

The Mill on the Floss as Moral Fable?

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For if you think so highly of *Middlemarch*, then, to be consistent, you must be more qualified in your praise of the early things than persisting convention recognizes. Isn't there, in fact, a certain devaluing to be done?

F. R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition*

Allowing that the strong autobiographical element in *The Mill on the Floss* is inseparable from "the vividness, the penetration, and the irresistible truth of the best of the book", Dr Leavis argues that it is responsible also for "disastrous weaknesses in George Eliot's handling of her themes".¹ Following his habit of regarding any novel as somehow a test of the self-control of the writer behind it, he finds here an occasion of "that kind of direct presence of the author which has to be stigmatized as weakness" (p. 44), and an identification of George Eliot with Maggie Tulliver through which the author's intelligence is overwhelmed by her feelings. "When George Eliot touches on these given intensities of Maggie's inner life the vibration comes directly and simply from the novelist, precluding the presence of a maturer intelligence than Maggie's own" (p. 54).

The greatest admirer of *The Mill on the Floss* would concede its unevenness, as George Eliot herself did. Even in *Middlemarch* the St Theresa passages will coexist with the fine irony of the scene of Dorothea and Celia dividing the jewels. But is the presentation of Maggie Tulliver really so out of control? Dr Leavis cites a typical passage in which Maggie "represents an immaturity that George Eliot never leaves safely behind her" (p. 55):

Maggie in her brown frock with her eyes reddened and her heavy hair pushed back, looking from the bed where her father lay, to the dull walls of this sad chamber which was the centre of her world, was a creature full of eager, passionate longings for all that was beautiful and glad: thirsty for all knowledge: with an ear straining after dreamy music that died away and would not come near to her: 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.²

- 1 F. R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition* (Chatto and Windus 1948; Peregrine 1962), p. 51. Subsequent page-references are to the Peregrine edition.
- 2 *The Mill on the Floss*, ed. A. S. Byatt (Penguin 1979), p. 320. All subsequent page-references are to this edition.

This occurs after the family council to consider Mr Tulliver's disgrace, when Maggie rounds on her relatives for coming to scold and interfere if they do not mean to help; and it comes immediately after Tom has been lectured by Mr Deane on the uselessness of his education for earning a living. He responds petulantly to Maggie's enquiries, after he has come home:

'I've been at school all this while learning Latin and things—not a bit of good to me—and now my uncle says, I must set about learning book-keeping and calculation and those things. He seems to make out I'm good for nothing.'

Tom's mouth twitched with a bitter expression as he looked at the fire.

'O what a pity we haven't got Dominie Sampson,' said Maggie, who couldn't help mingling some gaiety with their sadness. 'If he had taught me book-keeping by double entry and after the Italian method, as he did Lucy Bertram, I could teach you, Tom.'

'*You* teach! Yes, I daresay. That's always the tone you take,' said Tom.

'Dear Tom! I was only joking,' said Maggie, putting her cheek against his coat sleeve.

'But it's always the same, Maggie,' said Tom, with the little frown he put on when he was about to be justifiably severe. 'You're always setting yourself up above me and every one else, and I've wanted to tell you about it several times. You ought not to have spoken as you did to my uncles and aunts—you should leave it to me to take care of my mother and you, and not put yourself forward. You think you know better than any one, but you're almost always wrong. I can judge much better than you can.'

Poor Tom! he had just come from being lectured and made to feel his inferiority: the reaction of his strong, self-asserting nature must take place somehow; and here was a case in which he could justly show himself dominant. Maggie's cheek flushed and her lip quivered with conflicting resentment and affection and a certain awe as well as admiration of Tom's firmer and more effective character. She did not answer immediately; very angry words rose to her lips, but they were driven back again, and she said at last,

'You often think I'm conceited, Tom, when I don't mean what I say at all in that way. I don't mean to put myself above you—I know you behaved better than I did yesterday. But you are always so harsh to me, Tom.'

With the last words the resentment was rising again.

'No, I'm not harsh,' said Tom, with severe decision. 'I'm always kind to you; and so I shall be: I shall always take care of you. But you must mind what I say.'

Their mother came in now, and Maggie rushed away, that her burst of tears, which she felt must come, might not happen till she was safe upstairs. They were very bitter tears: everybody in the world seemed so hard and unkind to Maggie: there was no indulgence, no fondness, such as she imagined when she fashioned the world afresh in her own thoughts. In books there were people who

were always agreeable or tender, and delighted to do things that made one happy, and who did not show their kindness by finding fault. The world outside the books was not a happy one, Maggie felt: it seemed to be a world where people behaved the best to those they did not pretend to love and that did not belong to them. And if life had no love in it, what else was there for Maggie? Nothing but poverty and the companionship of her mother's narrow griefs—perhaps of her father's heart-cutting childish dependence. There is no hopelessness so sad as that of early youth, when the soul is made up of wants, and has no long memories, no superadded life in the life of others; though we who look on think lightly of such premature despair, as if our vision of the future lightened the blind sufferer's present.

Maggie in her brown frock with her eyes reddened and her heavy hair pushed back, looking from the bed where her father lay, to the dull walls of this sad chamber which was the centre of her world, was a creature full of eager, passionate longings for all that was beautiful and glad: thirsty for all knowledge: with an ear straining after dreamy music that died away and would not come near to her; 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.

No wonder, when there is this contrast between the outward and the inward, that painful collisions come out of it. (pp. 318-20)

When the passage singled out by Dr Leavis is returned to its context, does it mark a failure in authorial control? Tom's behaviour is firmly displayed and then as firmly interpreted ("Poor Tom! he had just come from being lectured and made to feel his inferiority"), and Maggie's reaction is measured by a maturer intelligence than her own as the "hopelessness . . . of early youth" is seen more lightly by an older observer—whose mature awareness cannot assuage its intensity in the "blind sufferer". The "Maggie in her brown frock" passage immediately follows, but the "creature full of eager, passionate longings" is brought back to sober reality with the comment at the end: "No wonder, when there is this contrast between the outward and the inward, that painful collisions come of it."

What Dr Leavis has really pointed to is an occasional tendency in George Eliot to gush. But it would be a distortion to see the whole episode as gush. To read the earlier part of *The Mill on the Floss* as Dr Leavis does is to overlook how humorously Maggie's misadventures are often treated (what is the purpose of the chapter on the gypsies but to expose her fantasies?) and how skilfully a contrast is maintained between her imaginative nature and Tom's inflexibly prosaic outlook. While Lucy delights in Maggie's tales about Mrs Earwig running for the doctor because

one of her children has fallen into the copper, "Tom had a profound contempt for this nonsense of Maggie's, smashing the earwig at once as a superfluous yet easy means of proving the entire unreality of such a story" (p. 161). There is occasionally a sardonic note, as when Maggie is left forsaken on her bough after the division of the jam puff, "gifted with that superior power of misery which distinguishes the human being and places him at a proud distance from the most melancholy chimpanzee" (p. 100), but the compassion is never withheld:

Well! there was no hope for it: he was gone now, and Maggie could think of no comfort but to sit down by the holly or wander by the hedgerow, and fancy it was all different, refashioning her little world into just what she should like it to be.

Maggie's was a troublous life, and this was the form in which she took her opium. (pp. 101-2)

"This was the form in which she took her opium." This is one of many proleptic statements in Book First, which suggests that there may be a greater control exercised in *The Mill on the Floss* than has usually been recognized. Among George Eliot's novels it is *Silas Marner* which Dr Leavis singled out as a "moral fable", comparing it to that "masterpiece of fiction", *Hard Times*, which comes under the same head (p. 59). May we not look for a similar structure in *The Mill on the Floss*, where the titles to the successive Books (and of many chapters) are so instructive, at times drawing on *The Pilgrim's Progress*, and where the ending is premeditated from the opening chapter? The novel asks to be read in another way.

Critics have commented on the Edenic implications of Book First, "Boy and Girl", the pastoral idyll which begins to fade in "School-Time", as the worlds of Innocence and Experience draw together. This phase is completed in the last chapter of Book Second, announcing the bankruptcy of Mr Tulliver, in which "The Golden Gates are Passed". Book Third, "The Downfall", then opens with a chapter explaining how Mr Tulliver's misfortunes occurred, and offering the first of the novel's two significant disquisitions on tragedy. George Eliot reflects on the irrationality of Mr Tulliver, as he rides home from Lindum:

It is precisely the proudest and most obstinate men who are the most liable to shift their position and contradict themselves in this sudden manner: everything is easier to them than to face the simple fact, that they have been thoroughly defeated and must begin life anew. And Mr Tulliver, you perceive, though nothing more than a superior miller and maltster, was as proud and obstinate as if he had been a very lofty personage, in whom such dispositions might be

a source of that conspicuous, far-echoing tragedy which sweeps the stage in regal robes and makes the dullest chronicler sublime. The pride and obstinacy of millers and other insignificant people, whom you pass unnoticingly on the road every day, have their tragedy too, but it is of that unwept, hidden sort, that goes on from generation to generation and leaves no record—such tragedy, perhaps, as lies in the conflicts of young souls, hungry for joy, under a lot made suddenly hard to them, under the dreariness of a home where the morning brings no promise with it, and where the unexpectant discontent of worn and disappointed parents weighs on the children like a damp, thick air in which all the functions of life are depressed; or such tragedy as lies in the slow or sudden death that follows a bruised passion, though it may be a death that finds only a parish funeral. There are certain animals to which tenacity of position is a law of life—they can never flourish again after a single wrench: and there are certain human beings to whom predominance is a law of life and who can only sustain humiliation so long as they can refuse to believe in it, and, in their own conception, predominate still.

Mr Tulliver was still predominating in his own imagination as he approached St Oggs's, through which he had to pass on his way homeward. (pp. 275-6)

From the sudden shock to his ideas of predominance rendered by the contents of Gore's letter comes the seizure on the roadway. The reference to "millers and other insignificant people, whom you pass unnoticingly on the road every day" as being no less a subject of tragedy than the very lofty personages whose fate is told in the chronicles, touches a familiar chord in George Eliot. And such a tragedy is immediately brought into conjunction with that of "young souls, hungry for joy, under a lot made suddenly hard to them, under the dreariness of a home when the morning brings no promise with it". The sentence imposed on the young is the subject of the last chapter of Book Third, where Tom writes in the family Bible at Mr Tulliver's dictate.

In Book Fourth, "The Valley of Humiliation", the opening chapter again puts the preceding narrative in perspective. From the beginning of *The Mill on the Floss* George Eliot has been at pains to emphasize that these events occurred "many years ago" (p. 55), and the recurring time references fix the action some thirty years before the time of writing (p. 76), when Wellington was considering the Catholic Question (p. 132) and Bonaparte was not long dead (p. 245). There are continuing playful allusions to fashions now outmoded, as when Mrs Tulliver's fan-shaped cap prompts the comment "I am afraid to think how long it is since fan-shaped caps were worn—they must be so near coming in again" (p. 56), or when Maggie later submits to having "the abundant black locks plaited into a coronet on the

summit of her head after the pitiable fashion of those antiquated times" (p. 388). There may be less comedy in the ignorance that is often referred to (as in Mr Pullet's "most confused idea of a bishop as a sort of baronet, who might or might not be a clergyman"—p. 127), especially as its focus becomes the provincial society of St Ogg's. Not only does the miller belong to the social order of those "insignificant people whom you pass un-noticingly on the road every day"; he is fixed also in "those antiquated times". The tragedy acquires larger dimensions as the lines of social and historical analysis converge.

The point of convergence is "A Variation of Protestantism Unknown to Bossuet", the first chapter of Book Fourth. It opens with the comparison of the romantic ruined castles on the Rhine with the "narrow, ugly, grovelling existence" of the ruined villas on the Rhone, an existence which "even calamity does not elevate, but rather tends to exhibit in all its bare vulgarity of conception" (pp. 361-2). Its counterpart is in the lives of the Tullivers and Dodsons on the banks of the Floss, another "sordid life . . . irradiated by no sublime principles, no romantic visions, no active, self-renouncing faith", where again "the iron hand of misfortune" does not elevate, but exposes an underlying paganism. Jacques Bossuet's *Histoire des variations des Eglises protestantes* (1688) did not encompass the kind of religious conviction which led Mr Tulliver to inscribe his vow of revenge in the family Bible: "Write, as I don't forgive Wakem, for all that; and for all I'll serve him honest, I wish evil may befall him. Write that" (p. 356).

This is the social and historical framework in which the lives of Tom and Maggie are fixed. We may feel its "oppressive narrowness", George Eliot writes, and

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. (p. 363)

This renews the plea for the study of "insignificant people". The "hundreds of obscure hearths", the English counterpart of the wretched villages along the Rhone, can be as instructive to the observer of human life as the ruined castles on the Rhine, and also as emblematic of the "vast sum of conditions", the unity towards which science is toiling. But again the "young natures" are seen as ineluctable casualties of it all. This "oppressive narrowness" finds its victims in "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 nevertheless been tied by the strongest fibres of their hearts". This is the pattern to be worked out.

Maggie's first avenue of escape from the "oppressive narrowness" of her lot seems to be offered through the "little, old, clumsy book" (p. 382) given her by Bob Jakin, Thomas à Kempis's *Imitation of Christ*. Dr Leavis has objected that "the soulful side of Maggie, her hunger for ideal exaltation", has been accepted with "a remarkable absence of criticism". In fact "it is offered by George Eliot herself—and this of course is the main point—with a remarkable absence of criticism" (p. 54). This could hardly apply to her account of Maggie's response to Thomas à Kempis. The "given intensity" of Maggie's inner life here certainly does not preclude "the presence of a maturer intelligence than Maggie's own":

With all the hurry of an imagination that could never rest in the present, she sat in the deepening twilight forming plans of self-humiliation and entire devotedness, and in the ardour of first discovery, renunciation seemed to her the entrance into that satisfaction which she had so long been craving in vain. She had not perceived—how could she until she had lived longer?—the inmost truth of the old monk's outpourings, that renunciation remains sorrow, though a sorrow borne willingly. Maggie was still panting for happiness, and was in ecstasy because she had found the key to it. (p. 384)

Renunciation appeals to Maggie as the entrance into a "satisfaction" long craved, a "happiness" for which she has been panting. The discovery of this "key" to it puts her into an "ecstasy"—it is a more intoxicating form of the opium which she was in the habit of taking long ago.

This is the drift of the disquisition which follows on "emphatic belief". The theme of "obscure hearths" and "insignificant people" is resumed. (I need to continue to quote generously, so that the fable may as far as possible expound itself.)

In writing the history of unfashionable families, one is apt to fall into a tone of emphasis which is very far from being the tone of

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good society, where principles and beliefs are not only of an extremely moderate kind, but are always presupposed, no subjects being eligible but such as can be touched with a light and graceful irony. But then, good society has its claret and its velvet carpets, its dinner-engagements six weeks deep, its opera and its faëry ball-rooms; rides off its ennui on thoroughbred horses, lounges at the club, has to keep clear of crinoline vortices, gets its science done by Faraday, and its religion by the superior clergy who are to be met in the best houses: how should it have time or need for belief and emphasis? But good society, floated on gossamer wings of light irony, is of very expensive production; requiring nothing less than a wide and arduous national life condensed in unfragrant deafening factories, cramping itself in mines, sweating at furnaces, grinding, hammering, weaving under more or less oppression of carbonic acid—or else, spread over sheepwalks, and scattered in lonely houses and huts on the clayey or chalky corn-lands, where the rainy days look dreary. This wide national life is based entirely on emphasis—the emphasis of want, which urges it into all the activities necessary for the maintenance of good society and light irony: it spends its heavy years often in a chill, uncarpeted fashion, amidst family discord unsoftened by long corridors. Under such circumstances there are many among its myriads of souls who have absolutely needed an emphatic belief, life in this unpleasurable shape demanding some solution even to unspeculative minds; just as you inquire into the stuffing of your couch when anything galls you there, whereas eider-down and perfect French springs excite no question. Some have an emphatic belief in alcohol, and seek their *ekstasis* or outside standing-ground in gin; but the rest require something that good society calls enthusiasm, something that will present motives in an entire absence of high prizes, something that will give patience and feed human love when the limbs ache with weariness and human looks are hard upon us—something, clearly, that lies outside personal desires, that includes resignation for ourselves and active love for what is not ourselves. Now and then that sort of enthusiasm finds a far-echoing voice that comes from an experience springing out of the deepest need.

(pp. 385-6)

While there is no denigration here of “the soulful side of Maggie”, her “emphatic belief” in self-renunciation is seen as the equivalent to the consolation found by the less soulful in gin. We should not be surprised that her resignation will involve turning the mirrors to the wall so that she need not see her own reflection, and also some nights of penance in sleeping on a wooden floor. “A Voice from the Past” is the concluding chapter of Book Fourth, and the last image is of Mr Tulliver sitting in gloom, occupied not with thoughts of resignation but with thoughts of revenge.

Few readers of *The Mill on the Floss* will need reminding that the opening chapter of Book Fifth is “In the Red Deeps”, and

the opening chapter of Book Sixth "A Duet in Paradise". Book Seventh and last begins with "The Return to the Mill". The novel is now working itself out almost like an equation. Book Fifth is concerned with Maggie's relationship with Philip Wakem, which offers one form of happiness to her, as Philip could have been the object of her devotion. This possibility is of course closed off by the inscription in the family Bible, so that there can be no tie with Philip which does not involve cutting all ties with Tom. The last chapter of Book Fifth, in which the miller's predominance reasserts itself in horsewhipping Lawyer Wakem, puts this possibility even further from Maggie's reach.

"A Duet in Paradise" introduces Stephen Guest, with his diamond ring and attar of roses, and an "air of nonchalant leisure" which is "the graceful and odoriferous result of the largest oil-mill and the most extensive wharf in St Ogg's" (p. 469). (Whatever the pretensions of Stephen Guest and his sisters, they are indissolubly connected with "trade".) It is hard to agree with Dr Leavis, from this description, that George Eliot finds Stephen Guest irresistible; into the debate over how Maggie Tulliver can, I shall intrude only briefly. There is nothing very remarkable, then or now, in women falling in love with men who are hardly worth their fingertips. But Stephen is a more honourable figure than this would suggest: he is at least honourable in the same way as Arthur Donnithorne, who makes a manful decision to ride over to confide in Mr Irwin over the matter of Hetty Sorrel, but then cannot find the right opening in the conversation. Stephen and Maggie are both self-deceived. She is pleased that he devotes himself to Lucy at the bazaar, and does not approach her. "They had begun the morning with an indifferent salutation and both had rejoiced in being aloof from each other, like a patient who has actually done without his opium, in spite of former failures in resolution" (p. 550). (Studies in the image motifs of *The Mill on the Floss* might have paid more attention to opium, gin and the like as tokens of human fallibility.)

But all this overlooks the place which the relationship of Maggie and Stephen occupies in the novel's design. She is susceptible to him precisely because of her misreading of Thomas à Kempis, and of the life of privation which has followed. On the evening of her first meeting with Stephen Guest, Maggie goes up to her bedroom, but is not inclined to undress. "Had anything remarkable happened?" the narrator asks.

Nothing that you are not likely to consider in the highest degree unimportant. She had been hearing some fine music sung by a fine

bass voice—but then it was sung in a provincial amateur fashion, such as would have left your critical ear much to desire. And she was conscious of having been looked at a great deal in rather a furtive manner from beneath a pair of well-marked horizontal eyebrows, with a glance that seemed somehow to have caught the vibratory influence of the voice. Such things could have had no perceptible effect on a thoroughly well-educated young lady with a perfectly balanced mind, who had had all the advantages of fortune, training and refined society. But if Maggie had been that young lady, you would probably have known nothing about her; her life would have had so few vicissitudes that it could hardly have been written; for the happiest women, like the happiest nations, have no history.

(p. 494)

This first foray into “the higher society of St Ogg’s” (p. 512) would have left any other provincial maiden, with the usual advantages, quite unmoved, and her history would have been a blank. But for Maggie it was very different:

In poor Maggie’s highly strung, hungry nature—just come away from a third rate schoolroom, with all its jarring sounds and petty round of tasks—these apparently trivial causes had the effect of rousing and exalting her imagination in a way that was mysterious to herself. It was not that she thought distinctly of Mr Stephen Guest or dwelt on the indications that he looked at her with admiration; it was rather that she felt the half-remote presence of a world of love and beauty and delight, made up of vague, mingled images from all the poetry and romance she had ever read, or had ever woven in her dreamy reveries. Her mind glanced back once or twice to the time when she had courted privation, when she had thought all longing, all impatience, was subdued; but that condition seemed irrecoverably gone, and she recoiled from the remembrance of it. No prayer, no striving now would bring back that negative peace: the battle of her life, it seemed, was not to be decided in that short and easy way—by perfect renunciation at the very threshold of her youth. (p. 495)

The prospect of fulfilment through renunciation now seems past, but it has left Maggie sadly vulnerable—not even to an individual Stephen Guest, but to “a half-remote presence of a world of love and beauty and delight” which this attentive dandy can seem to represent.

George Eliot returns to the theme in chapter 6, “Illustrating the Laws of Attraction”. The title is significant, in pointing not to individual choice, but to impersonal “laws” at work. In the same way the miller had illustrated predominance as “a law of life”, a law to be observed also in the animal kingdom. Here the second disquisition on tragedy is located. George Eliot’s account of “that passionate sensibility” which belongs to Maggie’s whole nature is interrupted for the purpose:

But you have known Maggie a long while, and need to be told, not her characteristics, but her history, which is hardly to be predicted even from the completest knowledge of characteristics. For the tragedy of our lives is not created entirely from within. 'Character'—says Novalis, in one of his 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.

Maggie's destiny, then, is at present hidden, and we must wait for it to reveal itself like the course of an unmapped river: we only know that the river is full and rapid, and that for all rivers there is the same final home. (pp. 514-15)

The distinguishing characteristic of a moral fable is that what is to happen will happen regardless. It will happen regardless of individual intention, human choice, actions taken for this motive or that, errors admitted or atoned for. And so it is in *The Mill on the Floss*. To question whether "character" is indeed "destiny" is to throw the onus on to circumstance, and certainly Maggie's circumstances have made her vulnerable, and she is the victim also of her father's impetuosity and vindictiveness, and of the unforgiving nature of Tom. A series of accidents will lead to her going out alone in the boat with Stephen Guest, especially Lucy's stratagem to throw Maggie and Philip together, and Stephen turning up as Philip's replacement. The excursion nonetheless depends on Maggie's choice. So the argument might go on, but it is idle to seek to allocate the shares between "character" and "destiny" when the pattern is to be fulfilled regardless. The flood more than anything else defeats attempts to explicate the whole action in psychological terms, because the flood cannot be related psychologically to the problems it resolves. It has a different relationship to them, determined by the design of the moral fable.

The broad intention of the moral fable of *The Mill on the Floss* will be familiar to anyone who recalls the discussion in chapter 5 of *Amos Barton* on the insight to be won from the study of the "palpably and unmistakably commonplace", or the "Dutch paintings" passage in *Adam Bede* (Book II, chapter 1), stressing the enlargement of sympathies possible from "faithful pictures of monotonous homely existence". In *The Mill on the Floss* the emphasis is again on "unfashionable families", "insignificant people" and "obscure hearths", and on the compassionate

understanding they should elicit. The more specific moral intention is to show how the "oppressive narrowness" of such a life has been the martyrdom of "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 nevertheless been tied by the strongest fibres of their hearts".

The mode of the moral fable is more evident in the later Books than in the earlier ones, which have therefore seemed to exert an unimpaired charm. But it is the events of "Boy and Girl" and "School-Time" which tie Tom and Maggie to the past "by the strongest fibres of their hearts". The experiences of childhood are consistently seen in this perspective:

We could never have loved the earth so well if we had had no childhood in it . . . Our delight in the sunshine on the deep bladed grass today, might be no more than the faint perception of wearied souls, if it were not for the sunshine and the grass in the far-off years, which still live in us and transform our perception into love.

(p. 94)

Along with this motif runs another, concerned with fears of drowning in the Floss, evidence of floodings in the past, Maggie's reading of Christiana passing "the river over which there is no bridge" (p. 94), with the aquatic legend of St Ogg always in the background.

Maggie's destiny is by no means an unmapped river. These childhood associations are responsible for her bond with Tom, and her loyalties to Lucy and Philip, and they draw her back to St Ogg's when prudence suggests that she should start life afresh elsewhere. When at Mudport she walks away from Stephen it is almost in "an automatic action that fulfils a forgotten intention", and she is impelled towards the coach by the thought that "that coach would take her away, perhaps towards home". It is like a subconscious urging, which the punctuation of the first edition reflects more faithfully than the later ones:

Home—where her mother and brother were—Philip—Lucy—the scene of her very cares and trials—was the haven towards which her mind tended—the sanctuary where sacred relics lay—where she would be rescued from more falling. (p. 606)

In her interview with Dr Kenn, after more consideration, Maggie dwells longest on "the feeling which had made her to come back to her mother and brother, which made her cling to all the memories of the past (p. 624).

The history of Maggie, as one who has risen above the mental level of the generation before her, but is tied to it irrevocably by the deepest fibres of her heart, exemplifies the tragic pattern of *The Mill on the Floss*. Whether the history of Tom does so is more uncertain. He rises above the generation before him in the sense that his life would not have been a duplication of his father's. But while Maggie protests at the wickedness of recording a vow of revenge in the Bible, Tom persists in it unshakably. This may be a form of filial piety—Tom does repay the debts and become master of the mill—but this is the Tom we already know as “rather a Rhadamanthine personage, having more than the usual share of boy's justice in him—the justice that desires to hurt culprits as much as they deserve to be hurt” (p. 107), the Tom who is the subject of the comment that “a visit to Garum Firs must have been a great treat to a young gentleman fond of animals—fond, that is, of throwing stones at them” (p. 148). He takes care of his sister because he has promised his father to do so, but he does it on his own terms. This Tom is somehow transfigured at the climactic moment in the flood, when he and Maggie are reconciled, but it still takes an effort of mind to see Tom as a martyr in the onward movement of the human race. Critics concerned with processes of “idealization” in *The Mill on the Floss* may have been too preoccupied with Maggie.

Book Seventh, describing the flood, is called “the Final Rescue”, and the last words of the novel are “In their death they were not divided”. (As these words appeared also on the title-page, readers could have been left in little doubt of the novel's drift.) Despite its artistic outcome, *The Mill on the Floss* does not leave the same kind of impression as a moral fable that Dr Leavis receives from *Silas Marner*, as having in it “something of the fairy-tale” (p. 58), and as being “modestly conscious of its minor quality” (p. 60). We may perhaps be reminded of *Silas Marner* when Maggie receives the letter from Philip Wakem to the effect that the whole experience has done him good, and when Lucy comes to assure her “you are better than I am” (p. 643). Maggie's misfortune also brings out the best in Mrs Tulliver and in Mrs Glegg. *The Mill on the Floss* may align itself with *Silas Marner* through the essential simplicity of its moral vision—Maggie's rejection of Stephen Guest, because she cannot take happiness for herself from the unhappiness of others, may even seem morally simple-minded—but it remains a much graver book, and its mechanism is closer to that of Greek tragedy.

That Greek tragedy is one of the models George Eliot had in mind is apparent from the closing words of Book First.³ Mr Tulliver's obstinate decision to repay Mrs Glegg's five hundred pounds means that he must borrow five hundred pounds from someone else, who, as he insists, "must be no client of Wakem's". But this is exactly how Wakem comes into possession of the mortgage on the mill (and the well-meaning intervention of Mrs Tulliver gives him possession of the mill itself).

'It must be no client of Wakem's,' he said to himself; and yet at the end of a fortnight it turned out to the contrary; not because Mr Tulliver's will was feeble, but because external fact was stronger. Wakem's client was the only convenient person to be found. Mr Tulliver had a destiny as well as Oedipus, and in this case he might plead, like Oedipus, that his deed was inflicted on him rather than committed by him. (p. 198)

The nomination of Oedipus is significant, for no other figure in Greek tragedy illustrates quite how implacably "external fact" can override human will. The tragedy in *The Mill on the Floss* has a similar irresistible movement, sweeping on independently of human volition, and the symbol of it is the river, present from the first page and still evident from its "ravages" at the end. "We only know that the river is full and rapid, and that for all rivers there is the same final home."

I think *The Mill on the Floss* resists being read in any other way. It of course seems amenable to explication in naturalistic and psychological terms, because it allows scope to human responsibility and invests in human motivation—but it cannot be fully explicated in this way. Human actions and "external fact" contribute to the design, but do not create it or finally control it: it is the design, the pattern, which finally matters. This may make *The Mill on the Floss* seem a more limited work than we had suspected, although one of the laws of the moral fable must be that certain effects are foregone in order that others may be impressed more strongly. At least we should be clear about the kind of art-form we are dealing with.

3 And also from such passing comments as that on the tragic potentialities in the episode when Maggie pushes Lucy into the mud (p. 164). George Eliot had published an essay on "The Antigone and its Moral" in 1856: see *Essays of George Eliot*, ed. Thomas Pinney, pp. 261-5, and David Molstad, "The Mill on the Floss and Antigone", *PMLA*, 85 (1970), 527-31.