the subjective human being in his absolute freedom and unlimitedness. . . . The beginning, middle and end of religion is Man".<sup>5</sup>

Feuerbach's aim was not so much to degrade God to an human level, as to exalt man to divine level, and with such an aim Eliot was in total agreement. Human relationships and feelings took on a sacred character, man's sufferings for others a divine dimension:

The mystery of the suffering God is therefore the mystery of feeling, sensibility. . . . But the proposition: God is a feeling Being, is only the religious periphrase [sic] of the proposition: feeling is absolute, divine in its nature.<sup>6</sup>

Feeling is religious simply because it is feeling, "the ground of its religiousness in its own nature -- lies in itself".<sup>7</sup> The value to be conceded to Christian ideas depends entirely on their relationship to human feelings. As Adam Bede phrased it, "I've seen pretty clear . . . as

<sup>5</sup>Ludwig Feuerbach, The Essence of Christianity (1841), trans. George Eliot (New York, 1957), p. 184.

<sup>6</sup>Feuerbach, Essence, pp. 62-3.

<sup>7</sup>Feuerbach, Essence, p. 10.

religion's something else besides notions. It isn't notions sets people doing the right thing -- it's feelings".<sup>8</sup>

But it is in the species man, not the individual (considered apart from his essence) that perfection and infinitude reside, in Feuerbach's thinking. Plainly a human being is limited and finite and must not identify himself immediately with the species, as his egoism demands. But his essence is infinite, and in this essence each man shares. He is to himself infinite, he has his God in himself, Feuerbach argues. "Such as are a man's thoughts and dispositions, such is his God."<sup>9</sup> Thus, Feuerbach ironically answers the question of Nietzsche's madman: "shall we not ourselves have to become Gods"?<sup>10</sup> It is when the individual becomes aware of a world outside himself, that he becomes conscious of limitations. His egoism would have him see himself as absolute, but "the first stone against which the pride of egoism stumbles is the thou, the alter ego. The ego first steels its glance in the eye of a thou before it endures the contemplation of a being which does not reflect its own image".<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>George Eliot, Adam Bede (1859) (New York, 1956), p. 176. Subsequent page references in the text will be to this edition.

<sup>9</sup>Feuerbach, Essence, p. 12.

<sup>10</sup>Nietzsche, Joyful Wisdom, p. 168.

<sup>11</sup>Feuerbach, Essence, p. 82.



Thus Feuerbach proclaims the essentially communal nature of man, and the function of the other in enabling man to break through egoistic isolation. Clearly Eliot agrees. "We are all of us born in moral stupidity, taking the world as an udder to feed our supreme selves."<sup>12</sup> Eliot's egoists live in illusion when they assume they can live in personal independence. They see themselves as living at the centre of their own existence, and they must come to see -- not so much that they are not at the centre -- as that other human beings have corresponding centres, from which they see the world in a different light. Even Dorothea, one of the least egoistic of Eliot's heroines, in coming to know her husband must learn that he ". . . had an equivalent centre of self, whence the lights and shadows must always fall with a certain difference".<sup>13</sup>

With Feuerbach, Eliot once commented, she everywhere agreed.<sup>14</sup> It is clear that her thought is permeated with

<sup>12</sup>George Eliot, Middlemarch (1871-2) (Cambridge, 1956), p. 156. Subsequence page references in the text will be to this edition.

<sup>13</sup>Eliot, Middlemarch, p. 157.

<sup>14</sup>George Eliot, The George Eliot Letters, ed. G. S. Haight (New Haven, 1954), II, 153, letter to Miss Sara Hennell, 29th April 1854.

the religion of humanity, and the links between Feuerbach's ideas and her novels are many. The religious centrality of man, the sanctity of human relationships, the absolute value of human feelings, and the need to recognize the co-existence of the other, are among the most easily detectable elements common to both the master and the disciple.

CHAPTER III  
THE MORAL IMPERATIVE

George Myers, relating a conversation he held with George Eliot in 1873, tells how she, in commenting on the words "God, immortality, Duty," ". . . pronounced with terrible earnestness, how inconceivable was the first, how unbelievable the second, and yet how peremptory and absolute the third. Never," comments Myers, "perhaps, have sterner accents affirmed the sovereignty of impersonal and un-recompensing Law".<sup>1</sup>

Friedrich Nietzsche, in a section of the Twilight of the Idols (1888), headed "G. Eliot", complained:

They are rid of the Christian God and now believe all the more firmly that they must cling to Christian morality. That is an English consistency; we do not wish to hold it against little moralistic females à la Eliot. In England one must rehabilitate oneself after every little emancipation from theology by showing in a veritably awe-inspiring manner what a moral fanatic one is. That is the penance they pay there.

We others hold otherwise. When one gives up the Christian faith, one pulls the right to Christian morality out from under one's feet. This morality is by no means self-evident: this point has to be exhibited again and again despite the English

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<sup>1</sup>Quoted in Basil Willey, Nineteenth Century Studies (Aylesbury, 1949), p. 214.

flatheads. . . . Christian morality . . . stands and falls with faith in God.

When the English actually believe that they know "intuitively" what is good and evil, . . . we merely witness the effects of the dominion of the Christian value judgement and an expression of the strength and depth of this dominion: such that the origin of English morality has been forgotten, such that the very conditional character of its right to existence is no longer felt.<sup>2</sup>

The absolute nature of ethical obligation is indeed central to Eliot's thinking, but -- contra Nietzsche -- she does consider it to be properly grounded, and not invalidated by her loss of faith. What, then, is the nature of this grounding? Again, Eliot is very close to Feuerbach. As we have seen, in his thinking absolutes once connected with God become human absolutes. And just as the divine quality of feeling is grounded solely in itself, so morality has its ground of sacredness now in itself. "Let friendship be sacred to thee, property sacred, marriage sacred -- sacred the well-being of every man: but let them be sacred in and by themselves."<sup>3</sup> Eliot accepted the contention that human sanctities are grounded in themselves -- in the very nature of human life. "Pity and fairness",

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<sup>2</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, Twilight of the Idols (1888), in The Portable Nietzsche (New York, 1965), pp. 515-16.

<sup>3</sup>Feuerbach, Essence, p. 271.

she said, "two little words which, carried out, would embrace the utmost delicacies of the moral life -- seem to me not to rest on an unverifiable hypothesis, but on facts quite as irreversible as the perception that a pyramid will not stand on its apex."<sup>4</sup>

A critic of her own day charged that Eliot in effect became a law unto herself. Although the source of her morality is nothing higher than her own mind, yet she attributed to that moral law an absolute quality.<sup>5</sup> It is ironic that Eliot can be charged with absolutism, considering that it is just this factor which she found so dangerous in the thinking of religious dogmatists. Yet it does seem to be true that Eliot held her moral absolutes to be self-evident truths. Ultimately both she and Feuerbach fall back into a kind of intuitionism. And this is a type of theory which is extremely difficult to put to the test -- there being no criteria outside themselves by which intuitions can be judged.

It may well be conceded to Nietzsche that some of the moral "facts" Eliot intuits are really the result of the

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<sup>4</sup>Quoted in Richard Holt, Essays on Some of the Modern Guides to English Thought in Matters of Faith (London, 1891), p. 303.

<sup>5</sup>Holt, Essays, p. 275.

dominion of the Christian value judgement. Eliot had been steeped in nineteenth century evangelical Christianity, and clearly the religion of her youth had a strong influence in the formation of her moral values. It remains true that Eliot draws from sources other than the Christian tradition. Her doctrine of the moral authority of the past, for example, owes more to the positivist doctrine of continuity and to her reading of Wordsworth than to any thinking specifically Christian.

In any case, Eliot could not agree that Christian moral judgements stand and fall with faith in God. If they are valid judgements, they originate in man's natural sympathies and feelings, refined and developed by the experience of generations. Their validity then, cannot be tied to any kind of dogmatic belief. To Eliot, as to Feuerbach, it is the human values which are primary, and the conception of divinity a subsequent projection. It follows that to Eliot it would not be inconsistent to retain Christian values while discarding theistic belief.

Eliot believed that moral behaviour would follow from the "fullest knowledge and the fullest sympathy".<sup>6</sup> Experience, chiefly of suffering, leads men by imaginative

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<sup>6</sup>George Eliot, Impressions of Theophrastus Such (1879) (New York, 1906), p. 293.

extension of their feelings to others, to sympathy and all-embracing love. In accord with the psychology of positivism, Eliot held the optimistic view that man is by nature both social and sympathetic. Being schooled by experience, the individual naturally sympathizes with others. The conditions of life -- the effects of natural law, the cruelty caused by the ignorance or selfishness of others -- must be borne. But they call forth, Eliot somewhat sanguinely thinks, a strong motive that others should not suffer from our actions.<sup>7</sup> Our own good must be renounced if others suffer thereby. Renunciation, then, and resignation are moral necessities imposed upon us by the very conditions of human life. What is required of man is not a Promethean defiance of the fates, but the "unembittered compliance of the soul with the inevitable".<sup>8</sup>

But if man is not armed with knowledge and the schooling in sympathy, then the egoistic passions may dominate him. Eliot had a great fear of the destructive possibilities of unrestrained human passion. Theophrastus Such voices his (and her) concern in dramatic fashion:

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<sup>7</sup>Eliot, Life, III, 179, letter to the Hon. Mrs. Ponsonby, 10th Dec. 1874.

<sup>8</sup>Eliot, Life, III, 214, letter to Miss Sara Hennell, 22nd Nov. 1876.

". . . it is the nature of vanity and arrogance if unchecked, to become cruel and self-justifying. There are fierce beasts within: chain them, chain them, and let them learn to cower before the creature with wider reason".<sup>9</sup>

The intellect, informed by that sense of duty which grows from human associations, must work to restrain the fury of the passions. In an essay in which Eliot lambasts one of the evangelical preachers of her day, she stresses that intellect and morality must be held together: "Amiable impulses without intellect man may have in common with dogs and horses; but morality, which is specifically human, is dependent on the regulation of feeling by intellect."<sup>10</sup>

Although Eliot appears to assume, with the optimism of the rationalist, that reason can control passion -- "thou ought, therefore thou canst" -- she nonetheless in her novels suggests with considerable subtlety the power of the non-rational factors in decision making, as, for example, in Gwendolen's choice of Grandcourt as a husband.

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<sup>9</sup>Eliot, Theophrastus Such, p. 123.

<sup>10</sup>George Eliot, "Evangelical Teaching: Dr. Cumming", pp. 158-189 in Thomas Pinney, ed., Essays of George Eliot (New York, 1963), p. 166.



The guiding intellect is assisted in its task by the traditions of the past, which provide associations and moral imperatives which have gained the status of laws. If moral duty is not firmly grounded in the past life of the individual and of his folk, then pure anarchy may result. "If the past is not to bind us", says Maggie Tulliver, "where can duty lie? We should have no law but the inclination of the moment."<sup>11</sup>

Awareness of where one's duties truly lie, then, is a necessary part of human life. Without this sense, Eliot's more noble characters appear lost. Romola, when she takes on the care of Tito's common-law wife and children, is undoubtedly responding to their need. But they are also providing for her a source of duties necessary to her existence. Both Dorothea Brooke and Daniel Deronda experience an overwhelming need to discover the duties which can give them a sense of direction and purpose in life. Duty to Eliot has the sense not only of something which one is obliged to do, though it does have that, but also of something more positive which gives central meaning to life, and serves to bind one to one's fellow in love.

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<sup>11</sup>George Eliot, The Mill on the Floss (1860) (New York, 1965), p. 499. Subsequent page references in the text will be to this edition.

John Cross refers to Eliot as a meliorist,<sup>12</sup> a believer in the slow but inevitable progress of man in moral matters. Higher moral tendencies are as yet in an undeveloped state. To Eliot, it is deeds which are of greatest importance in the moral life, because it is they which have consequences, and evil consequences may ensue no matter how irreproachable the motivation. But insight into moral action and its results takes place on a continuum; it utilizes the wisdom and insights of the past. There is no such thing as starting de novo. Eliot could not repudiate insights from the long Christian tradition, for such truths are necessary to build upon for the future. A break to a new morality, such as Nietzsche would advocate, would not be possible with Eliot's presuppositions.

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<sup>12</sup>Eliot, Life, III, 309.

CHAPTER IV  
THE LABYRINTH OF LIFE<sup>1</sup>

In writing to John Chapman about the appointment of an editor for the Westminster Review, in 1852, Eliot said:

If you believe in Free Will, in the Theism that looks on manhood as a type of the godhead and on Jesus as the Ideal Man, get one belonging to the Martineau "School of thought". . . .

If not -- if you believe, as I do, that the thought which is to mould the Future has for its root a belief in necessity, that a nobler presentation of humanity has yet to be given in resignation to individual nothingness, than could ever be shewn of a being who believes in the phantasmagoria of hope unsustained by reason -- why then get a man of another calibre. . . .<sup>2</sup>

What, then, are the conditions of life in Eliot's novels? Men live, not in "le milieu divin", but in an empty maze. Although the centre of his own world, an individual has no ultimate significance. Those of Eliot's characters who believe in Providence are either simply mistaken, or deluded by a projection of their own egoism -- hope unsustained by reason.

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<sup>1</sup>George Eliot, Daniel Deronda (1876) (Aylesbury, 1974), p. 317. Subsequent page references in the text will be to this edition.

<sup>2</sup>Quoted in Neil Roberts, George Eliot Her Beliefs and Her Art (London, 1975), p. 40.

Rigid laws govern both the natural and the psychological spheres. The law of moral consequences, propounded by Eliot's friend Charles Bray, suggests a kind of natural law of morality, on analogy with the laws of natural science, by which results follow necessarily from the deeds of men. In the world of the novels, men, for the most part, reap the good or evil they have sown. The evil, in particular, is pictured as multiplying its effects upon both the perpetrators and those who are innocent bystanders.

Early choices are crucial, for they set up patterns of good and evil from which it becomes increasingly difficult to deviate. And escape from the consequences of our deeds is virtually impossible. Lord Acton comments that, "The doctrine that neither contrition nor sacrifice can appease Nemesis or avert the consequences of our wrongdoing from ourselves and others filled a very large space indeed in her scheme of life and literature".<sup>3</sup> New beginnings are not possible, when life is governed by influences extending from the past into the future. Life is a web, a network of interconnected deeds, each a part of a natural unending cause and effect process. Deserting the claims

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<sup>3</sup>Lord Acton, "George Eliot's Life", in G. S. Haight, ed., A Century of George Eliot Criticism (Boston, 1965), pp. 154-55.

imposed by one's past thus becomes a cardinal sin against the order of nature, a hubris in the face of the inevitable.

Heredity, as well as the natural order, provides an inescapable determinant of human life. In her notes on "The Spanish Gypsy", Eliot stresses the part played by hereditary conditions in human life. ". . . what we call duty is entirely made up of such conditions; for even in cases of just antagonism to the narrow view of hereditary claims, the whole background of the particular struggle is made up of our inherited nature."<sup>4</sup>

Those who are born into the labyrinth of life are originally unaware of these determining conditions. Eliot's characters, in their immaturity, appear almost solipsistic. They must learn that the world outside themselves is not given for their nourishment, nor is mutual understanding in human community a given reality, but a goal which requires constant effort from those who live in the "fellowship of illusion".<sup>5</sup> Nor is there any hope for a complete attainment of the goal. In a world of isolated subjectivities, each must necessarily see from a different angle, each with its own degree of distortion.

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<sup>4</sup>Eliot, Life, III, 31.

<sup>5</sup>Eliot, Middlemarch, p. 237.

Tragedy occurs because of the human inability to accept the limitations imposed by the conditions of existence. Our wills and our destiny are perennially in conflict, unless we learn to resign ourselves to the inevitable. Eliot's position seems to presuppose a completely closed, predetermined system, in which choice is inoperable. She herself makes the contrast between a belief in free will -- which she does not hold -- and a belief in necessity -- which she does. But however weighted Eliot's view appears to be on the side of determinism, she also presupposes the need for the human will to initiate action. Only thus can moral endeavour be urged. Philosophical consistency may seem to contradict the exigencies of the moral nature, but those needs are crucial to Eliot. In writing to her friend Mrs. Ponsonby, who feared that determinism would lead to a paralysis of moral action, Eliot says:

As to the necessary conditions through which life is manifested, and which seem to present themselves to you as a hideous fatalism, which ought logically to petrify your volition, have they, in fact, any such influence on your ordinary course of action. . . ? And if they don't hinder you from taking measures for a bath . . . why should they hinder you from a line of resolve in a higher strain of duty to your ideal. . . ? But the consideration of molecular physics is not the direct ground of human love and moral action. . . .<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Eliot, Life, III, 177, 10th December 1874.

On another occasion, to the same correspondent, she stressed: "I shall not be satisfied with your philosophy till you have conciliated necessitarianism -- I hate the ugly word -- with the practice of willing strongly, willing to will strongly, and so on. . . ." <sup>7</sup>

Man, then, is constrained by determining laws from his cradle. His hereditary nature, the physical universe, the psychological sphere, the moral sphere -- all are governed by rigid law. Man must learn to acknowledge these limits to his freedom, for if he acts in defiance of them he will suffer the inevitable destructive consequences. Acceptance of the limits to freedom and resignation to their inevitability constitute true piety.

At the same time, man -- who cannot be fully cognizant of all the intricacies of psychological law determining his own nature -- must learn to "will strongly". The assumed power of moral volition, if a philosophical oddity in a determinist position, is nonetheless essential for practical living. A tension becomes evident in the novels when Eliot's determinist presuppositions collide with her insistence upon moral discrimination, and responsibility for moral action.

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<sup>7</sup>Eliot, Life, III, 189, 19th August 1875.

## CHAPTER V

### A LITTLE BUTTERFLY SOUL: HETTY SORREL

Of all Eliot's characters, Hetty Sorrel seems the least well equipped to exercise moral autonomy. All those elements in life which Eliot takes to be the origin of the moral sense in man appear to be missing or stunted in Hetty. First, she is an orphan, who has been transplanted to her uncle's home at ten years of age. But we hear of no loving bonds from her early years, no lingering ties to an old home. Even the ties with her new home are extremely tenuous. She has no affection for the flowers or the garden, no love for the living things of the farm. The servant Molly delights in the new yellow chicks, but Hetty tends them only because she is promised the profits from one. Rootedness in the land or affection for the common things of life is not part of Hetty's experience. The Poysers agonize over the prospect of being uprooted from the home farm, but "Hetty could have cast all her past life behind her, and never cared to be reminded of it again" (p. 150).

Nor is Hetty bound more closely to the human world. Her aunt and uncle, being middle-aged, are scarcely



loveable. Dinah's serious talk is tolerable, for Hetty never listens to her (p. 138). Her three little cousins, whom she has looked after since babyhood, are only a source of care and nuisance to her. When the infant Totty is lost, and believed in danger, Hetty's indifference is obvious. Her aunt is not insensible to Hetty's lack of feelings about the family. "It's my belief her heart's as hard as a pebble" (p. 152) says Mrs. Poyser. It is as though nothing from outside herself draws Hetty -- ". . . for things take no more hold on her than if she was a dried pea" (p. 333). Even in the final scenes, where Hetty confesses to the abandonment of her child, she refers to the infant as "it" or "the little baby". The reader is not even aware of its sex. Hetty incorporates nothing into her own life; others remain objects external to her.

An appreciation of communal traditions, a sense of being bound in a community of religious faith or thought, is also lacking in Hetty. She has never expressed any curiosity or interest in the pictures in the old Bible. Church is an excellent place to go to attract the admiring attention of her swains, but it means nothing more to Hetty:

Religious doctrines had taken no hold on Hetty's mind: she was one of those numerous people who have had godfathers and godmothers, learned their catechism, been confirmed, and gone to church every Sunday, and yet, for any practical result of strength in life or trust in death, have never appropriated a single Christian idea or Christian feeling. (p. 376)

Hetty, we are informed, is influenced neither by religious fears nor by religious hopes in her journey in despair.

Hetty's detachment from her natural surroundings, from human affection and from religious feeling means that she can develop little in the way of moral sensibility. She does not identify herself with the responsibilities of her life. It is vexing that butter-making should coarsen her hands (p. 147), and as for the imposition of Totty -- why Hetty "would have been glad to hear that she should never see a child again" (p. 151)! When Hetty occasionally reflects upon her own actions, her chief concern is with the view others might take of what she has done. A question of the intrinsic rightness or wrongness of her actions never seems to trouble her; her conscience is geared more to her own pleasure-pain calculus than to any conception of the right.

Nor does Hetty possess any real understanding of the world outside herself. While Dinah looks out her bedroom window at the world, Hetty turns in to her mirror and indulges in her rites of self-worship. Any polished surface in which she can see her reflection gives Hetty a welcome glimpse of her own divinity. In her egoism and vanity, Hetty spins for herself a dream world. A simple uneducated farm girl, Hetty has never read a novel. Sources for her romantic vision are limited. But the sweet words and caresses

from Arthur and the glimpses into Miss Lydia's wardrobe prove sufficient. She sees herself as Arthur's wife, a great lady in a coach, elegantly gowned in brocaded silk, and envied by all her former acquaintance. Her dreams have a narcotic effect upon Hetty, even in their earliest stages. She sees things ". . . through a soft, liquid veil, as if she were living not in this solid world of brick and stone, but in a beatified world, such as the sun lights up for us in the waters" (p. 96). Hetty's world and the real world are dangerously separated.

Hetty, indeed, had some rationale for dreaming of becoming Arthur's wife, for in her innocence and inexperience caresses and soft words such as his amount to a declaration:

Captain Donnithorne couldn't like her to go on doing work: he would like to see her in nice clothes, and thin shoes and white stockings, perhaps with silk clocks to them; for he must love her very much -- no one else had ever put his arm around her and kissed her in that way. He would want to marry her and make a lady of her; she could hardly dare to shape the thought -- yet how else could it be? (p. 147)

Hetty's passion for Arthur, Eliot suggests ironically, is "only a little less strong than her love of finery" (p. 245). After all, had Adam been wealthy, Hetty supposed she could love him well enough to marry him. Unfortunately, Hetty's misunderstanding about Arthur's intentions does not in the least alter the fact that Hetty lives in a false dream. She understands neither Arthur, nor her own limited passion,

nor the realities of their situation. And the real consequences of indulging their passion are quite beyond her ability to foresee.

It is as though Hetty belongs more to the amoral animal or natural world than to the human world, as indeed the imagery associated with her suggests. She and Arthur are like "two velvet peaches" (p. 128); Hetty possesses a "kittenish beauty" (p. 80), a "little butterfly soul" (p. 131) the "psychology of a canary bird" (p. 244); she is like a "young frisking thing" (p. 81), a "bright-eyed spaniel" (p. 133), a pigeon (p. 148), or in Mrs. Poyser's eyes, a peacock (p. 151). Eliot continually uses diminutives in connection with Hetty; if she is described in human terms it is as a baby or very young child.

Such imagery tends to diminish Hetty's stature as a human being. We are plainly intended to respond to the soft, babyish attractiveness of Hetty, and to be the more dismayed that human agony can overtake one so innocent. Yet Hetty's innocence is fatally deceiving; a grown woman with the psychology of a canary-bird is, after all, a worrying prospect. We are always conscious of the disparity between the inner and the outer, the poor Hetty with "the rounded childish face, and the hard unloving despairing soul" (p. 382). Hetty is capable of so little human affection, thought or judgement. Like a child or small animal she is not able to take responsibility for herself. With

neither understanding nor moral strength, how can she deal realistically with her circumstances? She is the sacrificial lamb, ready for Arthur's taking.

Like the little pleasure craft in the bay, Hetty is readily available. Essentially passive, once loosed from her moorings she is swept along in the current of events. She has no grasp of forces outside herself, so she is destined to be subject to them. And the most potent determining factor on her horizon is clearly the unrestrained passion of Arthur Donnithorne. His deeds, and her acquiescence in them, determine not only his course but hers as well.

For Hetty's little world of passion and imaginary finery is not the real world, and her beauty and innocence of face give no clue to her soul. It is this disparity between outward reality and inner conditions which provides the raw material of tragedy. For the universe takes no note that Hetty is a passive, childish little thing -- she will suffer all the same as will others, because of her. She may seem like a "water-nixie", a lovely thing without a soul, as Eliot suggests, for it is

. . . too painful to think that she is a woman, with a woman's destiny before her -- a woman spinning in ignorance a light web of folly and vain hopes which may one day close round her and press upon her, changing all at once her fluttering, trivial butterfly sensations into a life of deep human anguish. (p. 245)

Here is the human tragedy -- destiny is oblivious to ignorance or mitigating circumstances, it has no knowledge that Hetty's pleasure-loving nature ought not to be subject to pain. The universe is neither malleable to our wills nor pitying of our weaknesses. Hetty's "little trivial soul" must struggle ". . . amidst the serious, sad, destinies of a human being" (p. 334), be she never so lovely and kittenish.

There remains a certain peculiarity in Eliot's presentation of Hetty's "little trivial soul". It is as though Eliot sets out to excuse Hetty at first, only to damn her more thoroughly in the end. Part of this ambivalence may be related to the unresolved conflict in Eliot's determinist viewpoint. Eliot gains the reader's sympathy for Hetty partly by associating her with the natural beauty and innocence of baby, kitten and so on. We see that Hetty is charming, but not capable of human responsibility. Later this imagery of innocence begins to take on more sinister overtones. Eliot loads her terms in such a way that the suggestion of innocence is vitiated. Phrases such as "psychology of a canary bird", "trivial butterfly sensations" are plainly disparaging. They no longer suggest the innocence of bird or butterfly, but the culpability of the morally subnormal. Eliot has managed to convey two points of view: Hetty is the innocent victim, incapable of moral

responsibility. She is also the blind egoist, responsible for her moral insufficiency. But can she be both?

## CHAPTER VI

### A FLAWED VESSEL: ARTHUR DONNITHORNE

The abandonment of her child to possible death is Hetty's crime, not Arthur's. But in Adam's eyes the blame is all Arthur's. Clearly Adam is right that things do not lie equal between Hetty and Arthur, but Adam has been as ignorant of the realities of Hetty's nature as has Arthur. The rector refuses to accept Adam's arguments, and his desire to put all the responsibility on Arthur. Apportioning moral guilt is not, in the rector's eyes, something man can do with any justice. And ". . . the problem how far a man is to be held responsible for the unforeseen consequences of his own deed, is one that might well make us tremble to look into it" (p. 416). On Eliot's grounds, the rector is doubtless theoretically correct. Yet in Arthur's case there was an attempt to hide from himself the possible, or even probable consequences of his deeds. If the consequences were unseen, this was at least partly because Arthur did his utmost not to see them.

Eliot often suggests the necessity, when there is a disparity between two characters, of the stronger character giving more in the relationship. Thus Lydgate must be the more, because Rosamund is the less. Maggie,



with her wider vision, must be more tolerant than Tom, with his limited nature, can be. So, in this case, Arthur with his broader understanding and greater knowledge of the world must take care for the fate of the much more limited Hetty. And patently he fails to do so.

Character, says Eliot, is a process and an unfolding. In Middlemarch, Mr. Farebrother suggests that a man of honourable disposition such as Lydgate, might, under the pressure of hard circumstances, succumb to the temptation to do evil. Dorothea Casaubon impulsively defends Lydgate, suggesting that his good character speaks for him.

"But, my dear Mrs. Casaubon," said Mr. Farebrother, smiling gently at her ardour, "character is not cut in marble -- it is not something solid and unalterable. It is something living and changing and may become diseased as our bodies do."

"Then it may be rescued and healed" (p. 538) says Dorothea, changing her tack somewhat. Arthur Donnithorne, in his view of himself, seems much closer to Dorothea's original presuppositions. He takes himself to be an honourable man, and assumes that basic goodness to be a permanent possession, unaltered by any small peccadilloes he might indulge in. It is necessary for Arthur to think well of himself, and his own approbation is not, suggests the narrator, to be enjoyed quite gratuitously (p. 120). Arthur cannot permit himself to become aware of the insidious disease process in his character, for such knowledge

would shake his basic presuppositions about himself.

But it is not Arthur's character alone which determines the course of events. Exterior circumstances enter into the equation which produces the inevitable result. Even the knowledge of all a person's characteristics cannot, says Eliot in discussing Maggie Tulliver, lead us to predict his history:

For the tragedy of our lives is not created entirely from within. "Character," says Novalis in one of his questionable aphorisms "-- character is destiny." But not the whole of our destiny. Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, was speculative and irresolute, and we have a great tragedy in consequence. But if his father had lived to a good old age and his uncle had died an early death, we can conceive Hamlet's having married Ophelia and got through life with a reputation of sanity, notwithstanding many soliloquies and some moody sarcasms towards the fair daughter of Polonius, to say nothing of the frankest incivility to his father-in-law. (The Mill on the Floss, p. 420)

Indeed, we can imagine the good-natured Arthur, had a proper prospect for lady-wife appeared, marrying happily and living to a ripe old age playing country gentleman, puzzling the while over why his tenants didn't all love him without qualification. But instead the charming Hetty appears, and the drama of the interplay between Arthur's character and his circumstances has to be played out, to its tragic conclusion.

Arthur, in his conversation with the rector, suggests that we are determined mainly by circumstance, and can

hardly be blamed if we do wrong. Witchery from a woman is a disease to which one falls victim, and surely the poor victim must be excused. But the rector suggests other possibilities. A man, after all, may try change of air and escape further symptoms. Or he might administer an antidote by keeping the unpleasant consequences before him!

Arthur, unconvinced, expresses extreme vexation that, when so enchanted, we may be ruled by moods we can't calculate on beforehand. "I don't think a man ought to be blamed so much if he is betrayed into doing things in that way, in spite of his resolutions" (p. 168). Arthur would like to have his way made a little easier. If his responsibility is of only a very limited kind, who could blame him? He is not a fully autonomous agent, but a man betrayed. But the rector will not accept this abdication of responsibility:

"Ah, but the moods lie in his nature . . . just as much as his reflections did, and more. A man can never do anything at variance with his own nature. He carries within him the germ of his most exceptional action. . . ." (p. 168)

Arthur is still convinced that circumstances could betray him. And if he struggles against temptation, surely that makes the sin a little less condemnable. But it is the deed, points out the rector, not the moral struggle, which brings the Nemesis. "Consequences are unpitying. Our deeds carry their terrible consequences, quite apart from any

fluctuations that went before -- consequences that are hardly ever confined to ourselves" (p. 168).

The intensity of a moral struggle will have no effect on the inevitable consequences engendered by evil deeds. The deed alone is determining. The rector will not deviate from a firm stand on the need for responsible moral action. Arthur, here playing determinist, uses this kind of argument only to excuse himself, perhaps to find some kind of defense for continuing on a course of action which, if morally questionable, is exceedingly attractive to him. But the rector will not grant absolution in advance.

Arthur might have pressed his point further, that if our nature is already there in germ, we may be betrayed not only by circumstances but also by our predetermined natures. And if our natures are determined, then so is our will determined, and our will to will -- and so on. But a moral stalemate would be anathema to Eliot. The full implications of philosophical determinism find no place in her purview. Although she holds to a deterministic universe, yet she is imperative in her demands that men must will strongly. For the deeds which we will themselves enter into the process, and become factors in determining our further actions.

How then does character enter into the determining process? There is a double-sided imagery in Eliot's work, suggesting both a certain freedom for moral action, and a necessary limitation. If character is not cut in marble, but is living and changing, an openness to moral possibility is suggested. But if character is an unfolding of an already present germ, then the pattern is already set which determines the limits within which a person might develop. The germ is in our hereditary abilities and predispositions, and such germs are a given which cannot be altered. It is a fact that Hetty and Arthur are not on the same level. Her potentialities are vastly inferior to his, and so his is the greater responsibility for the relationship.

But if the germ contains the human potential, it is the circumstances of life which determine how the potential will be realized -- or atrophied. Arthur is like a vessel with a flaw:

The chances are that he will go through life without scandalising anyone; a sea-worthy vessel that no one would refuse to insure. Ships, certainly, are liable to casualties, which sometimes make terribly evident some flaw in their construction, that would never have been discoverable in smooth water. . . . (p. 121)

Eliot's imagery suggests a limited liability. We are responsible neither for our construction nor the flaw in it. Nor can we determine whether the water through which we flow will be calm or stormy. The question perhaps is,

are we capable of repairing the flaw? Or can we steer our course in such a way as to avoid the casualty?

Perhaps Arthur's greatest flaw, like that of all Eliot's egoists, is his tendency to create and live in a world of flattering illusion. Arthur's capacity for self-deception is enormous, and he is adept at confusing his wishes and the realities of the universe. His dreams of future grandeur in the role of country gentleman are all of the idyllic pastoral sort. Adam would act the part of grand-vizier, while they planned "no end of repairs and improvements" (p. 99). So Arthur would reign, spending his days galloping about doing good, while his underlings doffed their caps to him in admiring gratitude. Arthur needs to be respected and loved, and the general good-will of tenants and neighbours is essential to his well-being. The rector's warning that Arthur should decide which he really wants, popularity or usefulness, is unheeded by Arthur. Of course all will love him, for is he not eminently loveable?

Arthur's illusions about his carefree life as Squire are by no means his only ones. He is deluded about his own character; he imagines a moral strength he does not possess. He does not share Hetty's indifference to moral questions; he finds it necessary to pass judgement on his own actions. Yet that judgement must be a positive

one. He cannot accept the fact that he is motivated unworthily; he must continually rationalize in order that he might stand well in his own opinion. Arthur is not a deliberate hypocrite; the rationalizing process is scarcely conscious. But it is remarkably effective in smoothing his way to do the deed he wishes, without compunction -- or with as little as possible. Adam says that he cannot look on life as though it were Treddleston Fair (p. 163). Arthur cannot help thinking that the delights of the universe are spread before him for his enjoyment. And if, by any mischance, he should injure anyone in the process, Arthur feels he is quite capable of righting the wrong. Of course it would only be impetuous warm-hearted wrong -- he could not be mean or cruel -- or so he thinks. "'No! I'm a devil of a fellow for getting myself into a hobble, but I always take care the load shall fall on my own shoulders'" (p. 120). The narrator comments ironically:

Unhappily there is no inherent poetical justice in hobbles, and they will sometimes obstinately refuse to inflict their worst consequences on the prime offender, in spite of his loudly expressed wish. It was entirely owing to this deficiency in the scheme of things that Arthur had ever brought anyone into trouble besides himself. (p. 120)

Arthur, determinist when it comes to excusing himself, plainly believes that he is the master of his fate in this area. He feels that he has control over the consequences of his own actions, and can ensure that they harm no one

but himself. Arthur does not perceive that his attempts at recompense do not in the least erase the evil. A present of a pocket-knife or pencil-case is a poor substitute for a dinner, and a pension will scarcely make up for lost legs.

The story of Arthur's downfall is a history of continual vacillation. Always well-meaning and well-intentioned, Arthur is convinced no real evil will happen through him. In early June he is full of boundless self-confidence. "As for any real harm in Hetty's case, it was out of the question: Arthur Donnithorne accepted his own bond for himself with perfect confidence" (p. 124). But the circumstances are so propitious for an entanglement. For who could resist the loveable little Hetty? She is so available, and Arthur has nothing else to occupy his mind. Each encounter with Hetty tempts Arthur a little further, and each good resolution to end things is dissolved into a plausible excuse to continue the liaison. He must not see her again -- but then he must, to tell her he meant nothing the previous time. He will tell her they must part -- but then Hetty weeps, and who could be so cruel as to hurt the little thing? Arthur, at first, is mortified at his lack of decisiveness, but still he cannot believe that he will fall so low in his own esteem as to cause any scandal.



By the time of the birthday speech Arthur is still vowing to tell Hetty that she must take nothing seriously. But by now the determination of his own excuses and his own duplicity has changed Arthur. He has gone beyond what he had originally thought possible -- but then, he reasons, anyone else faced with such temptation would have done the same. He may have gone a little too far in flirtation. But the pangs of conscience that originally led Arthur to the rector have dwindled into nothing more than a "twinge of conscience" when Arthur hears himself praised at the feast. And the seduction that turns Hetty's life to nightmare is accomplished in spite of Arthur's resolutions.

Arthur's habits of self-deception, coupled with his vanity and passion, have totally negated his good intentions. With each succeeding temptation and fall, Arthur finds the evil harder to resist. His will, too weak to resist temptation, now must enter the determining process as a negative factor. Arthur, who could never do the mean thing, still finds it necessary to stand well in his own opinion. But he has now become so adept at excusing himself, that that opinion is not really too hard to come by. After all, his motivation has remained untarnished throughout. It is going to take a shock of some magnitude to shake Arthur's illusions of beneficence, and that shock is forthcoming in the person of Adam.

When Arthur makes light of kissing Hetty, Adam is infuriated, and this first glimpse of another's scorn dispels Arthur's self-excuse -- for a moment. For now Arthur stands "face to face with the first great irrevocable evil he had ever committed" (p. 294). Adam has become the voice of fate to Arthur. He accuses him of poisoning Hetty's life, insisting moreover that Arthur is fully responsible, for Hetty is but a child whom he ought to have protected. Under these gruelling accusations, it is very difficult for Arthur's self-justifying system to function well. Adam does not seem to believe in Arthur's doctrine of making amends; his offences this time cannot be forgotten in benefits (p. 305). Adam represents "an embodiment of what Arthur most shrank from believing in -- the irrevocableness of his own wrong-doing" (p. 305).

But Arthur is now immeshed in evil and the terrible coercion of his deeds leads him into further subterfuge. He must lie to Adam, for Hetty's sake, for he is bound to protect her. And he will make it up to Hetty; he will be so good to her in the future. "So good comes out of evil. Such is the beautiful arrangement of things" (p. 307). The evil which Arthur could not contemplate doing three months earlier is now, with the skillful use of the "lens of apologetic ingenuity", turned into a positive blessing.

Arthur cannot yet look at himself for very long without finding some means to excuse and justify his actions. He is really to be pitied, that with his honest nature he is forced to deceive Adam. But he must do the right thing by Hetty. As for a pregnancy -- why even consider a possibility that is not "demonstrably inevitable"? After all,

he didn't deserve that things should turn out badly -- he had never meant beforehand to do anything his conscience disapproved -- he had been led on by circumstances. There was a sort of implicit confidence in him that he was really such a good fellow at bottom, Providence would not treat him harshly. (p. 309)

Arthur is still under the illusion that it is intentions which really count, and that his deeds have not altered his basically decent nature. Nor has he yet realized that the universe is not governed by a sense of his deserts. Even on his return to the estate some months later, Arthur is busy planning schemes of benefit to Adam and Hetty, convinced that he himself has been the greatest sufferer. And considering Adam's harsh treatment of him, Arthur is able to congratulate himself on his magnanimity in overlooking Adam's fault.

It is only when faced with the hard facts of Hetty's tragic fate that Arthur finally looks facts in the face, without trying to justify himself. He confesses to Adam: "I was all wrong from the very first, and horrible wrong has come of it. God knows, I'd give my life if I could undo it" (p. 462). Arthur sees at last that nothing he can

do will alleviate Hetty's pain, and no amends can be made for a ruined life. He has accepted the truth of Adam's words, "There's a sort of wrong that can never be made up for" (p. 529).

Arthur's habits of self-deception leave him defenceless in a moral struggle. How can he seek to combat his own evil impulses, when his mental energies are all expended in convincing himself that he is really innocent -- or at least doing what anyone else so tempted would have done? When circumstances are so propitious for a fall, moral strength is a necessity in Eliot's world. And that strength requires a realization of one's own insignificance in the universe. To avoid tragedy, men must learn to live in accord with the "irreversible laws" which govern all spheres of life. Or else, as in Arthur's case, passion and weakness will inevitably lead to further evil, then to inmeshment in a web of evil in which all around will be entangled. And there is no escape from these consequences, for they are the inevitable sequence in the pattern of determination.

## CHAPTER VII

### THE BINDING PAST: MAGGIE TULLIVER

Hetty Sorrel, gifted with limited resources of mind or soul, is ill equipped to lead a fully human life. Arthur Donnithorne, with much greater potential, is blinded by his inability to face his real self. In his unpropitious circumstances, vanity and passion lead him into evil, and his will and conscience are dulled into acquiescence. In Maggie Tulliver, Eliot has drawn a character of much greater depth, and hence of greater potential than either Hetty or Arthur.

Eliot's notion of the germ of hereditary predispositions is clearly indicated in her treatment of Maggie and Tom. Maggie is dominated by the depth of feeling, warmth of affection and impetuosity characteristic of the Tullivers, and Tom by the practicality, moral rigidity and insensitivity of the Dodsons. The conflict between Tulliver and Dodson blood is illustrated in Maggie's passionate love for Tom, his affection for her, and yet the woeful gap in

understanding between them. As a child, Maggie kisses Tom in rather a strangling fashion (p. 39). Her great need to be loved, to possess Tom's affection and forgiveness frequently overwhelms Maggie and provides Tom with the opportunity to act as righteous mentor to his impulsive sister. For she frequently would like to have acted differently, while Tom in his conscious rectitude would always have chosen to do the same thing.

From her earliest childhood it is apparent that Maggie's life is going to be something of a battleground, with her voracious needs and impulsive nature warring against the restraints of her conscience and the expectations of others. She badly needs love and recognition, and seeks it from all quarters -- from the hired hand, from Tom, from the gypsies. But her attempts to impart her helpful knowledge never quite gain Maggie the admiration she expects. In her young girlhood, when no one seems to care for her, life becomes a vacuum to Maggie, and her way unclear. She is

a creature full of eager, passionate longings for all that was beautiful and glad; thirsty for all knowledge . . . with a blind, unconscious yearning for something that would link together the wonderful impressions of this mysterious life and give her soul a sense of home in it. (p. 250)

Maggie, in her intense loneliness and empty poverty, finding nothing in her surroundings to feed her soul's hunger, discovers in Thomas à Kempis her first real help in ordering her life. For Maggie's life at home and school has not taught her how to deal with trouble, and she lacks a sense of the "irreversible laws within and without her which, governing the habits becomes morality, and developing the feelings of submission and dependence becomes religion" (pp. 303-4).

One must acquiesce in the irreversible laws, or run the risk of tragedy. Maggie begins by trying to discipline her self-centeredness, and practise a life of self-abnegation. She is still acting out the drama of her life with intensity; her resignation is entered into passionately. Maggie has not yet learned, as Eliot's heroines must, that resignation is a sorrow, not a joy -- even if borne willingly. Opposing elements still war in Maggie's character, and quiet renunciation is not easy for her impulsive nature.

In spite of Eliot's gentle irony directed at Maggie's attempts at renunciation, she clearly considers that Maggie is on the right track. Passions must be restrained, and self-discipline and renunciation are essential in curbing them. Not only that, these virtues also provide the clue to the understanding of reality. By practising her new-found virtue, Maggie will begin to understand the irrever-

breaking old ties which have made others dependent upon her. Duties made by life come before love, and when this happens, love must be renounced. Says Maggie to Stephen:

there are things we must renounce in life; some of use must resign love . . . 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. I should be haunted by the suffering I had caused. Our love would be poisoned. (p. 471)

Maggie, in her attempts at rational understanding, thinks she foresees quite clearly the results of marrying Stephen. It is not really a life of happiness she is renouncing, but a gratification of her passion. Existence with Stephen would be psychological torment for Maggie, bringing not fulfillment but misery. "She might as well hope to enjoy walking by maiming her feet as hope to enjoy an existence in which she set out by maiming the faith and sympathy that were the best organs of her soul" (p. 481).

Maggie stands adamant against Stephen's argument from natural law. Intensity of feeling cannot be the ultimate criterion of the right, for following it would lead to moral anarchy. It would provide, she thinks, a warrant for all treachery and cruelty, and justify the breaking of the most sacred ties. "'If the past is not to bind us, where can duty lie? We should have no law but the inclination of the moment'" (p. 499). Life with Stephen would



sible laws within and without, and gain the kind of moral hold on life so lacking in Hetty and Arthur which will give her soul a sense of home. Maggie recognizes a degree of truth in Philip's words that stupefaction is not resignation, yet it is her attempts at submission, however faulty, which will aid her in coming to an acceptance of moral necessity.

In coming to terms with the irreversible moral laws, Maggie must learn to accept the primacy of natural duties. Here Eliot's concept of hereditary claims plays a large part in Maggie's story. Duties are determined by life itself. We are born into a certain family, and our relatives automatically exert the principal claim upon us. The idea of a primary natural claim is of immense importance to Eliot, for it is the starting-point for determining where duty lies. Claims of parents are of paramount importance. That a Maggie or a Romola must subdue her own needs in favour of her father's seems axiomatic. Only when the parent, as in Godfrey Cass's case, abandons his child completely does his claim become invalidated. Thus Silas Marner takes over the role of natural parent, and Eppie's primary ties are to him. Yet in Daniel Deronda's case, even his mother's giving him up to others does not invalidate the claim of Daniel's heredity. He recognizes his grandfather's will as the true source of his natural duty.

But moral determinism is not limited to the home sphere alone. Secondary claims are established both by our situation in life and by others who become attached to us. Thus Savonarola addresses Romola, as she attempts to fly from her home:

"And you are flying from your debts: the debt of a Florentine woman; the debt of a wife. You are turning your back on the lot that has been appointed for you -- you are going to choose another. But can man or woman choose duties? No more than they can choose their birthplace or their father or mother. My daughter, you are fleeing from the presence of God into the wilderness."<sup>1</sup>

If we make due allowances for the theistic language we see that Savonarola echoes the conviction of his literary creator. Our moral duties are not something we choose, but are something determined for us by life itself. And the results of defying the "facts" of moral determinism are as destructive as flying against the laws governing the physical universe. Yet conflict is inevitable, for primary and secondary claims do clash, and secondary claims vie with each other. Much of Maggie's story is confused by the absence of any adequate principle by which moral discriminations can be made.

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<sup>1</sup>George Eliot, Romola (1863) (London, 1971), p. 370. Subsequent page references in the text will be to this edition.

Two major factors, then, will prove to be crucial in the determination of Maggie's deeds -- the barely suppressed needs of her passionate, impulsive nature, and her strongly held sense of the inviolable sanctity of given moral claims.

The chief moral conflict Maggie undergoes is the choice between Philip and Stephen. Maggie feels a sense of strong obligation to Philip. The nature of this tie is crucial to an understanding of Eliot's ethical imperatives. How then does the tie to Philip develop, and become binding upon Maggie?

Initially, Maggie responds to Philip's cleverness, for he will think her clever too. But it is not this alone:

Maggie . . . had rather a tenderness for deformed things; she preferred the wry-necked lambs because it seemed to her that the lambs which were quite strong and well made wouldn't mind so much about being petted, and she was especially fond of petting objects that would think it very delightful to be petted by her. She loved Tom very dearly, but she often wished that he cared more about her loving him. (p. 191)

Philip's deformity, then, draws Maggie rather than repels her. Not only her sensitivity to Philip's pain, but also her own need -- her "unsatisfied beseeching affection" goes out to him. Perhaps had her own family, especially Tom, responded more fully to her affectionate nature, she would not have felt the same need for Philip's

care. In fact it is Tom who is, and remains, Philip's primary rival in Maggie's affections. When asked by Philip if she could have loved him like Tom had he been her brother, she immediately responds to his appeal: "'Oh yes, better. . . . No, not better than Tom. But I should be so sorry -- so sorry for you'" (p. 197). Maggie is anxious to reassure Philip that she could like him, in spite of his crookedness. And so the early kiss and promise are given. Already Maggie experiences pity and gratitude -- important elements in the establishment of a moral claim.

It is years later when Maggie sees Philip again. She has borne the indifference of her family, she has passed through her discovery of Thomas à Kempis, and has tried to subdue her hunger for passion and experience. The sight of Philip at twenty-one reawakens Maggie's old pity at his deformity and her gratitude to him for his kindness to her and Tom as children. The meeting also awakens Philip to the same rivalry with Tom he felt as a child. He exclaims bitterly that Maggie will never love him as much as she does Tom. Maggie agrees -- she can recall nothing before her love to Tom. To Maggie this temporal precedence implies an unquestionable priority of affection.

Schooled by her attempts at renunciation, Maggie is convinced that meeting secretly with Philip could act as a spiritual blight. Giving up her own will is the right

thing to do. "Our life is determined for us -- and it makes the mind very free when we give up wishing and only think of bearing what is laid upon us and doing what is given us to do" (p. 317). The voice of duty then is clear to Maggie -- she ought not to run the risk of bringing misery upon those "who had the primary natural claim on her" (pp. 346-7).

Philip's counter-argument, that "it is not right to sacrifice everything to other people's unreasonable feelings" (p. 316) cannot weigh with Maggie. Her father's feelings about the Wakems may be unreasonable but his wishes must be respected. His lack of reason could not excuse her duplicity in meeting Philip. And when the temptation proves too great, the meetings with Philip lead to the relationship of affection and dependence which confirms Philip's claim upon Maggie.

So the long hours of companionship with Philip in the Red Deeps make his claim irrevocable. It is a considerable irony that Philip's claim on Maggie, originating in their childhood friendship, is made binding by meetings which are themselves the violation of another claim. How can this be so? Here Eliot's principle of the moral authority of the past enters the picture, rather adding to the complication of the matter. Philip's love becomes a part of Maggie's history, and as it becomes a part of her past, it

automatically asserts its claim. This in spite of the fact that prior claims are incompatible with it. Nor does there appear to be any easy way of discriminating between two claims sanctioned by past associations, except by temporal precedence.

When the crucial day of Philip's proposal comes, he is quite aware that Maggie still thinks of him with the affection of girlhood. Her immediate response to his proposal is one of surprise, because she has never thought of it. Maggie, grateful for any love, nonetheless feels somewhat at a loss how to answer Philip. But his beseeching love finally evokes her response: "'I think I could hardly love anyone better; there is nothing but what I love you for'" (p. 351). She kisses him with the same calm affection as when she was a child, but Philip remains uneasy. Maggie pledges her love and desire to make Philip happy, vowing to do anything for his sake, with the exception of wounding her father. "Your mind is a sort of world to me," (p. 353) says Maggie. But her sadness does not seem dispelled by this new hope. She is conscious of Philip's doubts about her, and wants to leave him with no sense of pain. "It was one of those dangerous moments when speech is at once sincere and deceptive" (p. 353) comments the narrator. Obviously Philip has grounds for the need of reassurance, and his "pleading,

timid love" (p. 353) awakes Maggie's loving response, and she "has a moment of real happiness then, a moment of belief that if there were sacrifice in this love, it was all the richer and more satisfying" (p. 353).

The nature of Maggie's tie with Philip at this stage seems clear. It is not the fulfillment of a passionate love; Maggie is not drawn sexually to Philip at all. If his mind has opened new vistas to her, they are not such as to fill her with rapture. Her commitment brings her only a moment of real happiness, and that is because she has an opportunity to exercise her renunciation. Philip's love for her, not hers for him, has determined Maggie's response, for she recognizes the strength of his claim. Her plighted troth involves the renunciation of the needs of a large part of her nature; it is largely a self-sacrifice for the good of another. Given Maggie's belief that the duties and affections of life are determined for us, and her attachment to renunciation, her acceptance of Philip becomes essentially the response to a moral obligation.

When Maggie and Philip are forced to give up meeting, she feels acute pain for Philip, who has endured such harshness from Tom. Yet she herself is conscious of a "certain dim background of relief in the forced separation from Philip. Surely it was only because the sense of a deliverance

from concealment was welcome at any cost" (p. 366). The reader suspects that Maggie's relief has a much deeper basis than this. Her gratitude, affection and pity for Philip are strong, but not strong enough for her to repress entirely the sense of hopes and needs unprovided for in this attachment.

Maggie does not appear to be fully aware of her own underlying sense of unease with this engagement. After two years of separation from Philip, when Lucy comes to hear of this "beautiful love", she vows to contrive all she can to bring Maggie and Philip together and so end Maggie's troubles. Maggie's reaction at this happy prospect seems a little odd. "Maggie tried to smile, but shivered as if she felt a sudden chill" (p. 404). Maggie had, the narrator tells us, been sincere in her tale of love to Lucy, "but confidences are sometimes blinding, even when they are sincere" (p. 405). There are abundant hints that Maggie, although not fully conscious of it, shrinks from her commitment to Philip. Her decision to marry him has been governed by her sense of right, yet her passionate nature rebels at the union.

In the last stage of their relationship Maggie tells Tom, as she has promised to, that she will again be seeing Philip, at Lucy's. Not even his cousin's intercession weakens Tom's opposition to the son of his old



enemy. "'If you think of Philip Wakem as a lover again, you must give me up,'" says Tom, and Maggie quickly replies: "'I don't wish it, dear Tom -- at least as things are; I see that it would lead to misery'" (p. 409). Whose misery does Maggie have in mind? Her father is now dead, and Lucy approves the match. The only two whose misery are in question are Philip and Tom (if one excludes Maggie herself). In her original promise to Philip, it was only her father whom Maggie refused to wound. Now only Tom stands between her and Philip. Of the two, it seems clear who is really more important to Maggie. Philip was right -- that Tom would always come first in her affections. And the claims of the primary natural affections -- now those of Tom only -- override the claims of a suitor. But it may be that the existence of a prior claim is something of a relief to Maggie, just as the original separation from Philip was. Tom's opposition may provide the necessary (and reassuringly moral) reason for the nonfulfillment of a bond about which she has barely suppressed reservations.

Up to this point, Maggie seems to have been guided chiefly by her sense of the inviolability of moral claims. Her need for companionship did win out over her sense of moral right at first, but now she returns to her sense of moral priorities, with, it must be admitted, surprisingly little agony. But then Philip as a husband is a different

matter from Philip as a friend. It seems true that now there is no great conflict between Maggie's moral priorities and her real (if scarcely acknowledged) wishes.

It is, however, something of a moral anomaly that although Maggie leads Tom to think that she dismisses the idea of Philip as a suitor, in fact she still considers herself plighted to him. The double commitment still stands. By the time Maggie does see Philip, she has become infatuated with Lucy's admirer, and the relationship to her accepted suitor changes drastically. Previously the danger on her horizon, he now becomes the voice of conscience:

Her tranquil, tender affection for Philip, with its root deep down in her childhood and its memories of long quiet talk . . . the fact that in him the appeal was more strongly to her pity and womanly devotedness than to her vanity or other egoistic excitability of her nature -- seemed now to make a sort of sacred place, a sanctuary where she could find refuge from an alluring influence which the best part of herself must resist, which must bring horrible tumult within, wretchedness without. (p. 429)

Maggie, upon her reunion with Philip, gives him an "open, affectionate scrutiny"; they clasp hands, not with delight but with "a look of sad contentment like that of friends who meet in the memory of recent sorrow" (p. 431). Maggie's pity and womanly devotedness have not dissipated the element of sadness in this attachment. Philip's indirect declaration of love in his singing touches but does not thrill Maggie. It brings back memories and quiet regrets. If Philip's love

is a sanctuary, it may provide refuge from a tumult of passion, but it provides little joy in its place.

Lucy, at one point suspecting some reluctance in Maggie's relation to Philip, asks whether she loves him enough to marry him. Maggie's answer is unhesitating:

"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. He loved me first. No one else could be quite what he is to me. But I can't divide myself from my brother for life." (p. 459)

Maggie's tie to Philip, then, is one primarily of conscious rational choice. She is unable to tell Stephen that her whole heart is Philip's, for the simple reason that it is untrue. She considers herself engaged to Philip, and means to marry no one else. Her intent is plain. Yet there is obviously a split in Maggie between her rational controlled will and the unacknowledged promptings of her passionate, sensuous nature. She has chosen Philip because she feels that early associations have given him a claim upon her; her duty and affection for him have been determined by life itself. Only Tom's claim is stronger.

What then is the nature of Maggie's dilemma in choosing between Philip and Stephen? Life has determined that she is to be pledged to Philip, and she has deliberately accepted the force of that claim. But in the relationship to Stephen, it soon becomes apparent that reason is not in control of the situation. Maggie and Stephen, although

"oppressively conscious of the other's presence, even to the finger-ends" (p. 421); do not trouble to think where this might lead them. Maggie in this new situation is "absorbed in the direct, immediate experience without any energy left for taking account of it and reasoning about it" (p. 422). When Maggie first receives Stephen alone she is devoid of thought, she is only conscious of a presence "like that of a closely hovering, broad-winged bird in the darkness" (p. 424). The image is more ominously reminiscent of a bird of prey than of the spirit of peace. Maggie and Stephen are drifting along in a dreamy but somehow dangerous state, abstracted from commonplace reality. Maggie's rational self provides no defense against the overpowering nature of Stephen's appeal. His singing enchants her, and she becomes weak to all resistance, she is "being played upon by the inexorable power of sound" (p. 436). Philip's singing had been merely touching.

Just as reason is held in check, so too Maggie's conscious will is held in abeyance. In describing the trip down the river, Eliot turns almost completely to the use of passive verbs when speaking of Maggie. She is "being led" down the path to the boat, she is "being helped with firm tender care" (p. 486), she feels borne along "without any act of her own will" (p. 487). Maggie is as though under the influence of a strong tonic. Memory is excluded (p. 487) -- a sign of ominous danger in Eliot's world.

The lovers are enveloped in an enchanted haze; the boat is practically operating itself. The tide, suggests Stephen, is carrying them beyond unnatural bonds. For a moment Maggie indulges herself, "yearning after the belief that the tide was doing it all, that she might glide along with the swift silent stream and not struggle any more" (p. 488).

Maggie is tempted to excuse her lack of will in the same way that Arthur had done -- outside forces are really determining what is happening to her. With Maggie we are given a real sense of the power of determining forces; she is indeed being "borne along by the tide". With Arthur, when he talks with the rector, we feel he is hedging his bets -- hoping for some moral advantage which will excuse him in advance should he indulge his passions. Plainly Eliot identifies herself with Maggie's struggles in a way which she does not do with Arthur's. Yet the rector's words, if they apply to Arthur, apply to Maggie as well -- that the germ of our most exceptional deed lies in our nature. And all natures are subject to hereditary determination.

The dreamlike gliding of the boat, her fatigue, Stephen's charm and her delight in being with him seem almost to overcome Maggie's resistance. She is enjoying having decisions made for her. But the partial sleep of thought is dangerous, and Maggie's dreams of love without self-sacrifice provide only an empty hope, for it is a vision with no reality. And dimly Maggie feels conscious

of this:

Behind all the delicious visions of these last hours which had flowed over her like a soft stream and made her entirely passive, there was the dim consciousness that the condition was a transient one and that the morrow must bring back the old life of struggle -- that there were thoughts which would presently avenge themselves for this oblivion. (p. 493)

Maggie's resistance to enchantment inevitably begins to reassert itself. Her long years of self-discipline, her thoughts of the claims of Lucy and Philip, most of all her growing realization of the pain it will bring to them rush in upon her. She turns on Stephen, blaming him for attempting to deprive her of her choice by taking advantage of her thoughtlessness.

It is when she attempts to answer Stephen's arguments that Maggie's rational, dutiful self invariably reasserts itself. Drifting in silent dreams is one thing, accepting the sense of values implied by Stephen's arguments is quite another. She has already denied his plea that one should reject mistaken ties made in blindness, in favour of the natural ties of passion. Maggie has declared that she would rather die than fall into that temptation. The ties she and Stephen have made to others, whether official or not, are binding because of the feelings and expectations they have aroused in the minds of others. Following the strongest feelings cannot be right to Maggie if it means

be at the expense of all that has made Maggie's life sacred to her, a virtual violation of her religious centre. Maggie sees it as a rending away from all that was dear and holy (p. 502), as having nothing firm beneath her feet, as making herself into an outlawed soul, as forever sinking and wandering vaguely, driven on by uncertain impulse. Years of self-denial had developed her soul; marrying Stephen would be a spiritual suicide, the destruction of the centre of her personality. To this, Maggie says, she would never willingly consent. She feels her soul had been "betrayed, beguiled, ensnared" (p. 494) but that she has never consented to Stephen with her whole mind (p. 500). So Maggie rediscovers her clue to life, and insists on the renunciation she now at least has learned is not a happiness but a sad reality, with the thorns "forever pressing on its brow" (p. 495).

Neil Roberts suggests that Eliot has muddied the moral waters considerably by her early suggestion that Stephen is really a vain and dilettante scion of the idle rich, unworthy of Maggie . . . a picture which does not really jibe with the rest of her presentation of him.<sup>2</sup> Had

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<sup>2</sup> Neil Roberts, George Eliot Her Beliefs and Her Art (London, 1975), pp. 96-101.

Stephen been a more obviously worthy suitor Maggie's projections of a miserable life with him would have been less convincing. As Roberts suggests, it is Eliot's didactic purposes which are really at work here.

Plainly Eliot is trying to establish a moral point through Maggie. Ties once made (those determined by life itself) are simply not alterable -- not without disastrous consequences. And the older ties have a necessary priority. The projections of Maggie's life with Stephen are couched in language suggestive of a desecration of the sacred. Why should Maggie lose her religious centre if she married Stephen? Because she would be violating Eliot's laws of moral determinism. For this is a system which has little place for any concept of forgiveness, or any possibility of a new start in life. Mistakes once made bear results which must be lived with, for they cannot be altered or atoned for. There is no place in Eliot's thought for the concept of a mistaken commitment, which might be honourably dissolved. A pledge such as Maggie made to Philip has all the binding power of sacred law, and if it is denied, the terrible Nemesis would follow. Maggie's projections of life with Stephen, then, owe more to Eliot's view of the inexorability of moral law, than to a natural development of character and situation. Eliot's art is here at the mercy of her dogma.



Maggie tells Stephen that he has never been the object of her conscious choice. She wanted to be true to her calmer affection, without the joy of love. Already, Maggie is suffering the avenging Nemesis of her own thoughts. Her agony at causing evil and suffering leads her into orgies of self-laceration, and life becomes a penance to her -- although she cannot hope to atone for the wrong she has done.

Maggie's sense of the sanctity of moral law has prevented her from acceding to Stephen's pleadings. Yet as far as effects are concerned, it is the force of Maggie's heredity, in gifting her with a passionate, impulsive nature, and a great need to love and be loved, which has been ultimately determining. For allowing her passions to sway her into leaving with Stephen -- even temporarily -- has led to an alienation from all whom she loves. Moral reason has, in the end, triumphed in Maggie, yet only after the temporary abeyance of rational control has led to consequences which determine her fate.

It seems plain where Eliot stands in the conflict: to her it is the best part of Maggie which must resist Stephen. Wayward passion must be controlled by conscience schooled by duty. Yet there remains a curious ambivalence in Eliot's treatment. To her the past is indeed binding, and ties of affection and pity willingly undertaken must

be honoured. Maggie's duty to Philip is one which early affections and ties make irrevocable. Yet Eliot continually allows hints that this tie, though it must be adhered to, is somehow deficient in its nature. Maggie's conscious will is not at one with her impulsive drives, and the necessary tie is one she resents with one part of her nature. Her passionate self finds no fulfillment in this obligation. Plainly, Eliot believes that duty and obligation take precedence over personal fulfillment. Thus an unfortunate choice of mate may still represent sacred duty. Yet Eliot may have problems with her own moral imperatives in the resolution of the story. For in the end she does prevent the union of Maggie and Philip. She permits Maggie to be overwhelmed by her passionate impulses just long enough for the ties to both Philip and Stephen -- neither of whom is a satisfactory choice -- to be suspended.

Yet Maggie's flight with Stephen seems psychologically fitting. It demonstrates the intensity of her conflict between passion and duty, and the power of the forces which overwhelm her conscious moral decisions. For ultimately she herself feels that neither Stephen nor Philip is right for her. So she makes the decision to leave Stephen. Yet by being swept away with him for even a short time, she also accomplishes her real (if scarcely

acknowledged) desire of effecting a break with Philip. Unquestionably, she suffers torments because of the suffering she causes, yet perhaps part of that torment (as in the earlier forced parting from Philip) is the result of the unacknowledged relief she feels in the separation.

Maggie plainly espouses the view that the duties of life are determined for us, and she does not question the priority of the claims of the immediate family. She tells Philip that her affection for Tom dates from earliest memory, and therefore it must have precedence over any other. The impression the story gives, however, is that Maggie's attachment to Tom is stronger, not merely older, than her attachment to Philip, and indeed can be used as a buffer against the newer tie. The moral dilemma becomes more pointed when Maggie must choose between Stephen and Philip, for here her natural desires do not coincide with the older tie. As a basis for ethical discrimination, the theory of the absolute precedence of the past in determining obligation seems eminently questionable. Does it mean that Maggie must have accepted any suitor, providing only that he loved her and they had been friendly as children? Mere temporal precedence seems a peculiar basis for ethical decision.

If one starts from Eliot's ethical assumptions, that all self-sacrifice is good, that passion must be restrained by reason, that primary natural claims are not

subject to challenge, and that the past determines our obligations for us, then Maggie's dilemma becomes essentially insoluble. She could not marry Stephen (apart from other reasons) because Philip's claim is prior, she could not marry Philip because Tom's claim is prior. There is no answer to Maggie's dilemma, since she could not fulfill competing claims simultaneously. Nor could she leave her home and begin life anew. Rootedness in home ground is essential for moral strength, and new beginnings are impossible when the evils of the past automatically impinge upon the future.

Under these hard determining conditions, Maggie's death by water -- ever the prognosis of her anxious mother -- seems inevitable -- inevitable, that is, in the sense that Eliot has left Maggie no other way out of the mesh of incompatible moral imperatives in which she has entangled her. The final determining factor in Maggie's fate, then, is neither her respect for moral sanctities nor the demands of her impulsive nature, but the rigidities of Eliot's moral universe, from which, indeed, there is no deliverance but death.

Maggie is a character of greater depth of vision and human potential than Arthur or Hetty. While Hetty cares little for moral demands, and Arthur avoids facing his

real intentions, Maggie "wills strongly" and does her utmost to follow her moral imperatives. But her greater moral sensitivity does not deliver her from her fate. Her one thoughtless deed -- a boat trip down the river -- brings a Nemesis as cruel as those faced by Hetty or Arthur. In Eliot's world, intentions do not alter consequences: the deed of moral wrong brings its evil consequences automatically. But the confusions in Eliot's own moral stance render her attempts to bring this point home in The Mill on the Floss even more problematic than in Adam Bede.

## CHAPTER VIII

### A HELPLESS BONDAGE: MRS. TRANSOME

In the story of Mrs. Transome and her household, Eliot pictures a downfall which seems to have the inevitability of Greek tragedy. The seeds of the present evil indeed lie buried in the past. It was through a legal sleight-of-hand in the eighteenth century that the present Durfey owners, who call themselves Transomes, acquired title to the estate. Thus the stains of illegitimacy have deep roots in the family history. And Mrs. Transome identifies herself with a family of tainted origins from motives that are less than pure. Miss Lignon was poor, and it was plainly the attraction of the Transome wealth rather than love for her future husband which motivated her. "It was not easy to conceive that the husband and wife had ever been very fond of each other."<sup>1</sup> Mr. Transome seems little more than a caged animal (p. 88) and his wife an indifferent keeper. Eliot's high view of the sanctity of marriage renders such a union virtually sacrilegious.

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<sup>1</sup>George Eliot, Felix Holt (1866) (Aylesbury, 1975), p. 493. Subsequent page references in the text will be to this edition.

Such a family transfers the taint of its evil beginnings on to the children. Mrs. Transome's first son is "ugly, rickety, imbecile" and his mother passionately wishes for his death. The second son, born of an illicit relationship, cannot by the nature of things redeem the sufferings of the past as his mother hopes. For he too is tainted with the passion and egoism of his parents and subjected to the results of their sin. It was a sad illusion Harold Transome held, for he was "trusting in his own skill to shape the success of his morrows, ignorant of what many yesterdays had determined for him beforehand" (p. 277). It is fitting that such a man should have a slave to wife, and that their offspring Harry should be more of the savage than the "round-cheeked cherub" (pp. 178-9). Harry is given to biting those he does not like, and those he does like he harnesses for his purposes or adds to his "menagerie of tamed creatures" (p. 546). Like his father, Harry manipulates those around him. It is of course true that many small children are addicted to biting and playing horse, yet Eliot suggests with Harry a sense of untamed, egoistic savagery which is the natural fate for a child of such a family. "Harry would hardly ever talk, but preferred making inarticulate noises, or combining syllables after a method of his own" (p. 492). Just as his grandparents

exist in their own solitudes, so Harry rejects mutuality in preference for his own closed world. Clearly the Transomes represent a doomed house, and the children and grandchildren are implicated in the evils of their heredity.

Perhaps no character of Eliot's evokes so clearly as Mrs. Transome the atmosphere of spiritual death. She is a woman who has defied the fates, who has not lived with the proper reverence for the circumstances governing all human life. As Jermyrn puts it, he and Mrs. Transome ". . . had seen no reason why they should not indulge their passion and their vanity, and determine for themselves how their lives should be made delightful in spite of unalterable external conditons" (p. 318). But Mrs. Transome is haunted by the fears brought on by her guilty secret. When Oliver Elton suggests that Mrs. Transome's guilt is mere blindness, that she has only indulged in youthful impulse and is scourged out of all proportion to her sin,<sup>2</sup> he surely fails to appreciate the significance of Eliot's moral order. Self-determination in Mrs. Transome's sense is a kind of egoism and hubris which blights character permanently. It destroys the sacred ties which bind men together and so undercuts the basis of all morality. It leaves Mrs. Transome

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<sup>2</sup>Oliver Elton, "On George Eliot" in G. S. Haight, ed., A Century of George Eliot Criticism (Boston, 1965), p. 197.



(as Maggie feared she would be left had she married Stephen) with no guiding moral vision, no spiritual centre from which to direct her life.

Eliot places a high value on the sanctity of the marriage tie. Writing to her friend Mrs. Bray in 1855, feeling no doubt somewhat on the defensive because of her recent liaison with Lewes, she exclaims: "Light and easily broken ties are what I neither desire theoretically nor could live for practically"<sup>3</sup>. In speaking of married constancy, Eliot assumes that there can be no disagreement about the beauty of nature which prompts a wife to endure life with a drunken husband. "This", she says, "is quite distinct from mere animal constancy. It is duty and human pity,"<sup>4</sup> -- values high indeed to Eliot. It is right that Dorothea should sacrifice her own best self to the unloving Casaubon, and that Romola should return to the faithless Tito. Even in her early attempt to leave Tito, Romola feels that she might be doing wrong, that there is "something in human bonds which must prevent

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<sup>3</sup>Eliot, Life, I, 236.

<sup>4</sup>Eliot, Life, III, 92-3, letter to Miss Sara Hennell, 2nd January 1871.

them from being broken with the breaking of illusions" (Romola, p. 332). Clearly this is Eliot's view. It is only when Romola learns the full extent of Tito's evil, that she is permitted to entertain the question whether rebellion against a sacred law might also, in certain circumstances, be sacred (p. 483). But the resolution of the story requires no answer to this question.

So although theoretically there may be occasions which would justify loosening the marriage tie, Mrs. Transome provides no such exception. It is "passion and vanity" which motivate her and Jermyn, the kind of wayward feelings which are invariably destructive for Eliot. The duty of a wife, even in a hopeless marriage, must be to suppress such feelings. When, as in Eliot's view, human relationships are vested with a sense of the holy, then sins against them become destructive of the very basis of human life. To defy these sanctities is then hubris, that ancient sin against the gods.

(It is interesting that a twentieth-century writer like D. H. Lawrence, who would agree with Eliot in regarding human relationships as sacred, comes to ethical imperatives practically opposite to hers. Whereas Eliot sees the sacred necessity of restraining passionate impulse with the higher light of moral reason, Lawrence sees the sacred necessity of overcoming the restraints of reason in the fulfillment

of the passionate nature. Clearly they differ with regard to the locale of the sacred. Yet Eliot takes her moral absolutes to be self-evident truths, grounded in man's natural sympathies and feelings. Lawrence, apparently, would find them to be merely wrong. One cannot, after all, argue with a self-evident intuition. But one may "intuit" differently.)

Since she has given up her centre of moral strength, Mrs. Transome's life is characterized by powerlessness and futility. There is no development of character, for the "slow history of the ripening" of Mrs. Transome's past deeds is essentially a waiting process. She is borne along in passivity; by her early deeds she has given up control of her life, and can now only react, not act. Life is for her a great void (p. 104). She hates her firstborn, but can only wait and hope for his death, just as she can only await with dread the unfolding of events between Harold and Jermyn.

Symbols of impotence, bondage and fear recur continually in the story of Mrs. Transome. Behind her cold exterior she is like a caged animal, "as some quivering thing with eyes and throbbing heart may lie crouching behind withered rubbish" (p. 107). Counterpointing the physical slavery of Harry's mother, is the spiritual bondage of his grandmother:

The finest threads, such as no eye sees, if bound cunningly about the sensitive flesh so that the movement to break them would bring torture, may make a worse bondage than any fetters. Mrs. Transome felt the fatal threads about her, and the bitterness of this helpless bondage mingled itself with the new elegancies of the dining and drawing rooms. . . . (p. 198)

Mrs. Transome feels as much in bondage to her former lover as she does to her son: "there was a possibility of fierce insolence in this man who was to pass with those nearest to her as her indebted servant, but whose brand she secretly bore" (p. 203).

As Mrs. Transome realizes how powerless she is, between Harold and Jermyn, she begins to regret the days of loneliness before her son's return, when she still longed for something that might happen. Bitter as she is, she hides her anger, for even in that she is impotent. Her son is immovable when she wants him to discontinue proceedings against Jermyn, and it is precisely her past relationship with the lawyer that renders her attack useless. "Poor Mrs. Transome's strokes were sent jarring back on her by a hard, unalterable past" (p. 459). When her son suggests that she visit the new heiress, Esther, Mrs. Transome feels bitterly the powerlessness of her position: "I must put up with all things as they are determined for me" (p. 457). Her resentment at Harold's unfeeling domination is evident. Yet the unalterable consequences of her past actions have determined her present. So she has become hard and bitter,

exercising her power in petty things, living a narrow life with little sympathy for others. She is, as she puts it, as "unnecessary as a chimney ornament" (p. 204).

Could she have been or done otherwise? Plainly Eliot deplores the rigidities of a society where it is decreed that the proper work of grandmothers is to sit on satin cushions, and where women should spend their time on embroidery no one wants. As Esther complains to Felix, "A woman can hardly ever choose. . . . She must take meaner things, because only meaner things are within her reach" (p. 367). But it is not these external limitations which Eliot sees as the main factor in determining possibilities for Mrs. Transome. It is the egoism of her character, which leads her to marry unworthily, to give way to her passions, and to neglect the claims which life has imposed upon her. With no "tenderness or large sympathy" (p. 99) to broaden her understanding of her fellows, she becomes narrow and embittered, an "uneasy spirit without a goal" (p. 596), one who lives "in the midst of desecrated sanctities" (p. 494). In her moral vacuum she is like a living death, her fine clothes are only a "smart shroud" (p. 486); but even this death brings no rest (p. 489).

Mrs. Transome lives in dread, and attempts to blame Jermyn for her sorry lot, but when she tries she hears the retort from within: "You brought it on yourself" (p. 203).

Apparently there was little in Mrs. Transome's own character or in her surroundings to encourage her to a wider life. In her early youth, she had let her passionate egoism determine her, and the pattern was set. "So our lives glide on: the river ends we don't know where, and the sea begins, and then there is no more jumping ashore" (p. 360). Maggie Tulliver, who did manage -- literally as well as figuratively -- to jump ashore, discovered that passion, indulged in even temporarily, had its inevitable consequences. Mrs. Transome seems never to have possessed enough moral strength to attempt the jump.

In the picture of Esther, we see some hints of what the youthful Mrs. Transome might have been. Both gifted and beautiful, Miss Lignon with her "store of correct opinions" (p. 106) and Miss Lyon with her "fastidious taste" (p. 159) are clearly intended as parallels. Both were poor, and both faced with a crucial decision. Mrs. Transome enters her loveless marriage, and acquires the desired wealth. Esther too is tempted to marry a wealthy Transome, but she is granted the "good strong terrible vision" (p. 366) which will save her.

It is through Felix that Esther's self content is shaken, as she comes to recognize her shallowness in his eyes. She begins to "lose the sense of superiority in a-awakening need for reliance on one whose vision was wider,

whose nature was purer and stronger than her own" (p. 264). Felix, though sure she has a better self, is painfully aware of her susceptibility to "atta-of-rose fascinations" (p. 366). Eliot wants us to see that the possibilities are open: Esther may follow her lower or her higher self. Her "changing face was the perfect symbol of her mixed susceptible nature, in which a battle was inevitable, and the side of victory uncertain" (p. 468).

Esther is, of course, granted the saving vision, and it is perhaps the only time when Mrs. Transome functions in so productive a fashion. Esther is tempted by the ease and luxury of Transome Court, but the "image of restless misery" (p. 596), the tragedy of the dreary wasted life, empty of affection, fills Esther with horror. The haunting Mrs. Transome provides ". . . a last vision to urge her towards the life where the draughts of joy spring from the unchanging fountains of reverence and devout love" (p. 597). Indeed, Esther's decision to leave Transome Court and abandon claims to her fortune seems less like a renunciation than a flight from death to life.

Could Mrs. Transome, like Esther, have chosen differently? Undoubtedly, Esther has overwhelming advantages in her circumstances. The boredom and despair of Transome Court provide an effective warning. And Esther has chosen her god, although he is one who keeps her in

suspense at first: "The best part of a woman's love is worship; but it is hard to her to be sent away with her precious spikenard rejected, and her long tresses too, that were let fall ready to soothe the wearied feet" (p. 469). But her Christ does not fail Esther, and even had he finally rejected her, he had provided the impetus which led her to choose the higher life.

Finally, it is impossible to answer whether Mrs. Transome could have chosen differently. Had she done so, she would have been another character -- an Esther perhaps. Nevertheless, Eliot leaves us with the impression that the negative factors in Mrs. Transome's circumstances have been of an overwhelmingly determining nature. To people like Esther, who are in need of human encouragement and sustaining example, those who provide it are an essential part of the process. There is no evidence that Destiny provided any such necessary inspiration to the young Miss Lignon. The conditions of existence are implacable. What Miss Lignon sowed, she also reaped. And her chances of planting a different crop appear negligible.

In Mrs. Transome, Eliot has drawn a character who seems so weighted down by the Nemesis of her own sin, that she is capable of no action which might alter her lot. Mrs. Transome has totally abandoned any power of willing and has sunk into complete if bitter passivity. With the



relinquishment of moral autonomy, she has given up the struggle of human life, and merely subsists in ghostly form, haunting her self from her own past. Yet her Nemesis originated in her own deeds, and it is her own abandonment of will that leaves her to be carried along by the determining waves.

Mrs. Transome illustrates the extremes of Eliot's view of moral determinism. Maggie, contemplating marriage with Stephen, sees herself becoming an outlawed soul, forever sinking and wandering vaguely, driven along by uncertain impulse. It is just such a character Eliot pictures in Mrs. Transome -- one who, as a result of the evil deeds of her youth, coupled with the evils of the family history, must subsist as the living damned. The deed and the time are in Eliot's world, forever irredeemable.

## CHAPTER IX

### THE PEREMPTORY WILL: GWENDOLEN HARLETH

"Marriage must be a relation either of sympathy or of conquest" comments the narrator of Romola (p. 427). The relation between Gwendolen Harleth and her husband Grandcourt falls unmistakably into the second category. In the beginning of the courtship, Gwendolen is like a "high-mettled racer" (p. 134), full of spirit and imperious will; after the marriage she is securely harnessed, held by Grandcourt "with bit and bridle" (p. 744). The novel is replete with images of power and powerlessness; words such as "mastery", "dominance" and "submission" are frequent. The contrast is continually drawn between freedom and bondage, between illusory freedom and real freedom. The chief irony of Gwendolen's story is that the marriage she takes to be the gateway to greater freedom turns out to be only the entry to servitude. And yet she chooses her course: "A fish honestly invited to come and be eaten has a clear course in declining, but how if it finds itself swimming against a net" (p. 345)? Gwendolen, who cannot see that she must decline, is inevitably caught in Grandcourt's net.

Like the youthful Mrs. Transome, Gwendolen is dominated by her egoism, and suffers from the dangerous illusion that she may choose her own way in life, defying the moral restraints life has laid upon her. Gwendolen's moral sensibilities remain undeveloped. She has spent her early life wandering among foreign water-spots and, like Hetty, possesses no close attachment to the place of her birth. Offendene is not the cherished home of her youth, but a purchased "background" for the drama in which Gwendolen must star. It follows that, like Hetty, Gwendolen feels little sense of the obligations of life. Wasting her time teaching her younger sister (whose role in life is to be ignorant) (p. 54) is a vexation. Ties with the family past mean nothing to Gwendolen; she has no compunction in giving up the turquoises which belonged to her father.

Mirah, in contrast to Gwendolen, directs her religious allegiance to the faith of her dead mother, searches for her lost brother, and attempts to keep the ties with the past alive in circumstances far less propitious than Gwendolen's. Eliot means the comparison to be to Gwendolen's disadvantage, but unless he shares Eliot's pious allegiance to the past, the reader finds it difficult to accept her evaluation. This is particularly the case when Eliot's idealization of Mirah, in her world of fairy-tale

coincidence, makes Mirah's familial piety seem only one more unbelievable element.

Gwendolen's experience of life is minimal. She is possessed of an almost total naiveté about sex. Her mother thinks unpleasant areas -- such as the possible existence of illegitimate children -- are really better not mentioned. Gwendolen's ignorance and her vulnerability are clear. She is quite unprepared to face the "unmanageable forces in the state of matrimony" (p. 359). Yet there is a suggestion that it is not merely ignorance or inexperience which leads to Gwendolen's revulsion from sex. Her aversion when Rex courts her comes as a surprise to Gwendolen; her feeling is something she could not have predicted. "The life of passion" comments the narrator "had begun negatively in her" (p. 114). It is not the absence of passion which is her problem; indeed Gwendolen feels "passionately averse" to Rex's love. But Gwendolen has real difficulty in giving and receiving on an equal basis. She is a young lady of "peremptory will" (p. 46), and requires others to exist in subjection to her.

Gwendolen's relationships are all characterized by her imperious need to dominate. Her sisters are merely unwelcome appendages to the household, and although she is genuinely fond of her mother, it is Mrs. Davilow who must defer in all things to her spirited daughter. It is

Gwendolen, the "princess-in-exile" (p. 53), who will declare whether the new royal residence is acceptable, not the nominal queen.

Gwendolen's will, then, is not schooled by attachments growing from her past, nor by present affections. She sets out to "conquer circumstance" (p. 69) and thinks she is well-equipped for the mastery of life. It is almost axiomatic that Gwendolen will dislike to concern herself with religious matters. To the egoist, who sees himself at the centre of life, the pious necessity of accepting the "irrevocable laws within and without" is always a major problem.

Religious matters occupy a central place in Daniel Deronda. As is usually the case in Eliot's novels, the concern with religion displayed by a character indicates his level of awareness of his true place in life. A total lack of interest (such as that displayed by Grandcourt or Gwendolen) is generally the hallmark of the egoist. It is also true that holding dogmatic beliefs with conviction can be equally wrong-headed. Dogmatists such as Mr. Bulstrode are as dominated by their egoism as are sceptics like Tito Melema. Clergymen of whom Eliot approves usually share a dislike for theological speculation, and are governed by their human understanding. Gwendolen's uncle, Mr. Gascoigne, is a member of this fraternity.

Allegiance to a religious group is acceptable -- even necessary -- in Eliot's novels, so long as one learns, as Adam Bede does, that it is really feelings, not notions, that count in religion. So Dinah Morris helps people, not with her Methodistic fervour, but with her "exquisite woman's tact", and Dorothea recognizes the need for a good-hearted clergyman who will deliver moral homilies untainted by dogma. Mirah, with her piety closely linked to family feeling and a proper sense of submission, provides a religious exemplar in Daniel Deronda -- but one which Gwendolen ignores.

A second model -- like Mirah, providing a distinct contrast to Gwendolen and Grandcourt -- is found in Mordecai. Yet he represents something of a departure from Eliot's usual pattern. In Mordecai, she tries to picture a man of dogmatic conviction who is not dominated by egoism. Her attempt is scarcely successful. Mordecai's self-absorption in his vague mystical dreams bears a distinct resemblance to the kind of self-love generally associated with the egoist. Dino's blindness to Romola's problems is condemned, while Mordecai's blindness to Mirah's is not even questioned. Mordecai's great religious dream (which bears a striking family resemblance to Eliot's own worship of the past) excuses all. Eliot is careful to point out that Mordecai does not suffer from the tinge of orthodoxy,

and in this she is certainly correct. Still, he is intended to be "religious" in some conventional sense, as the token references to the Divine Unity indicate. Yet Mordecai as a man of genuine religious conviction -- orthodox or unorthodox -- is simply not believable. Eliot has lost her ability to distance herself from her character in portraying Mordecai, and consequently allows her usual moral priorities to be violated. At the same time, it is her religious presuppositions which underlie Mordecai's stance, rendering the references to the "Divine Unity" somewhat less than convincing.

Gwendolen takes no more interest in Mordecai and his ideas than she does in Mirah's piety. When she hears that Daniel is reading Hebrew with Mordecai, the information scarcely registers in her mind. Yet if she is to achieve true religious understanding Gwendolen must come to an appreciation of the truths of the "religion of humanity". Eliot's characters, however deceptively they may cloak their religious stance in theistic language, must learn to sympathize with the common lot, to recognize the sacredness of human relations, and to realize their own nothingness in the face of an implacable universe.

Gwendolen, as a young woman with potential for transcending her own egoism, must have some area of her life in which true religious teaching might find a lodging. Eliot suggests that Gwendolen, as an egoist, is devoid of

religious interest. Yet she also implies the existence of unheeded possibilities in Gwendolen's nature. Gwendolen had always disliked:

whatever was presented to her under the name of religion, in the same way that other people dislike arithmetic and accounts: it had raised no other emotion in her, no alarm, no longing; so that the question whether she believed it had not occurred to her, any more than it had occurred to her to inquire into the conditions of colonial property and banking, on which, as she had had many opportunities of knowing, the family fortune was dependent. (p. 94)

Just as Gwendolen's disregard for financial matters leaves her powerless before the dissolution of the family fortune, so her failure to pursue religious understanding leaves her unprepared for the destruction of her self-centred universe. But there are unnourished promptings of a different sort in Gwendolen's character. Her susceptibility to terror, dramatically evidenced in her hysterical reaction to the dead white face depicted on the opening panel, bears witness to a displaced religious sense. Her liability to "fits of spiritual dread" constitutes a "fountain of awe within her" which "had not found its way into connection with the religion taught her or with any human relations" (p. 94). Similarly, when she is alone in any open space, Gwendolen is impressed "with an undefined feeling of immeasurable existence aloof from her, in the midst of which she was helplessly incapable of asserting herself" (pp. 94-5). These feelings could have given Gwendolen a clue to her true



place in life, but she cannot tolerate the sense of helplessness she experiences when her will is inoperative. Gwendolen is not able to resign herself to her own nothingness, yet she remains vaguely aware of the unmanageable universe outside herself.

Gwendolen possesses, then, a number of positive potentialities: she is moved by genuine affection (if only for her mother), she is capable of passionate feeling, and she possesses a sense of spiritual awe. Yet in each of these areas something has gone wrong. Her affection is flawed by her need to dominate, her passion is turned to aversion, and her spiritual awe has become nervous dread. Gwendolen lacks the ability to give; she must have the central place and she must be in control. All of life is subject to her peremptory will. And this will, independent of restraints, is a highly unreliable guide to responsible action. It is clear that Gwendolen will have little real defence against the determining powers of her own passionate egoism, for an unguided will is subject only to arbitrary caprice.

Gwendolen's egoism is itself the result of a predetermined sequence. The kind of society she inhabits, the type of education and upbringing she receives, her hereditary nature, her mother's character -- all these and many more are factors which enter into the picture. There

is no way of discovering the beginning to Gwendolen's, or to anyone else's history. Eliot begins her account of Gwendolen's story in medias res, indicating that any "beginning" is merely a matter of convention. In the unending chain of cause and effect of Eliot's deterministic world, every break into or out of the chain must be a somewhat arbitrary one. Gwendolen, at the end of the book, is left with the problems of her life unresolved. For as Eliot implies in Middlemarch, life is not made up of a pattern of discrete wholes, but is like a web of ever-increasing complexity, which cannot be understood by examining an isolated strand.

Gwendolen's need for dominance, although it cannot be fully explained, remains the chief factor in determining her fate. Although she hopes to find freedom, her imperious will, governed by nothing beyond itself, puts her at the mercy of impulse. To Eliot it is essential that we have ". . . a binding belief or spiritual law, which is to lift us into willing obedience and save us from the slavery of unregulated passion or impulse".<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Eliot, Life, III, 156, letter to J. W. Cross, 20th October 1873.

The will in bondage to impulse cannot be rationally controlled, but is always subject to new caprice. Grandcourt, in even greater degree than Gwendolen, is marked by this bondage of the will. About to propose to Gwendolen, he suffers from a "languor of intention . . . like a fit of diseased numbness . . . to desist then, when all expectations was to the contrary, became another gratification of mere will, sublimely independent of definite motive" (p. 187).

Gwendolen appears to have definite motive when a suitable prospect for husband appears. She is determined to find greater scope for herself than the restrictions of life as a dependent girl permit, and if she must marry to do so, she will have a willing slave for a husband. Yet from the beginning of their relationship, Gwendolen senses some grounds for unease with Grandcourt. She curbs her natural tendency to satire, uneasily conscious that she suffers from a fear of offending him (p. 158). She is quite sure that after marriage she will be able to manage him thoroughly (p. 173), yet she feels a sense of constraint with him she cannot fully understand. Considering marriage to Grandcourt, Gwendolen is subject to fluctuations of feeling which she feels powerless to control. She wavers back and forth, never conscious of what her final decision will be:

. . . one of two likelihoods . . . presented themselves alternately, one of two decisions towards which she was being precipitated, as if they were two sides of a boundary-line, and she did not know on which she should fall. This subjection to a possible self, a self not to be absolutely predicted about, caused her some astonishment and terror: her favourite key of life -- doing as she liked -- seemed to fail her, and she could not foresee what at a given moment she might like to do. (pp. 172-3)

Even after she thinks she has decided to accept Grandcourt, Gwendolen feels an undercurrent of anxiety. She cannot understand what holds her back. In her indecision, she would at one point "willingly have had weights hung on her own caprice" (p. 176). When her uncle urges the duties of marriage upon her, Gwendolen confesses that she hesitates "without grounds" (p. 178). Although Gwendolen cannot formulate her objections in rational terms, she senses something holding her back from marriage with Grandcourt. In her half-acknowledged antipathy to him, Gwendolen's instincts are leading her aright. Yet with no clear sense of moral direction she cannot evaluate her reactions, but is left subject to each unpredictable wave of feeling. The power of her will is really an illusion, her need for pre-eminence the obverse of what it seems: "Gwendolen had not considered that the desire to conquer is itself a sort of subjection" (p. 139).

Although both Grandcourt and Gwendolen are possessed of imperious wills, there are differences between them.

Grandcourt is the exponent of absolute freedom. He attempts to live by "mere will" unguided by exterior or interior determinants. The result is anarchy of the soul. For if he wills independently even of his own motivation, Grandcourt's actions become simply arbitrary. Absolute freedom is an illusion. Those who hope to live by it do not realize that they cannot escape determining forces. They only abandon rational control of their will, and are tyrannized by impulse. Gwendolen, unlike Grandcourt, is troubled by her "subjection to a possible self" she does not understand. She cannot be easy living by "mere will"; she is restless, half-aware that she needs something -- although she does not know what it might be -- to guide her, and free her from this subjection.

When Gwendolen receives Lydia Glasher's letter, her first thought is "it is come in time" (p. 187). She has been saved from the need to accept Grandcourt. Yet the respite is only temporary. After her loss of fortune, Gwendolen, faced with the terrible prospect of becoming a governess, is devoid of religious resources to help her accept her fate. She has "the labyrinth of life before her and no clue" (p. 317) as to how to proceed in the maze. In this spiritual emptiness, when Gwendolen is afflicted with "world-nausea", Grandcourt's renewed suit comes as a powerful temptation.

Gwendolen dreads to let Grandcourt come and see her, for although she felt total revulsion from him when she learned his past, she is vaguely conscious of her own propensity to uncontrollable impulse. She dons her black dress -- the only possible wear for refusing an offer (p. 340). But it provides Gwendolen with no protection against her wavering self. For she is by no means so firmly decided as she implies to her mother. She is drawn powerfully to the life of freedom and luxury she thinks Grandcourt offers, in spite of her fearful sense that marrying him would constitute a grave wrong.

Grandcourt is aware of Gwendolen's repugnance to his past, and his desire for mastery is spurred on by the need to triumph over that repugnance (p. 346). The proposal scene involves them in a subtle power play, as each tries to outmanoeuvre the other. Her assured dominance over Grandcourt will bring, Gwendolen thinks, a happy escape from "helpless subjection to an oppressive lot" (p. 346). Gwendolen's egoism, her need for wealth and pre-eminence in life are potent determining forces. Her sense of unease over possible wrong-doing weighs little against Grandcourt's powerful inducements. Gwendolen senses that she is drifting towards a tremendous decision, "but drifting depends on something besides the currents, when the sails have been set beforehand" (p. 348).

The "yes" comes from Gwendolen's lips and she will "get her choice". The needs of her egoistic nature have triumphed, for Gwendolen's moral controls are too weak to restrain her, although they remain sufficiently strong to give her forebodings of avenging powers. She is uneasily conscious that she cannot fool herself into believing that she has been motivated by her mother's needs. She is irritated when her mother suggests dislike of being supported by a son-in-law: ". . . the deeper cause of her irritation was the consciousness that she was not going to marry for her mama's sake -- that she was drawn towards the marriage in ways against which stronger reasons than her mother's renunciation were yet not strong enough to hinder her" (p. 357).

Gwendolen, with her illusions of superior claims, and with her unrestrained will, is bound to be determined by her passionate egoism. Her sails have been set, and her "choice" is inevitable. Her marriage to Grandcourt provides her with a terrible Nemesis, in which her illusions of mastery are quickly dispelled. Her haunting dread that she has done wrong in marrying Grandcourt leaves her powerless before the implacability of his will.

Mrs. Transome with no spiritual resources virtually gives up her power of willing after her marriage and lives in helpless bondage to her own past. Gwendolen with her

peremptory will, independent of religious restraints, is also fated to live in bondage, to a husband whose powers of mastery surpass her own. "Willing strongly" is only effective when the will is directed by a proper sense of moral and spiritual priorities. Eliot has left open the possibility of further development in Gwendolen's character. Daniel Deronda will function for her (as Felix Holt did for Esther) as a kind of exterior conscience, which can awaken Gwendolen's undeveloped moral sense. For Mrs. Transome, there was no hope. Yet for Gwendolen there remains a possibility (however slight) that she might, in time, become "among the best of women" (p. 840).



## CONCLUSION

Sequences of determined events occur frequently in Eliot's novels. It remains to consider how far such sequences carry conviction to the reader. Do the events and the resultant Nemeses visited upon her characters appear to have the inevitability Eliot assigns to them?

The most convincing sequences do not occur, in my opinion, until her last two novels, Middlemarch and Daniel Deronda. In the earlier novels extraneous event, coincidence, or an obtrusive use of her own deterministic or moral presuppositions frequently assume a large place in the development of the Nemesis. But in the Rosamund-Lydgate and Gwendolen-Grandcourt sequences events emerge directly from the characterization, and carry conviction whether or not one concurs with Eliot's views on determinism.

In Adam Bede, although Hetty's pregnancy is not inevitable, it is certainly a possibility. What is not so likely is that Hetty should manage to conceal this pregnancy from all the astute eyes in her community. Arthur's various departures and arrivals at precisely the correct time for the story are clearly more coincidental than inevitable.

In The Mill on the Floss, the selection of a deed sufficiently evil to precipitate the tragedy is a problem

when Maggie is not basically an egoist. In the end the magnitude of the Nemesis visited upon her seems quite out of proportion with the nature of the misdeed. And Maggie's final fate is necessary only as the "solution" to her insoluble moral dilemma. The Nemesis which overtakes Godfrey Cass in Silas Marner requires a childless second marriage and a wife who disapproves of adoption. In Romola Tito must emerge from the river precisely where his murderous foster father happens to be. These events may be appropriate, but they are nonetheless coincidental rather than necessary.

In the case of the Transome household the Nemesis is certainly apposite, and convincing -- providing one believes in the doctrine of an hereditary taint. The picture of Mrs. Transome as a haunted soul is a compelling one. It is clear that Eliot believes that Mrs. Transome's spiritual atrophy is the direct result of early wrong-doing. What is not so clear is that this spiritual condition is a psychological inevitability in such circumstances.

In Middlemarch elements of coincidence and melodrama mark the Bulstrode-Raffles sequence. Yet in this novel, for the first time Eliot creates a relationship where the Nemesis is altogether convincing, since it is the result of the natural development and interaction of character. We see how Lydgate with his "spots of commonness" would be

drawn to Rosamond. Given her "torpedo contact" and the needs of Lydgate's affectionate nature, the resulting marriage with its devastating effects upon Lydgate has an inevitability which does not depend upon coincidental circumstance. Similarly in Daniel Deronda, the marriage between Gwendolen and Grandcourt and the subsequent power struggle emerge naturally from the natures of the two characters. Grandcourt's dominance over Gwendolen, whose need for power wars against her half-fearful conscience, provides a Nemesis that is eminently believable. Neither Eliot's doctrine nor the intrusion of fortuitous circumstance mars the Nemesis of her last novel.

It is ironic then, that in this same novel where Eliot has achieved one of her most convincing examples of a determined sequence, she suspends her usual network of causality in the Deronda-Mordecai-Mirah sections of the book. Here the "automatic voice of destiny" is silenced and the goddess of good fortune reigns. Deronda rescues Mirah, finds her brother, and discovers the hereditary duties he wishes for, all as a result of happy chance. This suspension of Eliot's deterministic system coupled with her loss of critical distancing (she treats these three characters with practically no irony) leads to an erosion of her moral standards and a loss of credibility. Deronda displays his cowardice (labelled "sensitivity" by a too-

partisan author) in continually postponing telling Gwendolen of his engagement. He also violates the dictum so sacrosanct in Maggie's case -- that people must honour ties brought about by expectations and feelings they arouse in others. Eliot has, of course, ensured that Deronda meets Mirah before he meets Gwendolen. This priority scarcely provides a convincing excuse for Deronda's treatment of Gwendolen.

In Daniel Deronda Eliot attempts to present a character whose final destiny is left open. Only in the story of Gwendolen does Eliot lay such careful groundwork for the possibility of moral regeneration in an egoist. Hints of undeveloped potentiality in Gwendolen's nature occur from the earliest pages. This makes her a more complex and interesting character than the other egoists, who, like Arthur or Bulstrode, may come to see that they have done wrong, but whose potentiality for growth is more assumed than prepared for. In the case of Esther Eliot draws a character of open potential, but one who does not share Gwendolen's depths of egoism. In both these latter cases however it is the presence of an "exterior conscience" in the person of a young man of moral rectitude which provides the necessary catalyst for the regenerative process. These godlike young men (Felix is compared to Christ, while Deronda stands "in the stead of God" to Gwendolen) provide the educative and sustaining influence necessary to guide

their weaker friends. Anyone less partial than Eliot might object that neither Felix nor Deronda is an especially prepossessing candidate<sup>d</sup> for the divine role. Nevertheless Eliot reassures us -- and clearly some reassurance is needed -- that Deronda has "not spoiled his mission" (p. 833). Yet in the end Gwendolen's future remains an open question. She is left with the mandatory depth of remorse, but she has not totally overcome the illusion that "whatever surrounded her was somehow especially for her . . ." (p. 876). With her mentor only available by mail, the battle is by no means won and perhaps even the initial skirmishes remain in doubt. But Eliot has carefully prepared for the possibility of regeneration, and hope for Gwendolen remains.

The question of responsibility is never satisfactorily settled in Eliot's novels, and perhaps it cannot be in a deterministic system. Eliot herself maintains the priority of life and action over theorizing:

When once we have satisfied ourselves that any one point of view is hostile to practice, which means life, it is not the dominance of intellect, but poverty of judgement, that determines us to allow its interference in guiding our conduct. . . . It is rational to accept two apparent irreconcilables, rather than to reject tested processes in favour of reasoning which tends to nullify all processes.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Quoted in Roberts, George Eliot, p. 42.

Man must act, and to act he must assume moral responsibility. It remains, however, somewhat of an inconsistency in the novels to imply that any one character is more responsible than another.

Eliot, as she says, urges the human sanctities chiefly through tragedy.<sup>2</sup> This accords with her own sense of life; its sadness and seriousness seemed even more profound to Eliot as she grew older: "pleasure seems so slight a thing, and sorrow and duty and endurance so great".<sup>3</sup> When one's prime religious duty is to resign oneself to one's own nothingness in an implacable universe, life is indeed sad. The need to sympathize with the human lot, urged so strongly by Eliot, seems at times tinged with desperation. For life is ultimately tragic to Eliot. Whether her final vision captures reality is another question. It may be (with a bow to Mark Twain) that the reports of God's death have been greatly exaggerated. And if this is the case, then life remains ultimately what it has always been, not a tragic reality, but a part of the Divine comedy.

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<sup>2</sup>Eliot, Life, II, 319, letter to Frederic Harrison, 15th August 1866.

<sup>3</sup>Eliot, Life, II, 33, letter to Miss Sara Hennell, 14th June 1858.

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