

The Narrator of *The Mill on the Floss*

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While some of the contemporary reviewers of *The Mill on the Floss* praised the skill and vigour of the manner in which the tale was told, there were objections:

Her clear, racy, nervous English, heightened by gleams of quiet humour and thrills of calm pathos, lends rather a perilous charm to passages teeming with the worst luxuriance of that petty realism which passes with careless critics for art of the first order. Even these are less intolerable than those other passages of laboured irony and didactic commonplace, which read like bits of private notebooks foisted into their present places. . . . Her interjectional remarks are seldom very wise or very pertinent. In nine cases out of ten they only interrupt the story, without offering a fair sop to the reader's impatience. . . . With the peevish fretfulness of a camel in the act of loading, our authoress keeps groaning out her tiresome tirades against evils for the most part of her own imagining.¹

Less cruelly put, the same kind of complaint about the obtrusiveness of the narrator in much nineteenth-century fiction continued for a century until the critical rehabilitation of the omniscient author convention began with such studies as Kathleen Tillotson's *The Tale and the Teller* (1959), W. J. Harvey's *The Art of George Eliot* (1961), and Wayne C. Booth's *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961). An essay like Isobel Armstrong's "*Middlemarch: A Note on George Eliot's 'Wisdom'*"² can be taken as clear refutation of the charges of the *Dublin University Magazine* reviewer. Mrs Armstrong shows not only the skill with which George Eliot develops and deploys the kind of discursive generalization which is so central to her narrative method, but also shows that the "sayings" are an integral means of her achieving her avowed aims in art. These aims, broadly, were that a work of art could and should present the full complexity of life, and hence extend life experience, and were expounded not only in essays and letters but throughout the novels as well. Because art can be a means to the moral end of developing greater sympathy for others, the interrelation of ethic and aesthetic figures prominently in George Eliot's work, and is frequently formulated by the narrator. And, throughout the novels, as Isobel Armstrong

1 *Dublin University Magazine* (February 1861), repr. in *George Eliot: The Critical Heritage*, ed. David Carroll (1971), p. 152.

2 *Critical Essays on George Eliot*, ed. Barbara Hardy (1970), pp. 116-32.

shows of *Middlemarch*, detailed attention to the utterances of the author as chorus to her own novel yields amplified understanding of the complexity of the art and the life it presents.

Such an analysis of *Middlemarch* has evident application to *The Mill on the Floss* as well, but there is I think point in singling out the narrator of *The Mill*, to examine this presence in the novel. More particularly, I mean to look at the ways and extent to which the narrator is characterized in the novel, suggesting that the narrator projects George Eliot's intellectual identification with the problems of heredity and environment, of a generation's relating to its ancestors and to its contemporary society; and that in *The Mill* at least the question of posterity is not able to be framed. Part of what is implied by this emphasis on the narrator is some retraction of the orthodoxy that the authorial "I" in novels such as *Vanity Fair* and *Middlemarch* is not to be identified with a biographical Thackeray or George Eliot. In the case of *The Mill on the Floss*, which has so frequently been discussed in terms of the distorting pressure of George Eliot's neuroses about father, brother and ugly-duckling self in the presentation of Maggie, it may be useful to indicate another way in which the author projects herself in her work.

It has often been commented that George Eliot in *The Mill on the Floss* can see no way forward for Maggie Tulliver. One of the things which I think emerges from a detailed consideration of the narrator's utterances is the extent to which she never intended to do so. What George Eliot is concerned to expound is the unperceived tragic situation in the St Ogg's world, not ways in which the tragedy may be redeemed. Perception of the tragedy has a kind of redemptive effect for the reader, but hardly for the protagonist. In this sense, the novel is about the limitations of resignation and renunciation, but perhaps there is a blockage about pressing the issue of how those limits might be transcended which is due to more than the intellectual paralysis engendered by the claustrophobic world of St Ogg's. My suggestion is that while George Eliot does resolve and place her projection of personal, emotional dilemmas in Maggie (a contention which I do not propose to argue³), there is much less resolution in the projection in the narrator of the dilemmas of

3 For a penetrating discussion of this issue — a discussion which among other things exposes the baldness of my assertion — see Barbara Hardy, "The Mill on the Floss" in *Critical Essays on George Eliot*, pp. 42-58.

how change can be effected and how such change is to be documented.

It is, then, to the explicit appearances of the narrator in the narrative that I am looking.⁴ I am not proposing a comprehensive examination of the form and functions of the narrator, and this obviously ignores significant aspects of the narrator's role in the novel. For instance, the ways in which the thoughts and perceptions of the characters are projected are particularly interesting since the sensibilities of many of the characters are so limited, by the child's lack of experience in the early sequences on Maggie, and Tom; by stupidity, in Mrs Tulliver; by pride, in Mr Tulliver; by romantic distortion, in the adolescent Maggie and Philip Wakem. Such limitations are not evident in the narrator, who if not quite "all-knowing", comprehends more than any of the other characters and makes allowances as well as connections.

The first point to be made is that the narrator of *The Mill* is to a degree characterized in the novel, and has special attributes in the choric role because of the extent of this delineation. This personification is not perhaps as explicit as that of the narrator of "The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton", the first of George Eliot's *Scenes of Clerical Life* (1858), who in his recollections of Shepperton Church and the Rev. Amos Barton twenty-five years ago, refers to himself as "so crude a member of the congregation that my nurse found it necessary to provide for the reinforcement of my devotional patience by smuggling bread-and-butter into the sacred edifice."⁵ However, the claim that the narrator as a boy heard Amos preach serves mainly as a conventional token establishing some authority in the narrator

4 W. J. Harvey, in *The Art of George Eliot* (1961) pp. 87-8, has a paragraph on the narrator of *The Mill*, to the effect that "the extended intrusion of the author in the opening chapters, the conflation of her past and present selves . . . creates a more intimate and personal tone than anything else in her work". In *George Eliot's Early Novels: The Limits of Realism* (1968), pp. 178-93 *passim*, U. C. Knoepfmacher offers a fuller discussion of the role of the narrator. He takes the view that in *The Mill*, George Eliot unabashedly presents herself with "the voice of that Victorian sage who was to speak with far greater assurance in *Middlemarch* . . . a sage eager to influence her own age" (p. 184). It would be petty to quibble with this, though it seems to me that Knoepfmacher lays some of his emphases with his overall argument in mind, so that some discriminations between author and narrator elude him.

5 *Scenes of Clerical Life* (1858; Penguin edn. 1973). p. 42. All subsequent references are to this edition.

by virtue of this childhood acquaintance; and the whimsy of the bread-and-butter episode continues through the early stages of the story in arch addresses to the reader — “Reader! *did* you ever taste such a cup of tea . . .” (p. 45), “It was happy for the Rev. Amos Barton that he did not, like us, overhear the conversation recorded in the last chapter . . .” (p. 51). There are, of course, early versions of authorial wisdom: the sentence just quoted leads into a long passage providing variations on the theme of “seeing ourselves as others see us”. The very length of the passage is an indication of George Eliot’s feeling her way: the telling expansion from the particular case under discussion to the incriminating generalization comes later. Here, the reasons for contemporary readers thinking *Scenes* to have been written by a clergyman are very evident. However, the principal qualities of the narrator of “Amos Barton” are shared by all George Eliot’s subsequent narrators: broadly, these are tolerance and compassion, urged, for instance, in the various warnings about making wrong judgements of the Countess and other characters, or in the set-piece opening of chapter v, on “the poetry and the pathos, the tragedy and the comedy, lying in the experience of a human soul that looks out through dull grey eyes” (p. 81).

The narrator of *The Mill* stands in something of the same relation to the narrative as does the narrator of “Amos Barton”: events which occurred some time in the past are being recounted by someone who had some involvement with the protagonists and their environment. This relation of past and present, the past in which the Tullivers’ tragedy is enacted, and the present in which that tragedy is being described, is one of the main concerns of the “I” in *The Mill*. In “Amos Barton”, there is a comment on change between the past and the present, in the narrator’s regretting the refurbishing of the quaint old Sheperton church to shining symmetry, and the disappearance of the old ways of hymn-singing and so on. But the comment goes no further than pointing to the change, where in *The Mill* questions of cause and effect, and of the various emotions engendered by the passage of time, loom large. And I think it is important that such concerns should be seen to be the narrator’s specifically, and not merely themes which emerge in a diffused way from the narrative.

To turn, then, to the beginning of the novel. It opens with a bald stage direction — “A wide plain . . .” — a scene soon

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animated to anthropomorphized motion: "A wide plain, where the broadening Floss hurries on between its green banks to the sea, and the loving tide, rushing to meet it, checks its passage with an impetuous embrace."⁶ The attribution of motive and emotion to the waters, mainly in the participles *broadening*, *loving*, *rushing*, blurs the fact that the active verbs (in a sentence lacking a principal clause) are *hurries* and *checks*. Movement and resistance are evident in the natural world, and also — as the novel will show — in the world of human action. For the moment, though, the tide moves purposefully, carrying ships to St Ogg's. The cargoes, precisely and evocatively enumerated, "the fresh-scented fir-planks, with rounded sacks of oil-bearing seed, or with the dark glitter of coal", are for the world of commerce and technology, man's imposition on the natural scene. So amicable is the relation of nature and man-made things, however, that the ships and trees seem almost to intermingle; similarly, the town of St Ogg's is incorporated between hill and meadows. The season, of winter yielding to spring, seems to assert the benign dominance of nature's cycles over man's energies in sowing and reaping; and the very present tense in which this whole description is couched reinforces such a sense of timelessness.

The beginning of specifying a point in time comes with the entry of the Ripple into the Floss, and of a human perceiver into the scene:

How lovely the little river is, with its dark, changing wavelets! It seems to me like a living companion while I wander along the bank and listen to its low placid voice, as to the voice of one who is deaf and loving. I remember those large dipping willows. I remember the stone bridge. (I, 2.)

"I remember" fully introduces relative times into the situation: what is not clear yet is the relation of the "now" when the "I" remembers to the time being remembered, when the willows and the bridge and the mill were familiar. Indeed, in the context, "I remember" functions almost as an invocation to conjure up the particular scene of past time, of the mill, which is then animated as the sound of the mill-wheel cuts out the world beyond, and the grain-filled waggon is hauled along. There is exclamation at the horses, exclamation which is almost exhor-

6 *The Mill on the Floss* (3 vols. 1860), I. 1. Subsequent page-references will be to this edition, and incorporated in the text. Book and chapter references will also be given.

tation to join in the gaze: "the strong, submissive, meek-eyed beasts, who, I fancy, are looking mild reproach at him from between their blinkers . . . See how they stretch their shoulders up the slope . . . Look at their grand shaggy feet . . ." (I, 3-4). We may recur to that "I fancy" when its force not merely as whimsy about the horses' feelings emerges, after the narrator passes from the horses to the little girl and the dog, and becomes involved in a reverie about her situation and feelings. For it is only now that the nature of this whole reverie is revealed; and I think it is a testimony to the conviction with which the scene has been laid and animated that the reader feels a shock — perhaps of betrayal or at least anti-climax — with the turn from the second last to the last paragraph:

It is time, too, for me to leave off resting my arms on the cold stone of this bridge. . . .

Ah, my arms are really benumbed. I have been pressing my elbows on the arms of my chair, and dreaming that I was standing on the bridge in front of Dorlcote Mill, as it looked one February afternoon many years ago. Before I dozed off, I was going to tell you what Mr and Mrs Tulliver were talking about, as they sat by the bright fire in the left-hand parlour on that very afternoon I have been dreaming of. (I, 4-5.)

The shock is generated mainly by the bluntness with which the deception engendered by the blurring of timescales in the present tense is exposed. Momentarily, the sense of being caught by an old convention prevails — but only momentarily, for the narrator gets us into the thick of the conversation in the left-hand parlour and the narrative proper gets under way.

Knoepfmacher rightly points to the Wordsworthian elements of chapter i of *The Mill on the Floss*: he interprets the narrator as, like Wordsworth's ideal poet, seeking to present emotion recollected in tranquillity, fusing thought and feeling, merging past and present.⁷ There are, however, other Wordsworthian themes, less explicitly enunciated here, but taken up elsewhere in the novel: the formative capacities of early experience — particularly the potency of the childhood home; the power of memory; and the healing force of nature.

But there is another obvious literary analogy, with the dream vision. Conventionally, in such works as *Piers Plowman*, or Chaucer's *The Book of the Duchess* and *The House of Fame*, or *The Divine Comedy*, the dreamer-narrator falls asleep, and

⁷ *George Eliot's Early Novels*, p. 188.

dreams the events described in the work, experiences which are often partly allegorical. Frequently the allegory deals with a notion of an ideal state, and frequently it has Christian implications. Bunyan used the convention in *The Pilgrim's Progress*, which clearly reverberates in Maggie's spiritual odyssey; and thirty years after *The Mill on the Floss*, William Morris more thoroughly revived the convention in *News from Nowhere* — appropriately, given the espousal of a form of medievalism in that novel, and its aim of devising a secular Utopia. Of course *The Mill* is not a vision in the way *Piers Plowman* is, though like Langland's poem it is concerned with the disparity between an illusory and elusive ideal, and the constraints of the real; and it is pertinent I think to see George Eliot's use of the dream-vision as part of her trying to formulate her "religion of humanity" just as the medieval writers provided their own gloss on Christian teachings. Rather, the dream which opens *The Mill* is a dream of recollection. Freedom from restraint on consciousness in this dream leads not to prescription or prediction, nor to the fantasy or allegory of "Kubla Khan", but to a kind of personal history which contrasts with the sorts of history — hagiography, chronicle, social — mentioned later as interests of the narrator (Book First, chapter xii).

The "Conclusion" to the novel returns to the vista of the Floss, but does not invoke the characteristic awakening of the dreamer imbued with enlarged understanding. In any case it is not clear how the "now" of the "Conclusion" relates to the "now" of the opening, though again the passage of time, and its effects, are under discussion:

Nature repairs her ravages — repairs them with her sunshine, and with human labour. The desolation wrought by that flood, had left little visible trace on the face of the earth, five years after. The fifth autumn was rich in golden corn-stacks, rising in thick clusters among the distant hedgerows; the wharves and warehouses on the Floss were busy again, with echoes of eager voices, with hopeful lading and unloading.

And every man and woman mentioned in this history was still living — except those whose end we know.

Nature repairs her ravages — but not all. The uptorn trees are not rooted again; the parted hills are left scarred: if there is a new growth, the trees are not the same as the old, and the hills underneath their green vesture bear the marks of the past rending. To the eyes that have dwelt on the past, there is no thorough repair. (III, 312.)

What the passage is doing is describing the restoration of the harmony of man and nature which had been depicted in the

opening chapter, though perhaps the note, as in the churchyard, is too much of regaining "grassy order and decent quiet" (III, 313). While we are told that there are some ravages which are beyond redemption, it is implied that incomplete repair is more evident in human lives than the natural scene, and in any case can only be discerned by "the eyes that have dwelt on the past" (III, 312). Those eyes are perhaps a little blurry, on the evidence of the end of the preceding chapter (Book Seventh, chapter v):

The boat reappeared — but brother and sister had gone down in an embrace never to be parted: living through again in one supreme moment, the days when they had clasped their little hands in love, and roamed the daisied fields together. (III, 311.)

We may be moved by the "clasped their little hands in love . . .", but the novel did not show this kind of activity as characterizing the childhood of the Tullivers, and it is difficult to see how the passage can be placed as presenting Maggie's sentimentalizing specifically.

Such considerations apart, certainly the "Conclusion" modifies the basically calm nostalgic note of the opening where there is no inkling of lament of the kind which pervades the "Conclusion". It is clear that there is a difference between the idea of a past time which can be recollected and recreated, with the emotional implication of wishing to re-engage with that time; and the idea of those aspects of the past which cannot be repaired or reconstituted. While the difference does not constitute a discrepancy, it does perhaps indicate an evasion, an evasion of the consideration of the problems of change and the passage of time which the narrator enunciates as an integral part of his interpretation of the history of the Dodsons and the Tullivers.

While the opening does provide the landscape vignette, the brief preparatory glimpse of the child Maggie on her home ground, and an intimation of the themes of time, memory and history, it does not I think have the assurance and complexity of the openings of other of George Eliot's novels. It seems to me that George Eliot has another go, much more fruitfully, at a similar task of devising an overture in the "Introduction" to *Felix Holt*, where the rather awkward use of the dream in *The Mill* yields to a fuller counterpointing of past and present in the commentary on the coach traversing the countryside. She proposes variations on the theme in the "Proem" to *Romola* with the angel of the dawn and a Shade of a fifteenth-century Florentine

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musings on the processes of history, and by the "Prelude" to *Middlemarch* she has worked the problem to a succinct formulation:

Who that cares much to know the history of man, and how the mysterious mixture behaves under the varying experiments of Time, has not dwelt, at least briefly, on the life of Saint Theresa . . . ?⁸

One of the things that has happened between *The Mill on the Floss* and *Middlemarch* is that the focus has shifted. The problems of the individual's relation to her past are still central, but the predominant concerns are with the effect of the past in determining present and future action. The historian in *The Mill* is mainly looking backward: the time structure of *Middlemarch* is not so sealed off.

The Mill on the Floss does include some quite explicit consideration of the role of the historian, as part of the delineation of the narrator. I have in mind Book First, chapter xii, where the narrator makes a more particular appearance than at the opening. The occasion for presenting "Mr and Mrs Glegg at Home" is to get their—and especially her—reaction after Mr Tulliver's rash decision to pay back her loan of five hundred pounds. It also is an occasion for the narrator to dilate about St Ogg's:

In order to see Mr and Mrs Glegg at home, we must enter the town of St Ogg's—that venerable town with the red-fluted roofs and the broad ware-house gables, where the black ships unlade themselves of their burthens from the far north, and carry away, in exchange, the precious inland products, the well-crushed cheese and the soft fleeces, which my refined readers have doubtless become acquainted with through the medium of the best classic pastorals. (I, 215.)

The sarcasm of the reference to "refined readers" and "the best classic pastorals" is rare in this novel, and sits lightly and aptly at the outset of a section which heavily qualifies stereotypes of rustic innocence and simplicity, and challenges the reader's distancing of himself from the people described.

The narrator presents himself as one well acquainted with the actual town of St Ogg's, but also devoted to its history, both as a local antiquarian (the reference to manuscript accounts of the exploits of St Ogg—I, 217) and as a chronicler of its history from Roman times to the present. This history relates many vicissitudes, of battles and of floods, which contrast with the illusion of stability subscribed to by Mrs Glegg's contemporaries:

8 *Middlemarch* (1871-2; Penguin edn. 1965), p. 25.

Ah, even Mrs Glegg's day seems far back in the past now, separated from us by changes that widen the years. War and the rumour of war had then died out from the minds of men, and if they were ever thought of by the farmers in drab greatcoats, who shook the grain out of their sample-bags and buzzed over it in the full marketplace, it was as a state of things that belonged to a past golden age, when prices were high. . . . The Catholics, bad harvests, and the mysterious fluctuations of trade, were the three evils mankind had to fear: even the floods had not been great of late years. The mind of St Ogg's did not look extensively before or after. It inherited a long past without thinking of it, and had no eyes for the spirits that walked the streets. . . . And the present time was like the level plain where men lose their belief in volcanoes and earthquakes, thinking to-morrow will be as yesterday, and the giant forces that used to shake the earth are for ever laid to sleep. (I, 220-1.)

Potential for all kinds of upheaval is latent in St Ogg's, a place where confidence is often the product of wilful ignorance. The effect of the passage is complex, questioning the way that tradition and historical record reflect the past, reflecting too on the way the present is interpreted by those experiencing it. In the precision of the description of the farmers sampling grain, the view of war as a feature of "a past golden age, when prices were high" does not obtrude itself as a materialistic modification of a pastoral ideal — though such a modification is certainly part of the import. Similarly, the recurrence of certain kinds of situation in various epochs is implied: for instance, the narrator suggests the divisiveness of religious conflicts was still in the 1820s and 1830s as real as during the struggles of Puritan and Cavalier, though more overtly expressed in terms of property and position.

And so the summing up:

This was the general aspect of things at St Ogg's in Mrs Glegg's day, and at that particular period in her family history when she had had her quarrel with Mr Tulliver. It was a time when ignorance was much more comfortable than at present, and was received with all the honours in very good society, without being obliged to dress itself in an elaborate costume of knowledge; a time when cheap periodicals were not, and when country surgeons never thought of asking their female patients if they were fond of reading, but simply took it for granted that they preferred gossip; a time when ladies in rich silk-gowns wore large pockets, in which they carried a mutton-bone to secure them against cramp. Mrs Glegg carried such a bone, which she had inherited from her grandmother with a brocaded gown that would stand up empty, like a suit of armour, and a silver-headed walking-stick; for the Dodson family had been respectable for many generations. (I, 222-3.)

The end of the paragraph launches several astringent jibes — at the whole concept of respectability as defined in the Dodson

world, and at the basis of that “respectability” in various kinds of superstition. But the remark about “ignorance was much more comfortable than at present” perhaps carries a vestige of hope that improvement can occur, while not permitting complacency about the likelihood of breeding out such superstitions over time. One of the lessons of history — perhaps the main one? — is the recognition of continuities in man and nature.

Another clear implication of the whole section is that the assimilation of change by the physiognomy of St Ogg’s — represented by “that fine old hall, which is like the town, telling of the thoughts and hands of widely-sundered generations” (I, 216) — must partly derive from the insensitivity of prejudice. The organic harmony of town with natural landscape must depend on suppression of discords. Similarly, a consensus about the details of the life of St Ogg, and about interpretation of the legend in terms of divine grace, must involve selection and suppression (very likely there is a Darwinian note in George Eliot’s discourse here). The narrator elsewhere (Book Fourth, chapter i) makes a strong stand as to the best way of seeing any single thing, namely by recognizing it as the product of “a vast sum of conditions” (II, 151), and here a few of the elements of the sum are indicated, as well as the difficulty of eliciting the elements and bringing them into relation.

Altogether, this section advances the exploration begun in Book First, chapter i, of the connection between past and present as experienced by individuals and variously recorded. Discussion of these matters is resumed at length in Book Fourth, chapter i, “A Variation of Protestantism Unknown to Bossuet”. Here the narrator steps right out of the oppressive world of St Ogg’s and surveys that oppressiveness in a densely-textured reflection. These pages form one of George Eliot’s most telling essays on a theme she develops over and over again, that of the responsibility of the person and of the artist; and from them a couple of paragraphs are inevitably quoted:

It is a sordid life, you say, this of the Tullivers and Dodsons — irradiated by no sublime principles, no romantic visions, no active, self-renouncing faith — moved by none of those wild, uncontrollable passions which create the dark shadows of misery and crime — without that primitive rough simplicity of wants, that hard submissive ill-paid toil, that child-like spelling-out of what nature has written, which gives its poetry to peasant life. Here, one has conventional worldly notions and habits without instruction and without polish — surely the most prosaic form of human life: proud respectability in a gig of unfashionable build: worldliness without side-dishes.

Observing these people narrowly, even when the iron hand of misfortune has shaken them from their unquestioning hold on the world, one sees little trace of religion, still less of a distinctively Christian creed. Their belief in the Unseen, so far as it manifests itself at all, seems to be rather of a pagan kind; their moral notions, though held with strong tenacity, seem to have no standard beyond hereditary custom. You could not live among such people; you are stifled for want of an outlet towards something beautiful, great, or noble; you are irritated with these dull men and women, as a kind of population out of keeping with the earth on which they live — with this rich plain where the great river flows for ever onward, and links the small pulse of the old English town with the beatings of the world's mighty heart. A vigorous superstition, that lashes its gods or lashes its own back, seems to be more congruous with the mystery of the human lot, than the mental condition of these emmet-like Dodsons and Tullivers.

I share with you this sense of oppressive narrowness; but it is necessary that we should feel it, if we care to understand how it acted on the lives of Tom and Maggie — how it has acted on young natures in many generations, that in the onward tendency of human things have risen above the mental level of the generation before them, to which they have been nevertheless tied by the strongest fibres of their hearts. The suffering, whether of martyr or victim, which belongs to every historical advance of mankind, is represented in this way in every town, and by hundreds of obscure hearths; and we need not shrink from this comparison of small things with great; for does not science tell us that its highest striving is after the ascertainment of a unity which shall bind the smallest things with the greatest? In natural science, I have understood, there is nothing petty to the mind that has a large vision of relations, and to which every single object suggests a vast sum of conditions. It is surely the same with the observation of human life. (II, 149-51.)

In the second of these paragraphs, I think George Eliot betrays the self-imposed limits of her consideration of her themes, and in some ways claims more than the novel substantiates. Certainly she gives the contrasting reactions to “oppressive narrowness” of Tom and Maggie, and certainly the novel gives warrant for seeing these reactions as symptomatic or even representative of a natural evolution. But the argument about how the brother and sister are representative is truncated. The passage is informed by a hope that science will provide the means for fuller human understanding, even if it is not quite the religion to supplant all varieties of Protestant and Catholic and Dissenter. But the narrator seems more intent on invoking science to urge present tolerance, than on asserting the power of science to predict, let alone provide “the ascertainment of a unity which shall bind the smallest things with the greatest”. Such an attempt may fail: in *Middlemarch*,

both Lydgate in his search for primitive tissue, and Casaubon in his search for the Key to All Mythologies, seek a unity, which they each fail to find, though for different reasons.

The Mill on the Floss certainly does present suffering, though the extent to which this suffering—in Maggie's case, say—can be seen to have epic and tragic dimensions might be challenged. The problem is not that of the reader being persuaded that there were potentials in Maggie which might have been realized had things been different, but that there were particular causes, related to "the onward tendency of human things", which prevent her fulfilment. It seems to me that in this section, George Eliot pronounces moral truths, but relies on "wisdom" rather than argument to exact agreement. The "wisdom", as Isobel Armstrong allows, sometimes deflects us from rigorous analysis of its portent.

The effect of Book Fourth, chapter i is principally a result of emotional rather than logical factors. It is a relief to leave the desperation of the curse in the Tulliver family Bible which concludes Book Third to join the reflections about the Rhone, with its homely ruins, and the Rhine, with its romantic ones, which open Book Fourth. The very presence of rivers signals a "compare and contrast" with the Floss and the Ripple, and by this stage the symbolic potency of the river is already well established in the novel. Of course, George Eliot is permitting us only temporary and illusory relief, for the chapter is itself a demonstration of its theme, of the importance of attaining "a large vision of relations", which here specifically involves an ability to read both the vulgar and romantic vestiges of the past as partial histories of similar lives.

Nevertheless, it is a relief to regard the Tullivers and Dodsons from a greater distance, and in a different perspective. It is noteworthy that the form of *The Mill on the Floss* is narrow and intense: George Eliot does not use a double plot and contrasting settings as she had done in *Adam Bede* and was to do in all her subsequent major fiction. Perspective has to be as it were imported, as here, by a geographical shift; or, more frequently, by a literary reference—romantic literature is particularly applicable, as in Maggie's reading of Scott—or, especially in Book Sixth, by the use of musical allusion. Such a focus intensifies the reader's awareness of the protagonists' psychological and moral plight, but places an additional burden on the authorial commentary which registers the characters in

a wider perspective and "a large vision of relations". In the context, the narrator's compassionate delineation of the narrowness of the Dodsons and Tullivers is more convincing than the attempts to conjecture about causes of and cures for the narrowness. And part of the context, of course, is the carefully established association of the narrator with the St Ogg's world, which somewhat hampers his discourse in less restricted areas.

Thus the application of scientific method directly to the Dodsons and Tullivers is useless. "Certainly the religious and moral ideas of the Dodsons and Tullivers were of too specific a kind to be arrived at deductively, from the statement that they were part of the Protestant population of Great Britain." (II, 151.) The passage which follows inexorably and compassionately gives the Dodsons their due, showing the logic of their course and indicating the limitations of their logic: as in

The religion of the Dodsons consisted in revering whatever was customary and respectable: it was necessary to be baptised, else one could not be buried in the churchyard, and to take the sacrament before death as a security against more dimly understood perils; but it was of equal necessity to have the proper pall-bearers and well-cured hams at one's funeral, and to leave an unimpeachable will. (II, 152.)

The reader, guided by the narrator, is however capable of invoking a more valid logic:

If such were the views of life on which the Dodsons and Tullivers had been reared in the praiseworthy past of Pitt and high prices, you will infer from what you already know concerning the state of society in St Ogg's, that there had been no highly modifying influence to act on them in their maturer life. It was still possible, even in that later time of anti-Catholic preaching, for people to hold many pagan ideas, and believe themselves good church-people notwithstanding; so we need hardly feel any surprise at the fact that Mr Tulliver, though a regular church-goer, recorded his vindictiveness on the fly-leaf of his Bible . . . Certain seeds which are required to find a nidus for themselves under unfavourable circumstances, have been supplied by nature with an apparatus of hooks, so that they will get a hold on very unreceptive surfaces. The spiritual seed which had been scattered over Mr Tulliver had apparently been destitute of any corresponding provision, and had slipped off to the winds again, from a total absence of hooks. (II, 154-5.)

The effect of this whole chapter is mainly conditioned by the circumstantial detail which requires tolerance for and restrains condemnation of the Dodsons and Tullivers. I suspect too, that the feeling of moral enlargement thus engendered in the reader exercises a further restraint, on critical scrutiny of how this

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“single object” relates to the whole novel. What the chapter mainly tends to show is how the self-perpetuating Dodson world has itself defended against change. Progress is assumed by the narrator to be inevitable, and suffering a part of progress — but how progress or improvement can be possible, given the Dodsons, is not indicated. The emphasis is on the strain of “the onward tendency of human things” against “this sense of oppressive narrowness”, rather than on the mechanisms of “the onward tendency”. Only some of “the mystery of the human lot” is to be dispelled by the narrator.

And it is important to accord recognition to the human limits on the almost divine knowledge and power sometimes attributed to the omniscient author. I do not think the characterization is fully developed in the novel,⁹ but nevertheless the narrator of *The Mill on the Floss* is depicted in terms of such personal limitations. His unspecified personal acquaintance with his characters goes along with an interest in the writing of history, and issues in a concern both with individual histories and with their representative significance. How to communicate the data and evaluate it are central problems, and part of what George Eliot is presenting is the difficulty, even the intractableness, of the problem she delineates and animates.

9 I am inclined to speculate that the fullest presentation of the kind of character sketched as the narrator of *The Mill* is Theophrastus Such, George Eliot's persona in *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* (1879): see especially the essay “Looking Backward”.