

THE HOLD OF THE PAST IN GEORGE ELIOT'S NOVELS

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INTRODUCTION

It was once the fashion to separate George Eliot's novels based on personal experience namely Scenes of Clerical life, Adam Bede, The Mill on the Floss, Silas Marner - from those of the more laboured novels : Romola; Felix Holt, Middlemarch, Daniel Deronda, and to call the first group, novels of "feeling", the second group, novels of "intellect".

In her earlier works those that she published before Romola, George Eliot drew much on her recollected experiences, whereas in the later novels, she moved further away from her immediate experiences. She planted her characters in the surrounding with which she had been acquainted since her childhood. Her materials were drawn from the earliest sources of memory from her childhood to which she may have sometimes turned yearningly as to a lost paradise. With George Eliot, there was a faithfulness to past ties, to memories and affections which had a strong hold on her. These first novels may also be called "looking Baward". They are a tender recreation of days that are no more.

In George Eliot's novels the presence of the past is felt through the different historical events she dealt with. All her books, except Romola and Daniel

Deronda are set in a historical period. They are set, in the same historical period - that of the immediate past. And the choice is very significant for the novelist in so far as her recollections were still fresh in her memory.

George Eliot dealt with the scenes of her childhood and with a time when the Industrial Revolution was threatening but has not yet destroyed the rural peace. She was very fond of her landscape not to linger in it. We know her father loved to take her with him on his drives about the country. In this way, young Marian, as she was then called, became acquainted with many of the characteristic of the Midlands.

In most of her novels, we recognize a need to use some part of her own experiences, perhaps to explore possibilities of life that seemed, at some time, to open to her. We can detect her emotional involvement in some of her characters, and her actual participation in the emotions and sorrows portrayed. Her sense that her potentialities unfulfilled, the loss of her childhood intimacy with her father and brothers were all reflected in her early novels. She mingled her own aspirations and regrets with those of her character who are thus viewed with the truth and tenderness of memory.

That she felt a kind of Wordsworthian regret at the passing of the innocence of childhood is clear from most of the novels of the first period. George Eliot shared Wordsworth's concern for the problem of maintaining the continuity of past and present. For, both Wordsworth and George Eliot, this could be achieved by the virtue of piety. In Wordsworth, two forces sustained piety. The first one was the world of natural objects, standing as perpetual reminders of the world experiences associated with them. The second one was memory, recalling those "spots of time", and by recreating the conditions of those past moments, reawakening imagination itself. As for George Eliot, the feeling of divergence between her childhood and womanhood caused her to seek continuity with the past. She clearly needed the perspective of "emotion recollected in tranquilly". Her early novels reflect this need to get her with the many preoccupations - intellectual, moral, religious - that manifested themselves throughout her past life. In her works, which she thought of as "experiments in life", George Eliot was searching for a view of life that would give man a sense of dignity and purpose.

But in the later novels, we feel less spontaneity, George Eliot

had somewhat exhausted the vein of her childhood ; her mind had grown more matured, her talent more experienced. She tackled other problems, and in Romola, she even left the English scene and set her plot in Florence. In a word, she wrote at a safe distance from her experiences.

If by means of the works, George Eliot tried to recapture her past, she also revealed to us how the past could act on the present. The past and its meaning for the present are also themes that permeate all her novels.

George Eliot, often, presents characters with a long past behind them, and though that past is not of the plot, we can discern the effects of the circumstances of the character's early sorrows and struggles. George Eliot's perception of the past is very keen. We can classify her characters in two main categories : those who use their past as a guide and those who become the slaves of their past. But there is yet a third category : those who cannot escape their past though they would like to have it undone, but the consequences are so heavy that they cannot wipe them out.

"It appears that the life of a character must be considered as a whole, in its total duration and in its social context, since the quality of a human being cannot be appreciate in the twinkling of an eye, but only in the course of years. The image George Eliot often uses to express the idea of continuity in growth is the metaphor of the plant

"The human personality is like a tree whose sustaining root is early experience, but the root can function only though the network of veins which is memory, carrying nourishment to the remotest branches of the tree"

The last aspect of George Eliot's treatment of the past is her reference to the hereditary claims of a race, which is the theme of her last novel, Daniel Deronda.

GEORGE ELIOT'S WORKS AND HER PERSONAL EXPERIENCES

At the center of George Eliot's novels, we can detect the personal experiences she went through, mainly the moral preoccupation which haunted her mind. Among her heroines, Maggie Tulliver in The Mill on the Floss and Dorothea Brooke in Middlemarch are those who most resemble her : there are both recreation of what she was, and more especially of what she might have been.

Her childhood experiences were to remain living in her imagination for ever, and partly in her autobiographical novel, The Mill on the Floss ; she tried to recapture the different events which marked her childhood, among the people who held a predominant place in her life, and left a deep impression on her. The characters are, therefore, presented in the context of familiar knowledge and attachment.

George Eliot set most of her novels back in time. She wrote for the most part of a society and way of life she knew in her childhood. And it is important to point out, she feels that she is no longer at ease and her characters have much less vitality than her men and women of the Midlands. Thus, by writing Romola, a novel of Renaissance Florence, she cut herself off from what the main source of her power as a novelist that is to say, the scenes of pastoral Warwickshire, or the provincial society of Coventry, with which she was deeply connected.

Despite her cosmopolitan experience and her knowledge of the intellectual life of the Continent, George Eliot remained definitely English. In her fiction, she drew her impressions of English rural and provincial life which she knew intimately, and of which she was to become the greatest interpreter. Her scenes are set in that past where her experience and her observation had the intensity of childhood and youth. And it is Adam Bede which remains the best representative of George Eliot's recreation of "old" ENGLAND through personal experience. When she started writing it, she pointed out that it was to be "full of the breath of cows and the scent of hay". Throughout the book there are fine and full descriptions of country life. There are country scenes that are looked back upon with such a passionate tenderness as though the author ached for the genial old home. Whether true or not the reader believes that it is all real, that what is so vividly reported is taken from life : everything is so real and genuine.

In the other novels too, we can feel George Eliot's nostalgia for rural England as it was before the Reform Bill of 1832; and as it continued to exist intensely in her imagination. The beauty of the early pictures of mill life in The Mill on the Floss, are what the author herself had witnessed and lived.

With Silas Marner, George Eliot, once again, escaped from her intellectual world as well as from the life of the city. This rustic tale is a means of rediscovering the rural world for which she was homesick. The community of Raveloe is confined, spiritually and intellectually, within the bounds of early XIXth century. In Felix Holt, the author describes the aspect of Midland village as seen by a traveller, but also as revived in the novelist's memory. Every detail and every sound is reported. Everybody recognizes the charm of the old touch in the Middlemarch: now and then, the novelist breaks the narrative to describe sound aspects of Midland landscape. Many details from the political history of a period characterized by determining events are also present throughout Felix Holt and Middlemarch.

Most of the historical references therefore concern events and personalities involved in the struggle for political reform which culminated in the passing of the first Reform Bill in 1832.

There is no doubt that childhood and youth recreated are the manifestation of the hold of the past in George Eliot's novels.

And the novelist is among the great Victorian writers who

studied childhood, relied on memory and experience to create their characters. Like them, George Eliot had a marked tendency to cherish the past and keep it alive in memory, as witness the loving pictures of childhood in The Mill on the Floss.

As many critics say, in most of her works, it is possible to identify characters, and places, and events, as taken from the author's own life. Among them, The Mill on the Floss is recognized as the most autobiographical; the childhood of Maggie and Tom Tulliver is in many respects, that of Marian Evans and her brother. However, it is not an autobiography in the full sense as that of David Copperfield. If many incidents are based on real life experiences they are also mixed with fictitious elements and situations that it would be misleading to consider as true history. Yet, in the other novels, which depend less on materials taken from early years, her principal heroines experiences the same struggles and sufferings that their creator encountered in her early womanhood. If Maggie, in The Mill on the Floss, is the nearest to her creator in circumstances, Dorothea Brooke, in Middlemarch, stands for her quest of values. Both Maggie and Dorothea have the same problem: they are not satisfied with their narrow social environment, and with their woman's lot. Their story is but the incomplete story of George Eliot herself according to what we know of her biography.

In her novels, the writer has also described certain phases of religious feelings with which she

had long ceased to sympathize. Although she did not believe in God, she pointed out the importance of religion in human life. Indeed, the contact she got with many religious sects and the disagreement she saw in Christianity then, induced George Eliot to question the source of her faith. And the immediate consequence was her breach with Christianity.

She rejected, then, to some extent, her own past in so far as far as she broke the link with her family, mainly with her father. A stormy silence was therefore established between the father and the daughter. But, on 28 February 1842, in utter desperation for a little sympathy and understanding from Mr. Robert Evans, she wrote him a letter which is one of the most poignant letters Mary Ann ever wrote. In this letter, she gave her point of view on the subject. She writes:

“... I regard these writings (the Jewish and Christian Scriptures) as histories consisting of mingled truth and fiction and while I admire and cherish much of what I believe to have been the moral teaching of Jesus himself, I consider the system of doctrines built upon the facts of his life and drawn as to its materials from Jewish notion to be most dishonourable to God and most pernicious in its influence on individual and

¹ Joan, Bennett, George Eliot, p. 248.

social happiness.”¹

The appeal failed, for the wall of silence didn't disappear between Marian Evans and Robert Evans and the novelist was to suffer a lot from her father's misunderstanding.

George Eliot who spent her first years in a rural shire, received her earliest and most enduring impressions from a region of social stability. Isolation, the recurring note of her existence, set in early, for her urgent craving for love, was repelled by the relations around her and her childhood was not always happy. We can feel those here and there by the tone of sadness in her stories. Yet, following Wordsworth, she was convinced that the experiences of childhood and youth alike - are the root of piety, establishing what is to be the best and the dearest in the future years. She never ceased to be Marian Evans, pious and plain, who wandered through the Warwickshire woods with her father and brother. This was her “present past”. This was the message she wanted to convey in her fiction when she said:

“My books are deeply serious things to me and come out of all the painful discipline, all the most hardly learnt lessons of past life.”²

From this assertion, it follows that George Eliot sees the development of human life as organic through infancy and youth to maturity.

George Eliot's analysis of the past is shrewd; her aim is to

show that it is impossible to understand any individual if we do not take into consideration his/her childhood and his/her past deeds.

She expresses her views on the past by creating characters who, most of the time, have a past behind them already when the narrative opens. She puts them in given situations in which they are faced with a moral choice.

This choice depends on what they have been and on the society in which they live. But everything is not over when the choice has been made; the consequences of the choice on the characters to be punished for their wrong-doings, but she also seems to understand them and pity them when she considers that they are the victims of fate.

No other novelist, before George Eliot, has shown his characters so deeply attached to place and to particular ways of life, so intimately linked by association to a familiar world that the preservation of it, whether in memory or in fact, becomes the condition of life itself. The idea is made explicit throughout Daniel Deronda.

George Eliot's concern for “rootedness” is effectively and creatively present in most of her novels. Her characters are so deeply rooted in the places where they live, where they were born, that it would be almost a tragedy to make them move.

Her characters often look back, and when they do not, she looks back for them. This occurs whenever they are faced with a significant event; whenever they experience a deep emotional crisis. As a result, they have a tendency to try and grasp their

past which may help them with their future deeds; but it can also prevent them from taking new steps because it proves to be stronger because of its hold on the characters' life.

Actually, the role of the past is twofold in George Eliot's fiction: the past as a warning and the past as a prison.

In the first case, past experiences have a good share in the framing of acts; they become lessons which are applied to life in the future. Such are the cases of Janet Dempster in Scenes of Clerical life, Adam Bede in Adam Bede and Dorothea Brooke in Middlemarch. In the second case, the past stands as a barrier. This conception of the past is clearly and most dramatically illustrated by such actions as Maggie's rejection of Stephen Guest or Mrs. Transome's inability to cope with her present situation. Mrs. Transome cannot break, once for all, with her wicked past; instead of seeking the means to free herself, she sinks in that past. In other words, George Eliot underlines the idea that the good in a life is determined by the past; but she also stresses the other idea that the past can be the cause of many sufferings and spoil the individual's life, as it is in the case of Maggie and Daniel Deronda, and Mrs. Transome.

Furthermore, in her last novel, Daniel Deronda, George Eliot tackles a new problem: the problem of race.

Here, the past is not a private past, and its authority depends, not on affection but on some reasoned principle of

inheritance and duty. Daniel Deronda exhibits piety towards an abstract ideal past. The past determines duty for him just as it does for Maggie, with the significant difference that Deronda's is a past he never had. It is an intellectual conception of the past which guides Daniel Deronda. In Daniel Deronda, fidelity to race stands as the first of duties and virtues; race links past and future together.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I can say that like some other great writers, George Eliot felt a profound need to re-examine her beliefs and to attempt a radical reassessment of her earlier life - a process that often demands an imaginative reliving of the past from childhood onwards. She gave the past an important value. Romantic poets, especially Wordsworth, contributed to her vision of the past. She agrees with them that the past ought to remain living in the memory, that past and present ought to be bound together. As far as she was concerned, her past never left her and she was obsessed with it. The evidence is everywhere in her letters, in her Essays and in her novels. Although she rejected the symbols of the past, that is to say the traditions of her family and her society, she deeply felt the emotional isolation from the past and from her family that ensued.

In fact, George Eliot's mind was a mind of conservative and reforming tendencies. Her novels mingled respect for the "new" with tenderness for the "old".

And the basis of her conservatism was a piety towards

her early experience that grew out of affectation and imagination. Old and familiar objects and associations were cherished because they were sources of affection which gave meaning to life.

Although she moved at ease among the intellectuals at her time, George Eliot's imagination was rooted in the England she has known as a young girl, and upon which she had drawn exclusively in her earlier works. She always turned back for her material to the scenes of her first thirty years. She wrote almost always about provincial life. Although it was to seem less personal in her later book. It was never to be shaken off. It is important to point out that she hardly ever mentioned her experience in London, in the world of literature and ideas. But she was so strongly attached to her childhood surroundings that she constantly felt the need to return to them because, for her, all that is best in our mortal life is rooted in the family life.

Her novels are delightful for their affectionate rendering of provincial scenes just as George Eliot had lived them. And we must not forget that despite her intellectual energy, she was very emotional. This explains the reason why she drew her happiest inspiration from the quiet English countryside of her early years, and from the experiences of her own individual past. And consequently, it is easy to understand the importance of the hold of the past in her novels./-

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¹ Kathleen ADAMS, THOSE OF US WHO LOVED HER, Ch 2, pp 14 - 15;
² Barbara, hardy, Critical Essays on George Eliot, p. 240.