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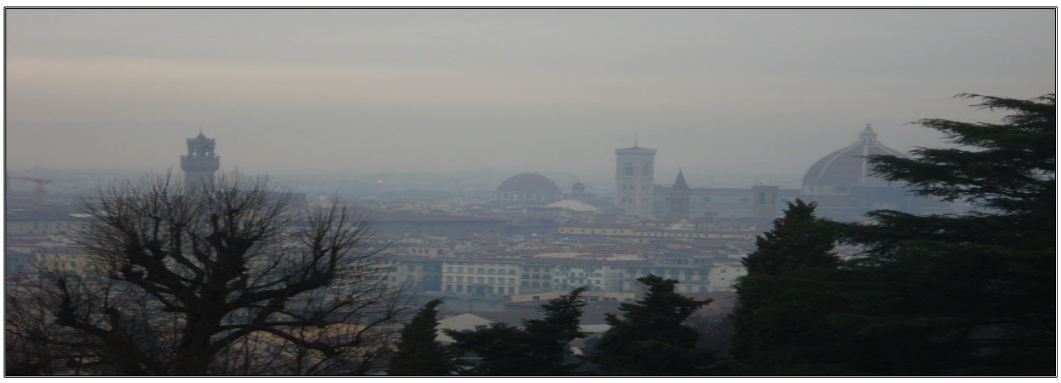
"The Tree that Bears a Million of Blossoms": A Revaluation of George Eliot's *Romola*



A View of Florence from San Miniato on a cloudy, rainy day

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aos meus pais, sempre e acima de tudo, pelo carinho, pelo apoio e pelos valores sólidos que me permitem encontrar na obra de George Eliot um eco da minha própria.

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À professora **Felicia Bonaparte**, provavelmente a maior estudiosa de George Eliot viva, pela sua obra majestosa, pelos longos e-mails nos quais dedicou seu tempo valioso a discutir minhas pobres ideias sobre *Romola* e sobre George Eliot, pela delicadeza, atenção, respeito e humildade e pela disposição altruísta em compartilhar seu conhecimento: é isso que caracteriza os verdadeiros intelectuais.

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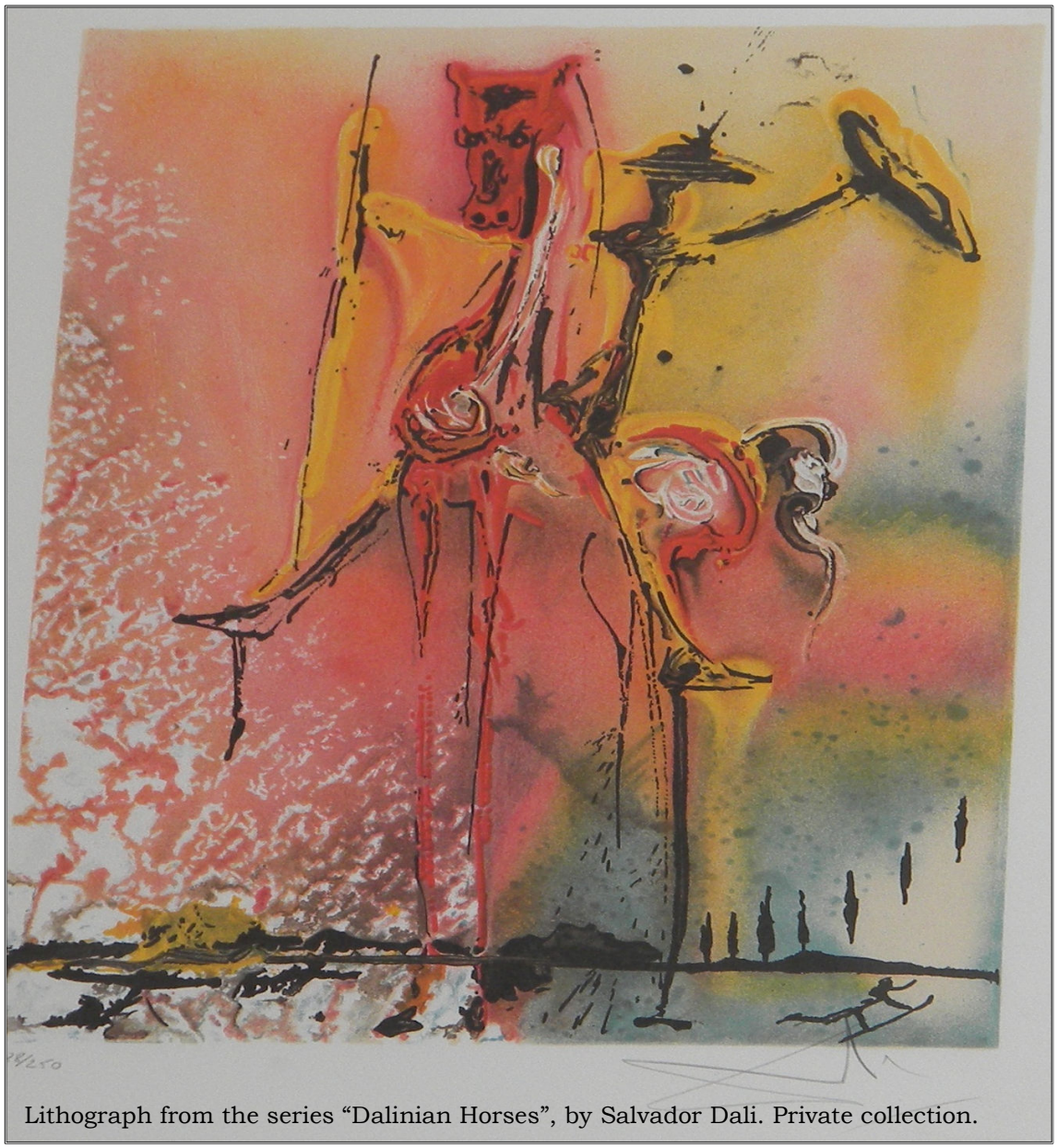
A todos o meu sincero muito obrigado!

Statue of George Eliot by John Letts in the centre of Nuneaton, her hometown



Lithograph from the series “Dalinian Horses”, by Salvador Dali. Private collection.

Quite a few things will be missing, of course. But this is not Noah’s ark: it is a collective reflection on the pleasures of story telling, and their interaction – at times, complicity – with social power. Now more than ever, pleasure and critique should not be divided.

Franco Moretti, *The Novel*

ABSTRACT

Looking back on her own novel several years after its composition, George Eliot said of *Romola* that it had been the novel she had written with her best blood, thus indicating a predilection for it among her other books. A survey of her critical fortune, even if a quick one, reveals that *Romola* is the least popular of her novels. Whereas a few contemporary critics, such as Henry James and Robert Browning, have published enthusiastic reviews, the general tone of these opinions is of disappointment. The most common reason presented is that George Eliot's fourth novel departs too much from the reality the author knew so well and fails to represent truthfully the *zeitgeist* of Florence and Florentine people at the close of the fifteenth century. The result of such failure would be a novel constructed out of intellectual effort rather than poetic imagination, with an unnecessary flight to the past and foreign setting which produced improbable events and characters. The clash between George Eliot's appraisal of her book and the general opinion expressed in its critical fortune is noteworthy and provides the initial motivation of this thesis. Summarising the bulk of criticism about *Romola*, professor Felicia Bonaparte states that George Eliot never disappointed her readers as much as she did with *Romola*. The goal of this work is to investigate what I consider to be the main reason for this disappointment: that in *Romola*, more explicitly than in her other novels, George Eliot was experimenting with the form of the novel and stretching its limits to accommodate formal conventions and aesthetic effects until then generally thought to belong almost exclusively to other genres. The immediate effect of this experiment is a reconfiguration of realism and of the interplay between literary genres which looked like an unselective assortment of loose elements. In *Romola*, we see George Eliot's writing progressing towards a more modern kind of novel. This work will have been successful if it can coherently argue that, rather than a random mixture of conventions *Romola* is a harbinger of the modernist novel. The seminal work of Georg Lukács in *The Theory of the Novel* sheds some light on the potential of *Romola* for containing most genres within it and Franco Moretti's collection *The Novel* provides valuable critical and theoretical support for this thesis at points in which blanks are left by Lukács's book. Felicia Bonaparte's work on George Eliot and George Levine's studies on realism contribute valuably to the interpretation of English nineteenth-century that unfolds in the present work.

Key-words: George Eliot, *Romola*, Novel, Romance, Epic, Realism.

RESUMO

Ao refletir sobre o seu próprio romance anos depois de tê-lo escrito, George Eliot disse a respeito de *Romola* que foi esse o romance que ela escreveu com seu melhor sangue, indicando assim uma predileção por esse livro. Uma análise de sua fortuna crítica, ainda que superficial, revela que *Romola* é o menos conhecido entre os seus romances. Ao passo que alguns poucos críticos contemporâneos, como Henry James e Robert Browning, por exemplo, publicaram elogios entusiasmados, o tom geral das opiniões contemporâneas sobre a obra é de decepção. O motivo mais comumente apresentado para isso é que o quarto romance de Eliot se desvincula da realidade que a autora muito bem conhecia e, por isso, falha ao tentar representar verdadeiramente o estado de espírito de Florença e dos florentinos ao final do século quinze. O resultado de tal fracasso seria a produção de um romance construído a partir de esforço intelectual e não de imaginação poética, com uma fuga desnecessária ao passado e a um cenário estrangeiro que teria produzido personagens e eventos improváveis. O conflito entre a apreciação de Eliot sobre sua própria obra e a opinião geralmente expressa em sua fortuna crítica é notável e prove a motivação inicial do presente trabalho. Ao resumir o foco central da crítica de *Romola*, a professora Felicia Bonaparte diz que George Eliot jamais desapontou seus leitores tanto quanto o fez em *Romola*. O objetivo deste trabalho é investigar o que considero ser os principais motivos para tal desapontamento: que, em *Romola*, mais especificamente do que em seus outros romances, George Eliot estava experimentando com a forma do romance e alargando os seus limites para acomodar convenções formais e efeitos estéticos que, até então, eram entendidos como pertencentes, quase que exclusivamente, a outros gêneros literários que não o romance. O efeito imediato desse experimento é uma reconfiguração do realismo e da interação entre os gêneros literários que pareceu aos contemporâneos uma junção descriteriosa de elementos soltos. Em *Romola*, observa-se a escritura de George Eliot progredindo para um tipo mais moderno de romance. O presente trabalho terá atingido seus objetivos se argumentar coerentemente que, ao invés de uma mistura aleatória de convenções, *Romola* é um precursor do romance modernista. O trabalho seminal de Georg Lukács na *Teoria do Romance* ilumina o potencial de *Romola* em conter boa parte dos gêneros literários dentro de si e a coleção *O Romance*, de Franco Moretti, fornece à presente reflexão um valioso suporte crítico e teórico em pontos nos quais se percebe lacunas deixadas pela obra de Lukács. O trabalho de Felicia Bonaparte sobre George Eliot e os estudos de George Levine sobre realismo embasam a reflexão sobre a literatura inglesa do século dezenove que se desenvolve aqui.

Palavras-chave: George Eliot, *Romola*, romance, épico, realismo

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INTRODUCTION

George Eliot is one of the most outstanding English novelists. She is one of the (only four) makers of the great tradition of the English novel, says F. R. Leavis (1980, p. 14). She is the writer of one of the few novels in English written for adults, says Virginia Woolf (1919, p. 187). Her *Adam Bede* was translated even into Hungarian in its first year of publication and her *Middlemarch* is usually hailed as one of the finest achievements in literary realism. She was one of the few woman writers in the nineteenth century who managed to secure a considerable income exclusively from her writing. Why she wrote *Romola* remains a mystery to many of her critics and readers from the time of its publication up to nowadays. In comparison to the success and popularity of her three previous novels, *Romola* was a failure and its reception was as controversial as it could be. Many contemporary reviewers tended to think the book drags on unnecessarily over excessive information and that its theme was too dusty and rusty to raise any kind of interest. One anonymous reviewer wrote in 1863 that George Eliot's work at writing *Romola* is "like attempting to feast on the bread and wine found in the ruins of Pompeii" (UNISGNED, 1863, p. 169)[1]. On the other hand, names such as Henry James, Anthony Trollope and Robert Browning, have seen *Romola* as a fine achievement. Another anonymous critic, in a July edition of *The Saturday Review*[2] in 1863, wrote that "No reader of *Romola* will lay it down without admiration, and few without regret" (ROMOLAa, 1863, p. 21)[3]. On the other hand, a third anonymous critic writing to an October edition of *The Westminster Review* in the same year thought that "the critic must be himself weak indeed who fancies he

[1] This review was first published anonymously in the *Athenaeum* on 11th July, 1863. The version that I use was reprinted in CARROL, 1995.

[2] *The Saturday Review* was a weekly newspaper published in London from 1855 up to 1938. *The Westminster Review*, a much more influential periodical, was a quarterly publication founded by Jeremy Bentham. It was published from 1834 to 1914 and had several illustrious names in its list of contributors such as John Stuart Mill, Herbert Spencer and George Eliot, who was assistant editor of *The Westminster Review* from 1851 to 1854.

[3] This review was published anonymously with the tile "Romola" in *The Saturday Review* on 25th July, 1863. The version I use was reprinted in HAIGHT, 1965.

can discern any sign of failing powers in *Romola*"[4] (ROMOLAb, 1863, p. 26), thus demonstrating that the controversy was born almost at the same time as the book was.

A comment that expresses very well the contradictory reception the novel has had is Henry James's saying that "*Romola* is, on the whole, the finest thing she wrote, but its defects are almost on the scale of its beauties" (JAMES, 1995, p. 500). He wrote that more than one hundred years ago, but the controversy is still alive. In 1966, Joan Bennett wrote that *Romola* was unsuccessful (1966, p. 151) and, about a decade later, in 1975, Water Allen endorsed the same point of view by saying that "*Romola* was a mistake" (1975, p. 278). However, in 1979, a major work of criticism put *Romola* in an entirely new perspective. In this year, professor Felicia Bonaparte published *The Triptych and the Cross*, a monumental work investigating the main myths and symbols of George Eliot's work, at the centre of which she places *Romola*. Seven years later, Harold Bloom demonstrated how little he understands George Eliot's *oeuvre* by stating that "*Romola* is rightly forgotten" (1986, p. 4). More recently, in 1998, Caroline Levine and Mark Turner, under the light of more recent theories, came to understand *Romola* as an important nineteenth-century novel, although not without a feeling, even if slight, that it does not reach the same standards of artistic finery as *Middlemarch*, for instance.

Since then, almost two decades have gone by and the academic world has seen very little published about *Romola*. So it is certainly true that it has been forgotten, although not rightly as the present work aims at demonstrating. It will have been successful if it is able to coherently argue that a reassessment of George Eliot's fourth novel can contribute to a deeper understanding of its author's aesthetic project, of its age's artistic discussions and of the development of the English novel as a whole.

A survey through collections of essays on the novels of George Eliot quickly shows us that *Romola* is by far the least favourite of all her novels[5]. The

[4] This text was also published anonymously and also with the title "Romola", but in *The Westminster Review* in October, 1863. The version I use was also reprinted in HAIGHT, 1965.

George Eliot Collection, a box of dvds by BBC Video, brings one dvd for each of her novels, except for *Romola* and *Felix Holt*[6]. When it comes to Brazil, not a line seems to have been written about it. The only translation I could discover dates back to 1946 and is only available in very few university libraries. A search for "Romola" at CAPES's database of theses and dissertations in Brazil will return no results. Similarly, no results are currently found at Pro-Quest - Dissertations Abstracts International (DAI)[7], which catalogues Canadian and North American academic production. A detailed search at Periódicos CAPES, an authoritative source, under the headings "Romola" and "George Eliot", returns only 780 registers. On the one hand, this is very little. A search under the headings "Ulysses" and "James Joyce", for instance, returns 7,298 registers[8]. This demonstrates that there is still much room for studies about *Romola*. On the other hand, a more detailed analysis of the numbers shows that academic interest in it is certainly alive and is even growing. Of the 780 registers for "Romola"+"George Eliot", 230 date from the year 2000 on. This represents 30% of the total number. *Romola* finished serialization in 1862 but the earliest record at Periódicos CAPES is from 1895. This totals 116 years of critical fortune, slightly more than 11 decades. The fact that 30% of the publication appeared in the last decade (2000 to 2009, with 2010 included in the search) demonstrates an increase of academic interest in relation to previous decades.

Despite the growth, academic interest in *Romola* is still quite modest and there is considerable silence about it in the proceedings of English literature. There is a number of histories, outlines and surveys of literature in the British Islands that only mention *Romola en passant*, in spite of long, sometimes laudatory comments on George Eliot and on her other novels. Some such

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[5] Some examples of such collections are: *George Eliot. Modern Century Views*, edited by Harold Bloom in 1986; *George Eliot. A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by George R. Creeger in 1970 and *George Eliot*, edited by R.T. Jones also in 1970, which contains six essays, each about a different novel, leaving only *Romola* aside. I comment on these below.

[6] *Felix Holt* was made into a film in 1915. *Romola* had an Italian production in 1911 and an American one in 1924. All of the other novels have had more and more recent adaptations. For more information, see the Internet Move Database. www.imdb.com

[7] Database consulted on 02nd October, 2012.

[8] Database consulted on 27th May, 2011.

examples are Thornley's *An Outline of English Literature* (1973), Baugh's *A Literary History of England* (1970) and *The Oxford Illustrated History of English Literature* (2001). The famous *English Literature – A Survey for Students*, by Anthony Burgess (1996), mentions *Romola* only in the list of Eliot's work. And when he comments on a renewed interest in her work, he mentions as an example Joan Bennet's book, precisely the one in which Bennet calls *Romola* a failure. There are even examples of studies specifically about Eliot's work that are silent about *Romola*. An interesting case is R. T. Jone's 1970 *George Eliot*, which brings six essays, being one about each of Eliot's novels, except *Romola* which is left out. Also George Creeger's 1974 *George Eliot, A Collection of Critical Essays*, with ten essays by reputed writers such as Henry James and Barbara Hardy, for instance, fails to make any reference whatsoever to *Romola*. Even Peter Garrett's *Scene and Symbol from George Eliot to James Joyce* (1969), which I read in hopes of better understanding the use of symbols in *Romola*, fails to say a word about it. Barbara Hardy, perhaps the best known literary critic to write about George Eliot today, has only two or three very short comments on *Romola* in her *George Eliot – A Critic's Biography* (2006) and, even when she discusses issues clearly related to *Romola*, such as historical consciousness, she chooses to illustrate her arguments with examples from *Middlemarch* only. Gordon Haight's biography of Eliot, on the other hand, brings a thirty-page long chapter on *Romola* and its relation with its author's life.

The first epigraph to the present work, a passage from a letter written by George Eliot to John Blackwood, brings the author's own opinion and feelings about *Romola*. What Eliot seems to be stating is that *Romola* is actually her favourite novel, the one written with her best blood, and the one in which she tried the hardest to be truthful. But, as I hope is evident from what has been exposed above, this opinion of hers seems to be in conflict with the opinion of most of the critics mentioned above. Why could that be?

"Never, of course, did Eliot disappoint us as utterly as she did in *Romola*" (BONAPARTE, 1979, p. 01), says Felicia Bonaparte in *The Triptych and the Cross*. This little statement carries with it a myriad of assumptions about the literary and historical context in which the work of George Eliot appears. Like the

grain of sand that contains the world, this single statement also contains much of what *Romola* represents in the context of George Eliot's work and much of what her work represents in the development of the English novel in the nineteenth-century.

With the publication of *Adam Bede* in 1859, George Eliot became recognized as one of the greatest realistic novelists of the time. In the next two years, she published two other novels that corroborated this recognition and established what came to be known as George Eliot's style of writing. By 1862, both critics and readers had developed a strong set of expectations regarding anything she would come to publish. When *Romola* came out, they missed the familiar surroundings of rural England, the discussion of familiar issues: who is to marry who, church going, crops, morals and so on[9]. As Fredric Jameson well puts it, "we never really confront a text immediately" (1982, p. 9). Our sets of expectations keep interfering with our interpretations and, for that reason, George Eliot's contemporary readers found it hard to come to terms with the most slippery of her books. The recognizable landscape, social context and language from her previous novels were all gone. For its differences, *Romola* was quite a shock.

When Felicia Bonaparte says that Eliot disappointed us in *Romola*, she probably refers to the fact that, in her fourth novel, Eliot betrayed the expectations of her readers and critics as to the tone and theme of her book. They were taken aback when they found in it material that could perhaps be found in medieval romances, perhaps in romantic novels, or, perhaps, in a historical novel by Walter Scott. But certainly nobody expected a character that is believed by plague stricken villagers to be the Virgin Mary to appear in a realistic novel by George Eliot. Not after her having written *Adam Bede*, The *Mill on the Floss* and *Silas Marner*. The result of the disappointment professor Bonaparte mentions is the enormous silence about *Romola* in the history of English literature.

[9] Of course there is much more to GE's previous novels than this. However, as I argue later, most of the essential features of GE's previous and later novels are present in *Romola* so that contemporary readers would not necessarily miss them.

I am convinced there are two main reasons why *Romola* has remained in obscurity: 1) it breaks radically with the expectations George Eliot's previous novels had created and 2) it introduces to the literary scene of its time structural and conceptual changes that, although deep and significant, are also very subtle, very difficult to notice at first sight and when they go unnoticed, the book gives an impression of being an amalgam of chaotic material undiscerningly put together.

When I first finished reading *Romola*, I was struck by the fact that I had heard and read about George Eliot throughout my (not very long) life as a student of English literature without ever having come across a reference to it. I had read other novels by her and had acquired some knowledge about several other texts she had written, literary or not, but it was not until I had become particularly interested in George Eliot and had already made up my mind to write about her that I learned about the existence of her fourth book.

In fact, I am still surprised at having remained so long in ignorance of *Romola* and even more surprised by the fact that I find so much silence about it in the general literary history of the nineteenth-century English novel. This surprise is the genesis of this dissertation. Its general objective is to provide the missing link that has caused the discrepancy between George Eliot's opinion that *Romola* was her best novel and the widespread silence among readers and scholars of the English novel. After six years of research, the missing link is not too hard to see: it consists of the changes introduced by Eliot via *Romola* into the English novel. The alterations are deep but very subtle. One can easily read the novel from cover to cover and mistake them for formlessness, which explain the contemporary dislike for the book.

I have organized the findings of this research in three chapters. Chapter one, "The Fictional Universe", argues that *Romola*, instead of being essentially different from the body of its author's production, is actually very coherently representative of Eliot's art. This chapter treats of elements in *Romola* which are most commonly considered inadequate by the portion of criticism that sees the novel as a flaw or a mistake in George Eliot's work. These elements are five: i) the internal conflicts of plot and characters, ii) the proem, iii) the epilogue, iv) the setting and v) the historical background. Their apparent inadequacy is

mentioned and they are analysed according to the novel's inner logic and to George Eliot's aesthetic project, both of which render them coherent and even necessary. Thus, the first chapter stands as a contextualization and an exposition of *Romola*'s often unnoticed details.

Chapter two, "Genres: "A New Order of Things"", is the main point of this work. It aims at establishing a dialectic relationship between *Romola* and the most important literary genres of western literature. It may seem too bold a project to be developed within the scope a doctoral dissertation, but it should be observed that the research is carried out within the limits of the historico-literary context of the literature produced in the British Isles and in the nineteenth-century. This second chapter aims at proving the central thesis of this dissertation: that *Romola* is the work in which George Eliot united her life time concerns to her views on art. This she did by breaking with strict formal barriers of genre, by not recognizing conventional limits to her creative impulse. In RML[10], more than in her other novels, George Eliot allowed herself to pursue, in a single work, ideas and effects that were usually understood to be the subject matter of different kinds of work. When she felt that a certain idea or feeling could only be expressed through poetry, her prose became poetic. When she felt that a given theme had a broader scope than her novel could reach, the novel became epic. It became tragic in points where Eliot felt the potentiality for tragedy. One of the greatest concerns of writers at Eliot's time was how to represent reality faithfully. In *Romola*, she felt free to resort to romance, mysticism and symbolism whenever she thought this would provide more truthful access to reality than objective, almost scientific, observation and description. These are, of course, never abolished; George Eliot never stopped being a confirmed realist. However, the effect of the formal liberty she practiced was of confusion. It was very difficult for her contemporaries to tell the breaking of limits from undiscerning mess. This I hope to be able to do in chapter two.

Chapter three, "The context of the English novel", evinces a basic principle of this work: all considerations, discussions and analyses made here are

[10] From now on, for practical reasons, I sporadically refer to *Romola* as RML and to George Eliot as GE.

subject to their particular socio-historical background. All art is here understood as bearing a vital relationship with the time and place of its composition. Likewise, the present work, although not a piece of art, is the product of the time and place in which it is produced.

Chapter three addresses the most evident change effected in *Romola*: the change in the concept of literary realism. This change, I claim, is the main reason why George Eliot "disappointed us", as professor Bonaparte puts it. We (meaning both contemporary and present-day readers and critics) had been expecting another novel set in rural England and concerning the common lives and thoughts of rural English men and women. When *Romola* did not do exactly this, but travelled centuries into the past and allowed visions and prophecies into the realm of the novel, it was quickly assumed that George Eliot was losing hold of realism. The fact that she states, in the already mentioned letter to John Blackwood, that she was much concerned with veracity when writing *Romola* prompts a necessity of reconsidering old ideas about reality and its representation in literature. I understand that the rise of realism as a dominant literary mode in the nineteenth-century is intrinsically connected to the rise of the novel as a dominant literary genre at quite the same time. Thus the third chapter in this work starts by looking at the historical process that led the novel to the status of prestige it comes to enjoy in the nineteenth-century. Then, it considers the difficulty of pinning down precise definitions for realism, the complexity inherent to the concept and some of the conceptual changes it has undergone. This prepares the ground for the discussion of George Eliot's own theory of realism and her practice of it in *Romola*.

In the conclusion, I hope to be able to demonstrate that *Romola* occupies a central position in the history of the English novel, functioning as a missing link between old and new forms, between the Medieval and the modern worlds and also between the Victorian and the Modernist novel. Conclusions are difficult to anticipate, even difficult to reach sometimes. However, a satisfactory conclusion to this work would demonstrate that an appraisal of *Romola* provides much food for thought about the history of English literature: the book guides us through the most crucial points in the development of Western society: from

Ancient Greece to Christianity to the Renaissance and points to the most astonishing event our history has witnessed: the birth of modern consciousness.

I find it particularly relevant to state, more as a commitment than as a disclaimer, that this is first and foremost a work of literary criticism and not of theory. I am well aware that no work of criticism is expected to do much without the support of theory. Indeed, I have found that, in many moments in which my reasonings seemed to have reached a dead end, I drew valuable insight from the reading and re-reading of theoretical texts. What the statement expresses is that the main focus of this dissertation is on the reading of *Romola* and not on producing any ground-breaking theoretical elaborations.

Most of the questions I raise about *Romola* and the critical assessment it has received are intrinsically connected to the development of the novel as a literary genre in nineteenth-century Britain and of realism as its form of expression. A great deal of my thoughts considers the relation of the novel form with other genres. My research of the subject has found invaluable bearing in studies by Georg Lukács and his *Theory of the Novel* has built some of the theoretical pillars that support this work. These are two: i) all the considerations made here about *Romola*, literature or art in general consider the historical background and social environment in which it was produced a key factor indispensable for its understanding; ii) the novel is the product of a world in which the production of meaning is increasingly difficult and the novel hero's worldview reflects this difficulty. A study of novels is therefore, at least in some aspects, a study of a human search for meaning.

For Georg Lukács, the novel arises to replace the epic in a world that has lost the sense of unity and totality which was essential for the existence of the epic. Therefore he considers the novel as existing much earlier than English historians of literature such as Ian Watt would allow. Whereas Ian Watt locates the rise of the novel in the eighteenth-century, Georg Lukács sees *Don Quixote*, for instance, as the seminal novel. The points of view are different but do not exclude one another: *The Theory of the Novel* (first published in 1916) seeks to establish "a general dialectic of literary *genres*" (LUKÁCS, 1983, p. 16, author's italics) strongly based on the historico-philosophical conditions that produce them. It is a study of

the understructure of the novel charged with historical perspective. *The Rise of the Novel* (first published in 1957) is a study on the origins and socio-historical background specifically of the English novel. At points about which Lukács's thought is too abstract or general, I draw important information from Watt's book. As the focus of my study is in the British context, I acknowledge my debt to British critics and historians of literature Ian Watt and Walter Allen.

Whereas Georg Lukács postulates that the novel emerged out of the disappearance of the epic (1983, p. 41), Ian Watt claims that it originated out of "the old-fashioned romances" (1959, p. 09). But Lukács presents a consistent discussion of the epic whereas Watt focuses on the eighteenth century novel without paying particular attention to the romance. So I turn to the studies of Northrop Frye to support my discussion of how conventions of the romance can be seen at work in *Romola*. Frye's book *The Secular Scripture – A Study of the Structure of Romance* supports my discussions about this controversial genre.

Georg Lukács wrote about the novel almost one hundred years ago. In 1962, he recognised certain limitations to his method, but, despite the years and all the developments of literary theory, his book remains an authoritative word on the subject. It is true that a portion of what he wrote sprang from the despair caused by the First World War and may seem somewhat dated now that the trauma begins to heal. The bulk of *The Theory of the Novel*, I believe, is deep philosophical abstraction, which, on the one hand, provides an encompassing view of the topic, but, on the other, leaves gaps about more practical details. At points in which I felt Lucáks theory was too abstract, I turned to Franco Moretti's *The Novel*, an up to date monumental study of the novel, its history and development. Moretti's collection provides possible answers for several critical and theoretical gaps happily left blank by Lucácks; happily because they leave room for insight and innovation. Many of the essays in Moretti's collection offer valuable contributions to this work: Jack Goody's "From Oral to Written: An Anthropological Breakthrough in Storytelling" and Massimo Fusilo's "Epic, Novel" inform much of the theoretical foundations of this.

The present research also relies strongly on the work of two contemporary scholars. George Levine, who has written extensively about literary

realism, provides a significant contribution to this through his numerous essays and particularly through his book *The Realistic Imagination. English Fiction from Frankenstein to Lady Chatterley*, without which my discussion of literary realism and of George Eliot's manipulation of it would not have ripened as it did. Finally, professor Felicia Bonaparte's works about George Eliot and particularly about *Romola* have challenged and instigated me to continue writing about it after my discovery of her book *The Triptych and the Cross. The Central Myths of George Eliot's Poetic Imagination*, which seemed to me for a while to have said everything that could possibly be said about *Romola*. The present research will have been successful if it is able to see George Eliot's fourth novel under a new light so as to evidence that *Romola* offers very fertile ground to study the main currents running through the development of the novel in the British Islands. The main goal of this dissertation is to enable its readers to see *Romola* as a great work of art, despite whatever weaknesses, in its own right. In proposing a critical reassessment of the novel, I do not intend to invalidate its previous criticism, which has taught me much. I intend to call the reader's attention to features in *Romola* that I believe have not been paid enough attention to and thus propose an alternative point of view which enables the novel to stand on its own as the great work of art I believe it is.

1 THE FICTIONAL UNIVERSE: "A GENERIC PUZZLE"?

George Eliot is the author of six successful novels. But she also wrote *Romola*, which seemed (and remains to a great extent today) a puzzle to many of its critics and readers. By the time *Romola* began serialization in the *Cornhill Magazine* in July 1862, its author was recognized throughout Europe as one of the icons of nineteenth-century realism. George Eliot had been a respected translator and journalist since the early 1850s when she became editor of the *Westminster Review*, but her literary fame did not start before 1858, with the publication of *Scenes of Clerical Life*, a collection of three novellas. From then on, her novels were an immediate success among both the contemporary critics and the reading public. Her first novel, *Adam Bede*, published in 1859, sold more than 10,000 copies in its first year in the British Isles alone. In the same year, it went through three editions in the United States and was translated even into Hungarian (HAIGHT, 1985, p. 279). But when RML was published reviews and sales were less than satisfying. Gordon Haight explains that "*Romola* did not bolster the circulation of the *Cornhill* as much as Smith had hoped"[11] and that "when it was published in three volumes in July 1863, the sale was not large" (1985, p. 370) In its own time, its reception was controversial: while some praised the novel's intellectual power, others attacked the excessiveness of this same power.

Henry James's saying that "Romola is on the whole the finest thing she [George Eliot] wrote, but its defects are almost on the scale of its beauties" (JAMES, 1995, p. 500) is very representative of the novel's confusing and contradictory critical fortune. Robert Browning's appraisal of RML is also

[11] GE's previous novels, as well as her *Scenes of Clerical Life* had all been published by *Blackwood's Magazine*. George Murray Smith, then owner of *Smith, Elder & Co* offered GE the unprecedented amount of £10,000 for publishing and retaining the copyright of *Romola* for life. After much hesitation on GE's part for leaving John Blackwood, her old friend and long-time publisher, and a new agreement with George M Smith, *Romola* started serialization in the *Cornhill Magazine*, founded by Smith in 1860. GE was paid £7,000 for publication and copyright, which returned to her possession after 6 years. Smith had very high expectations in *Romola*, which was a financial disappointment for him. It was one of the best offers ever made for a writer of the period. By then GE had secured a comfortable income.

noteworthy and contributes to the present argument. After having read the first two volumes of the book, he wrote the following letter to GE:

> 19. Warwick Crescent, | Upper Westbourne Terrace,
> August 2. '63. 5 a.m.
>
> My dear Mrs. Lewes,
>
> I had hoped that the last thing I should do before going away would be, on shutting 'Romola's' last volume, to use pen and paper in at least an attempt to express my gratitude for the noblest and most heroic prose-poem that I have ever read: but I go miserably away at the end of the chapter, 'on San Miniato'. – Well, if I had just read *all* – going up to the height I expect – I probably could not have said even this poor word – which you must take for what it is worth: thank you once more heartily.
>
> All regard to your Husband from his and yours affectionately
>
> Robert Browning[12]

Browning's words echo the laudatory opinions of several writers contemporary to GE. However, when he had finished reading the book, he had the time and the chance to re-evaluate it, now echoing the other side of the contemporary criticism of RML, the negative side. Gordon Haight tells us that

> When Browning finished the last volume he was disappointed at too much dwelling on the delinquencies of Tito, while the great interests – Savonarola and the Republic – 'dwindled strangely'. He told Isa Blangden: 'My impression of the great style and high tone remain, of course, - but as a work of art, I want much. Other people like it – I heard Gladstone loud in its praise the other day at a dinner', Browning added. This revised judgement was naturally never revealed to George Eliot. (HAIGHT, 1985, p. 367)

Such contradictory critical fortune brings forth a widespread opinion that RML is the odd-one-out among the novels of George Eliot. I have come to believe and hope to demonstrate how coherent it is that she should have written it just how and when she did it. GE wrote seven novels, three before RML and three after it, and her work is usually divided into two phases[13]: an early phase focusing on rural England which comprises *Adam Bede* (1859), *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) and *Silas Marner* (1861), and a later phase, usually considered imaginatively

[12] This letter is quoted in Gordon Haigt's biography of Eliot, entitled *George Eliot – A Biography*, on page 367.

[13] Critics who follow this division are Walter Allen (1975) and Joan Bennet (1966).

bolder, comprising *Felix Holt, the Radical* (1866), *Middlemarch* (1871-1) and *Daniel Deronda* (1876). *Romola* stands in the middle, apparently fitting neither of them.

In their introduction to *From Author to Text*, Caroline Levine and Mark Turner comment on *Romola*'s controversial reception and state that

> It is only when set in the unitary context of George Eliot's *oeuvre* that the novel disappoints, drawing criticism, most emphatically, for failing to resemble the author's other novels. Readers have looked at the integrated web of *Middlemarch* and have been frustrated to find the generic puzzle of *Romola*. (LEVINE; TURNER, 1998, p. 2)

This is a point of view with which I find it very difficult to agree. First of all, I do not think RML fails to resemble GE's other novels, much on the contrary. A careful reading reveals distinctive traits of her authorship throughout the text. Much of her concern in the book is clearly the same that appears both in her previous and subsequent works. There is the same interest in discovering a meaningful way of coping with the struggle between the self and the world, the same essentially humanistic view of religion and the same philosophical reasoning that we find in all of her novels. There is the tragedy of characters dilacerated between passion and moral concern. In RML, as in any of her novels, we see everlasting human conflicts: present vs. past, man vs. woman, good vs. evil and wrong vs. right, to name but a few.

As a character, Romola de' Bardi is clearly a type of Maggie Tulliver, her ancestor, and Dorothea Brooke, her descendant. The three protagonists are women who struggle to live in a male-dominated world and to be faithful to their feelings without betraying what they understand to be their moral duties. The three thirst for knowledge and are clearly more intellectually independent than the men who dominate their lives and have a clearly inferior intellectual and moral vision. In this sense, also Bardo de' Bardi is a type of Edward Casaubon.

The role of society is analogous in RML to what it is in Eliot's other novels. Not differently but similarly to *Middlemarch*, the characters live in a definite social context and we see them act according to their various social masks. We see Dorothea Brooke, for instance, struggle to find a balance with her roles of wife, woman, citizen, daughter (although she is actually the niece of the

character who plays the role of her father) and sister. We see Romola struggle with the very same sternness to find the very same balance with the very same roles. It is only the place and time of the social background that has changed, not its essence. The same force that impels Maggie Tulliver to give up seeing Philip Wakem for the sake of her brother Tom impels Romola to return to Florence and submit to the dominance of her husband and of her confessor. We can trace Romola's affinities from Eliot's first to her last novel. The passion with which she cares for the sick people of Florence resembles Dinah Morris's passionate preaching in *Adam Bede*. Also, Gwendolyn Harleth's desperate need to become a better person in *Daniel Deronda* can undoubtedly have been inherited from Romola's sense of moral duty. Romola's strong moral awareness and wish to help society as best as she is also the distinctive mark of Felix Holt, just as Tito's superficial sacrifices echo Harold Transome's superficial machinations and relationships.

Critics have also claimed that one of *Romola*'s weaknesses is its excess of scholarship[14]. That because George Eliot departed from the rural England she knew so well, she had to rely only on her intellect and not on her experience and, because of this, the book is more of an intellectual effort than of an imaginative experience.

There certainly is a great intellectual effort in RML, on the part of the author, who studied every detail of every aspect of her novel with painful minuteness, and on the part of the reader, who is inundated with references and has to find his/her way through the turbulence of that society in the same way the characters have to. I do not think this is any different from what happens in "the integrated web of *Middlemarch*", for example. Although it is set in the period in which George Eliot lived, the social context of *Middlemarch* is transformed into artistic material by the same laborious process she used in RML. In his great account of Eliot's life, Gordon Haight explains that she relied on a great amount of intellectual labour from the moment she wrote her first novel.

[14] Some critics and works that subscribe to this view are ALLEN (1975) and BENNETT (1966).

> Critics who like to draw a sharp distinction between George Eliot's early novels, 'inspired by imagination working through memory', and the later ones, 'contrived laboriously by intellect', do not realize how carefully George Eliot studied the background for the most natural of them, *Adam Bede*. Her acquaintance with Methodists was limited to one or two visits of her aunt. Now she got out Southey's *Life of Wesley* and made careful notes on such matters as women's preaching, visions, the drawing of lots, divination of God's will by opening the Bible at hazard and reading the first text the eye falls upon, belief in present miracles, visits to prisons and madhouses, and Wesley's description of his preaching in the open air, standing 'in the calm still evening, with the setting sun behind me', as Dinah Morris does in the second chapter of *Adam Bede*. (HAIGHT, 1985, p. 249-250)

Another common criticism about *Romola* is that it contains too many elements "that do not belong in a novel" (BONAPARTE, 1979, p. 13). These consist mainly of a profusion of images and myths laden with symbolic meaning that is not found in her other books. These give the characters and their story a myriad of interpretive possibilities and invest the book with several layers of meaning and great symbolic potential. The myths and symbols problematize the characters' relationships to each other and to their world. They create an impression of conflict and of turbulence, but this, I believe, far from being a "generic puzzle" is an important part of George Eliot's aesthetical project, on which I comment more fully in chapters two and three.

I do not pretend to see the same amount of symbolical and mythical material treated with the same effervescence in all of George Eliot's novels. *Romola* certainly stands out as the one in which this is more evident, but it is clear that ever since she wrote *Adam Bede*, the author started developing a growing need for symbolical material to give significance to her artistic goal: "to give no more than a faithful account of men and things as they have mirrored themselves in [her] mind" (ELIOT, 1980, p. 221).

Men and things mirrored themselves in Eliot's mind in a way that grew more and more complex as she matured and was able to interrelate more and more aspects of art and life. Fixed labels, such as right and wrong, good and evil or romantic and realistic, had been replaced by the tragic awareness that we live in a world with few certainties, few answers and a great many moral dilemmas. Such a world she reproduces minutely in the fictional universe of RML.

To account faithfully for it, instead of simply showing her readers a disintegrated social context, she has them experience the same sense of misdirection of the characters through imagery, myths and symbols, many of which can sometimes be contradictory. Now this is a very innovative way of being realistic: producing in the readers, through plot movements and manipulation of formal conventions, the same feelings her characters have to deal with.

When we have this in mind, the fact that the action in *Romola* starts on the day of Lorenzo de' Medici's death acquires special significance: by entering chapter one, we enter a city that has lost its sense of moral order (represented by the image of its dead ruler). As readers, we struggle through the chaos of the Mercato Vecchio and look around just to see the chaos of our own society, which is also at a loss trying to find some sense of moral order.

The impression of chaos is indeed strong at the opening of RML and it certainly contrasts with the neatness and balance of her other novels. However, it is not an accident, nor even a turn from GE's aesthetic project as a novelist. Far from constituting a mere "generic puzzle", it is the result of GE's theoretical reflections on the nature of the novel and of realism. "Eliot had no sooner articulated what we have taken to be her doctrine of realism than she began to discover that the old forms could no longer express her unfolding vision" (BONAPARTE, 1979, p. 2). I comment on GE's treatment of realism in chapter two.

Romola is hardly ever the first thing by GE that one reads for the simple reason that it is the least known of her novels. One will usually start by reading *Scenes of Clerical Life* or, to keep within the realm of the novel, by reading *Adam Bede* or *The Mill on the Floss*. One might even start by reading *Middlemarch*, but usually when one comes to RML, we are already, even if a little, acquainted with the work of GE.

This, as already mentioned here, means that readers of RML open its first page with a certain set of expectations and, more often than not, these expectations are frustrated. However, the book was not written *in vacuo* and brings on its pages the distinct mark of GE's authorship. Its concerns are analogous to those in GE's other novels and its characters share major

similarities with so many others. This I have tried to demonstrate in this section. Now I wish to comment on what makes RML different from GE's other novels, on some of the characteristics that may contribute to frustrating reader's expectations.

1.1 Internal Conflicts

The novels of George Eliot constitute a unified and coherent whole. Even if critics often complain about their disappointment with *Romola* or the strangeness of *Daniel Deronda*, for instance, all of her novels bear a recognizable essence. This seems to have been significantly overlooked by the body of criticism that tends to understand GE's work either in terms of an earlier, more romantic phase and a later, more mature one, or in terms of a division between the so called "English novels" (*Adam Bede*, *The Mill on the Floss*, *Silas Marner* and *Middlemarch*) and the "non-English novels", let us say.

Although I believe RML is a great instance of this coherence (because it is so distinct and yet so similar to the other novels), it has been its differences that have been responsible for much that has been said about it. Differently from most of GE's other novels, which convey the impression of order, sometimes of a massive clockwork, as might be the case with *Middlemarch*, RML conveys an impression of tension, even of confusion. Two things immediately stand out when we start reading *Romola*: the very peculiar language and character of the proem and the mixture of fact and fiction. These usually cause the reader to feel confused and insecure about his/her understanding of the text. The reader's first impression might be that the proem is not really the novel yet or that it is some kind of contextualization or explanation, which can be very puzzling when s/he turns to the apparently unrelated chapter one. The very existence of the proem invites the reader to ponder about its function. It is no more an introduction than the epilogue is a conclusion. I deal with the proem and the epilogue in sections 1.2 and 1.3, respectively.

After the confusing experience of going through the proem, the reader moves on to chapter one to find, on the very first page, allusions to Dante, to

fifteenth century Florence and to conflicts in the city's history, not to mention two expressions and a verse in medieval Italian. This is enough of a shock for the GE reader: all her previous novels had been set in a recognizable place and time, namely England and the eighteenth or nineteenth century. The language had always been that which one would often listen to in the rural parts of the country and the historical context, never so explicitly dealt with, was something one would probably remember or recognize as being the time when their grandparents lived. We just have to look at *Adam Bede* and *Middlemarch* for very clear examples. The characters' language in *Adam Bede* is recognizable (at least to English ears or to those familiar with the accent) to the point of being audible. Adam, a carpenter, often employs carpentry vocabulary in his speech, demonstrating that character and language are in harmony. As for *Middlemarch*, the historical context is much more than background, it is the environment in which the characters live and with which they constantly interact. The Reform Bills of the 1830's, for example, are as much part of the novel as are Dorothea Brooke or Tertius Lydgate. The nature of the use of language and historical context in RML is of course no different from their use in the other novels. It is the specific language and the specific setting that changed frustrating readers' expectations. I comment on GE's peculiar choice of language and setting below.

The relationships among the characters in RML is also quite complicated and, at a first reading, things like Romola's submission to Savonarola's guidance and dedication to Tessa and her children may seem absurd. They only acquire their full significance if understood as steps towards the novel's final achievement: the portrayal of a matured and self-conscious Romola. The roles of Mona Brigida and Tessa are also better understood when we see them as counterparts of the main character.

Most of the main characters in RML are multi-faceted. Romola herself is one of the characters that amalgamates a great number of facets in her, many of them antithetical: she enacts the contrasting roles of Ariadne and the Virgin Mary and of the rebellious youth and the submissive woman, for example. In each of these roles, she is opposed by other characters that appear as her counterpart or opponent, which creates a strong sensation of conflict. The pungent

relationship among characters and their very subtle interrelatedness with images and symbols in the text help produce the impression that RML is "a mere generic puzzle".

When we first meet Romola, she is in her blind father's library, where she spends most of her time, reading, taking notes and fetching his books for him. The first image that we have of her is the image of the dutiful daughter. Actually, the very first words she says are "Yes, father". And when she speaks again, she repeats the same "Yes, father" (ELIOT, 2005, p. 50). In this early phase of the story, not only Romola's language but also her physical attitude point to her role of dutiful daughter. When she first stands up to get him a book, the narrator tells us that she returned and "kneeled down by him" (ibidem). We repeatedly see her "seating herself on a low stool, close to her father's knee" (ibidem) in reclining, humiliating or submissive postures. This attitude is, of course, revealing of her story and disposition and it acquires special importance through recurrence. Romola is going to assume similar positions towards both Girolamo Savonarola and Tito Melema, characters who directly oppose her in many ways. But the first contrasting character to appear is Bardo, her father. His declining health, physical frailty and limited intellectual vision are understood as opposing Romola's physical, moral and intellectual force. Bardo's blindness is certainly not only a physical limitation, instead it stands for putting in evidence his daughter's unfolding vision, which, along the story, progresses from a naïve knowledge of the small world around her to a fuller historical and philosophical consciousness of herself as a microcosm of the human race. Bardo's confinement to the known world of his library stands as a counterpart of Romola's inner and outer journeys.

Still within her family circle, Romola appears in opposition to her brother Dino, the undutiful son. Bardo believes he may fail to become a renowned scholar because he loses the help of his son, who abandons his family to become a Dominican friar. Bardo, a convicted stoic[15], feels betrayed and unable to

[15] Felicia Bonaparte explains that "Bardo's Stoicism is evident in his discipline, his honesty, and his sense of justice. Committed to a life of reason and moderation, Bardo reminds us of the simplicity of the Roman in the days of the republic" (1979:41). Such a characterisation establishes his contrasting relationship with several other characters, especially in terms of values, beliefs and moral stand, and functions as a seed of a theme that will grow in the novel: the clash of paganism and Christianity. His portrayal as a Stoic is carefully chosen: Stoicism began to decline with the closing of philosophy schools

accomplish his research with what he considers the imperfect help of his daughter. He thinks his chances of success have been

> Cut off by the failure of my sight and my want of a fitting coadjutor. For the sustained zeal and unconquerable patience demanded from those who would tread the unbeaten paths of knowledge are still less reconcilable with the wandering, vagrant propensity of the feminine mind than with the feeble powers of the feminine body. (ELIOT, 2005, p. 51)

Although Bardo claims that he can neither accept nor forgive his son's decision to leave him and become a friar, he does not cease to regret the fact that he is really gone. Bardo's real failure in this case is that he cannot realize the ways in which the divergence between his two children transcends the boundaries of sex. Blind as he is, he does not realize that the male intellectual principle he searches for is acted out by Romola, whereas Dino stands for the female principle.

With the appearance of Tito Melema in the life of Romola and her family, she incorporates still another role. She is now also the young woman in love who needs to find a balance between her commitment to her family and her commitment to the formation of a new family. Tito initially seems the perfect helper in the search for this balance. He brings joy and energy to Romola's quiet life and, being himself the foster son and apprentice of a scholar, he appears to Bardo as the perfect substitute for the lost Dino, "the fitting coadjutor" he looks forward to having. The three seem to be able to form a harmonious triple unity.

However, when the roles of Romola and Tito move from daughter and son to wife and husband, a new phase is begun. Tito starts assuming an increasingly tyrannical posture, leaving Romola in a crossed-fire between her father's sternness and her husband's selfish want of easy pleasure. Her initial response is an attempt to attend to both men's demands. The dutiful daughter is now also the dutiful wife. On the day of her betrothal to Tito, we see the beginning of his oppressive influence over her. Romola wishes to have the key for the

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because it came to be understood as a threat to Christianity. As the daughter of a Stoic living in a world in which Stoicism is a philosophical drift of the past, Romola's story is the story of society's struggle to accommodate antithetical philosophical, religious and moral trends. At the very beginning of the novel, we already find Romola weary of Bardo's stoicism but unable to break the bonds. With Bardo's death and her marriage, far from being free of such a rigid doctrine, Romola is caught between the pagan and Christian extremes, represented by Tito Melema and Girolamo Savonarola respectively.

triptych presented to her by Tito to hide a crucifix given her by Dino. He denies her access to the key and we learn that “he pressed a light kiss on her brow, and she said no more, ready to submit, like all strong souls, when she felt no valid reason for resistance” (ELIOT, 2005, p. 199). The initial impression of coming stability represented by Tito starts to turn into its very opposite and one more sphere of conflict starts unfolding within the novel. Indeed the book seems to rest on a conflict-based structure which operates at several levels: conflicting characters, conflicting images and symbols, conflicting values, conflicting literary conventions and even conflicting expectations.

It is clear that the conflict Romola has had to struggle with, at least in the first and second books, has been the conflict of women living in a male-dominated world. She becomes trapped in a circle of masculine oppression (even if the oppression is affectionate, as it certainly is in the case of her father) formed by Bardo, Dino and Tito. As the story progresses and Romola matures as a woman, her conflicts also mature and expand beyond the barrier of sex to reach a more universal dimension.

The opposition of Romola and Tito grows to a point in which he comes to represent the contrary of practically everything that she represents, turning their marriage into dark irony. Whereas Romola develops an increasingly altruistic love for family, moral rectitude and humanity, Tito develops an increasingly selfish love for power, vice and material goods. In chapter thirty two, the conflict between them comes to its summit. “It was time for all the masculine predominance that was latent in him to show itself” (ELIOT, 2005, p. 285). Tito sells Bardo’s library thus breaking the promise he had made to Bardo on his deathbed. The organization and preservation of his library had been Bardo’s most cherished wish, the only means of granting the survival of his name and of his intellectual work. Upon his death, Romola assumed this task as the goal of her life, but when Tito commits his ultimate act of betrayal against her, symbolized in the sale, she is faced with the need to redefine herself, her life and her world. Another phase is begun.

At this point, another character whose influence had slowly been growing within Romola begins to acquire special importance in the story.

Girolamo Savonarola does not appear only as an influential force in her life, but also in the life of all Florence. By the time of the sale of the library, Savonarola had risen as the city's most powerful religious leader.

Initially, his influence strengthens the circle of masculine oppression to which Romola is bound and she assumes the same submissive posture she had towards her father and husband towards him. The seeds of the submission to him had been planted since the beginning of the novel. When Romola meets Savonarola for the first time, in her dying brother's chamber, he tells her to "kneel down, my daughter" (ELIOT, 2005, p. 157). Her first reaction was to resist his words for the sake of her intellectual independence, her disbelief in the Christian faith and in respect to her father's hatred of monks and priests. However, as a representative of western society[16], she eventually accepts his command.

With the death of her father and the betrayal of her husband, it is Savonarola who symbolically assumes these roles in Romola's life. She gives in to his guidance only to be disappointed with his partiality. This happens in the same way in which she was disappointed in Bardo's spiritual blindness, in Dino's empty fanaticism and in Tito's selfishness. The difference with Savonarola is that his teachings have given Romola a whole new comprehension of herself as a member of the human race. The need to break free from his oppressive influence elevates her consciousness to higher levels of understanding. When she confronts Savonarola, she is no longer a woman confronting a man, but the collective spirit of western society struggling to break free from so many forms of tyranny. This, I believe, is the deepest level in which the idea of conflict unfolds in the novel. The total effect of the book is that of a glance at the conflicts that have been defining our society, "at the great river-courses that have shaped the lives of man" and at the "broad sameness of the human lot" (ELIOT, 2005, p. 1). It is in this sense that RML may give its readers a strong impression that it is a "mere generic puzzle": because it is as puzzling as real life, with as few fixed meanings. Also in this sense, I find RML to be the most realistic of Eliot's novels.

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[16] I subscribe to Felicia Bonaparte's view that *Romola* is an epic of western society and that the protagonist's acceptance of Christianity represents western society's same acceptance.

That Romola's relationship to these male characters is one of conflict and oppression and that feminist protest is a theme of the novel is quite clear. This, however, does not mean that her relation with female characters is of pure harmony. This seems to indicate the contrary of what the relation with males indicates. The female character immediately associated to Romola is Tessa. Felicia Bonaparte is more than right when she says that "Tessa is far less important in Eliot's book as a character than in her symbolic relationship to Tito" (1979, p. 104) but it is important to notice that she has a crucial symbolic relationship to Romola as well. If, on the one hand, Tessa highlights Tito's bacchic nature, on the other hand, she also draws attention to Romola's Christian nature[17]. Initially, Tessa appears in contrast to Romola: she is naïve, superstitious, uneducated and sensual whereas Romola is independent, rational, cultivated and angelical. Professor Bonaparte points to the women's very interesting and antithetical relationship to Florence.

> In imagining Tessa the heroine of an idyl, Tito identifies her with the pastoral life that surrounds the city of Florence, and at the same time therefore distinguishes her from Romola, who is wholly identified with the city. (...) and it is outside the city's gate that Tito later sets up his home with Tessa. (BONAPARTE, 1979, p. 105)

Tessa becomes to Tito everything that Romola cannot be because of their different natures. Romola's marriage to Tito turns out to be a deception, which acquires particularly ironic overtones when we remember that he married Tessa in a mock ceremony and Romola in a real one, full of all the ritual and symbolic requirements of such occasions. This explains why Tito has children with Tessa, and not with Romola. His real marriage to Romola is much more of a fraud than his mock wedding to Tessa is. Therefore, on a more symbolic level

> Tito's "marriage" to Tessa is analogous to Romola's "marriage" to Christ, for in each case the partners belong to the same historical and moral sphere. As Romola belongs more truly to the spiritual world of Christ, so Tito belongs more truly to Tessa, who, as a child of nature, is like himself both pagan and amoral. (BONAPARTE, 1979, p.105).

[17] Surely "Christian" is a very partial description of Romola's nature and one that applies only to a certain point in the novel. I use the term "Christian" here for its symmetrical contrast to Tito's bacchic nature.

Mona Brigida is a far less important character than Tessa, but it highlights the coherence of GE's treatment of characters to observe that, in the same way as Tessa has Tito's children for Romola, so Mona Brigida indulges in all kinds of female futility that would not make any sense for Romola.

The relationship among the characters in RML is an intricate web of symbolism. Exactly because of this it may look like a "generic puzzle" when it actually is a neatly designed symbolical system, and just as so many symbolical systems, the truth that it reveals does not yield easily. I like to think of the characters in RML like cards in a Tarot deck, which is another complex symbolical system. Each of the cards has its peculiar characteristics and its own way of interacting with the others. Their meaning, although always essentially the same, can change considerably according to their position on the table and according to what other cards are around it. So, although Romola is always essentially the same, she represents different things in relation to different characters. We can look at her as daughter, sister, wife, citizen, individual, woman. We can look at her and see things as diverse as a defender of tradition and an advocate of rebellion. We can see in her images as diverse as those of Ariadne and the Virgin Mary.

1.2 The Proem

The most intriguing and poetical part of the novel, the proem can hardly be said to serve the function of a preface. It is true that it presents the city of Florence at the close of the fifteenth-century to the reader, but other than that, its relationship to the text of the novel is far from evident. It is not signed by the author, as prefaces usually are, which makes it difficult to know whether it is to be considered as an introduction or as the beginning of the novel. As I mention in the first section of this chapter, the proem, as the entrance to RML, is responsible for a good deal of the discomfort some readers and critics have experienced when reading the novel. It certainly is an experience of uncertainty. We do not know whether to read it as a preface by an author or a beginning by a narrator.

We enter the proem through the unexpected guidance of “the angel of the dawn” (ELIOT, 2005, p. 1), although little or nothing do we know about such an angel. However, he shows us a grand overview of humanity and “the main headings of its history” (ibidem) in the first paragraph. However, his guidance is so loose that we have to go well into chapter one to realize that “more than three centuries and a half ago, in the mid spring-time of 1492” (ibidem), is when the story told begins. In the second paragraph of the proem, the angel is replaced by “the spirit of a Florentine citizen, whose eyes were closed for the last time while Columbus was still waiting and arguing for the three poor vessels with which he was to set sail from the port of Palos” (ibidem, p. 2). With this spirit, we are taken to the top of San Miniato hill, from where we have a great view of the city of Florence, and from where the magnitude of its main landmarks catches the eye. From there, we approach the city and hear of “its strange web of belief and unbelief” (ibidem, p. 6), of its conflicts, values, buildings, monuments, geography, characters, philosophy, politics and everyday comings and goings.

Following the spirit, we hear of the great Girolamo Savonarola, of his quarrel with Lorenzo de’ Medici and of his rise in Florence, we hear of Florentine philosophical discussions: “There were even learned personages who maintained that Aristotle, wisest of man (unless, indeed, Plato were wiser?) was a thoroughly irreligious philosopher” (ibidem, p. 5). We hear of the western world’s conversion to Christianity: “For had not the world become Christian? Had he not been baptised in San Giovani, where the dome is awful with the symbols of coming judgment (…)?” (ibidem, p. 5). We hear of moral conflicts like “the eternal marriage between love and duty” (ibidem, p. 5). We hear of all these things unaware that they will only acquire coherence and significance when the novel reaches its full stop. At a first reading they seem indeed to form only a generic puzzle, but, by the end, the careful reader is entitled to realize that the proem stands as much as an introduction as it stands as a conclusion to the novel.

The proem immediately catches the reader’s attention with traits that seem either strangely out of place in a realist Victorian novel or rather confusing and unclear. These however, are traits of central importance in the novel, central because they are part of GE’s aesthetic project and because they end up becoming

essential themes in the novel. I believe the first such trait to catch the eye is the imagetic and symbolic nature of the proem. The very first page is filled with expressions that make this nature evident: “the angel of the dawn”, “hidden knowledge”, “dark path”, “immeasurable circle of light and glory” and “the broad sameness of the human lot” are just some examples.

A second trait of the proem that “makes heavy demands on the readers”, as Dorothea Barrett (2005, p. viii) says, is its amount of references. The fact that it invites the reader to a different country and a different century would be challenging enough, but the text is inundated with names of people, places and even monuments from Florence. By the end of the proem, the reader has had to come to terms with Giotto, Filippo Brunelleschi, Lucretius, Aristotle, Plato and Savonarola. S/He has been asked to picture the hill of San Miniato, Santa Croce, Ponte Vecchio and Palazzo Vecchio. And s/he is left wondering who this Pope Angelico that has not come yet is.

This trait leads to yet another: language. Set in fifteenth-century Florence, the story ought to exist in Medieval Italian. English functions as a surrogate language. The direct consequence to this is that the text is full of names and expressions in Italian which often sound awkward to the English-native ear. This, according to Dorothea Barrett (2005, p. xv), “applies not only to the utterances of the characters but also to the narrative discourse, which is often weighed down by the translation of Italian terms”. A more subtle, but not less striking consequence is that “George Eliot’s perfect ear for spoken idiom is thus disabled in the writing of this novel, because she is straining to ‘hear’ voices to which she has access only through written documents” (ibidem). It is characteristic of most of GE’s novels that her characters speak with the distinctive language and accent of the time and place depicted in the novel. The speech of her characters is recognisable to the English-native ear or to those familiarised with it. Indeed this is a weakness to be pointed out in *Romola*. How could George Eliot have reconstructed fifteenth-century Florentine prosody? She did an astonishing job reconstructing vocabulary, beliefs, values and the feeling of everyday life in Florence, but the less palpable peculiarity of Florentine speech is somewhat damaged, which contrasts with the fine mastery of dialect speech in her other

novels. However, I wonder to what extent this is a weakness of RML or of most historical novels, since no author of a historical novel which takes place centuries before its writer's lifetime can possibly have known personally the time and place s/he writes about.

It is also the proem's function to emphasise one of the themes that permeates GE's fiction and that acquires special evidence in RML: history. Indeed one of the most important themes of RML that the proem problematises is the intricate relationship between history and fiction. In the same way the proem blurs the limits between poetry and prose so does it problematise the relationship between history and fiction. GE goes further than fictionalizing historical characters as she does with Savonarola or Machiavelli, for instance. She makes all characters, historical or fictional, subject to the ebb and flow of history, which is certainly not treated as background, but as a living organism. The proem is the first evidence that one of RML's intended achievements is a glimpse at the whole of western history, "at the great river-courses that have shaped the lives of men" (ELIOT, 2005, p. 1). It is probably also the first evidence that it is tinged with positivist and utopian ideals. The places from and to where the angel of the dawn travelled reveal that, in scope, the proem shares affinities with Comte's philosophy of history. At the very opening of the proem, the angel departs from the Levant, which is to the north of the Arabian peninsula and the north of Egypt, and moves on to the Pillars of Hercules, at the Strait of Gibraltar, where Europe meets Africa. Such a movement covers almost the whole of the western world (only the Americas being left behind, since they were still somewhat unknown at the time the story takes place) and, consequently, almost the whole of western history. The proem's concern, in a way, is the concern of Positivism: to sketch an outline of the movements of history and its phases.

History is dealt with symbolically. A widespread criticism against RML is that it lacks verisimilitude. The same anonymous critic I mention in the introduction, who thinks there is no sign of failure in *Romola*, comments on the "accumulation of improbable coincidences she heaps on Tito's head" (ROMOLAb, 1863, p. 27). Moreover, many readers and critics have found it difficult to understand passages such as Romola's first return to Florence or her adoption of

Tito's wife and children. If these do not seem to make sense internally, they do so when set in a historical perspective. There is, in RML, a system of correspondences that creates verisimilitude where the plot seems to lack it. Thus, although it might strike the reader that the proud and offended daughter of a pagan[18] scholar should bend to the teaching of a catholic monk and decide to return to the husband she no longer respects, it is vital for the accomplishment of the novel's intended achievement that she should do so. The proem, although we often fail to notice this, explains what the general subject of the novel is. *Romola* is about "the broad sameness of the human lot" (ibidem). The protagonist is then the representative of the society being portrayed. Western society has been converted to Christianity and so Romola is going to follow the same path. She has to return and she has to accept Savonarola's guidance even if only to reject it afterwards.

The proem is indeed one of the parts of the novel in which the juxtaposition of history and fiction is more evident, but nowhere is it more strongly represented than in the relationship of Romola and Savonarola.

> Savonarola is a male historical figure, and his conflicts take place in the public sphere; Romola is a female fictional character, and the problems that beset her are in large part private. Had Romola been an actual Renaissance Florentine, her story would not have come to George Eliot and to us as has Savonarola's, because, as that of a woman acting in the private sphere, it would not have been recorded and preserved. On the other hand, George Eliot's writing of *Romola* has in a sense placed Romola's story in history, albeit literary history. In the act of writing 'historical fiction' (the phrase itself is an oxymoron), George Eliot erodes the distinctions between 'history' and 'narrative'; by juxtaposing Romola with Savonarola, she both highlights their differences and dissolves them. (BARRETT, 2005, p. xi)

[18] The words "pagan" and "paganism", often used here, have no consensual definition. GE uses "pagan" in the Proem to *Romola*, in which she states: "Our resuscitated Spirit was not a pagan philosopher, nor a philosophising pagan poet" (p. 6). She seems to be using the term in its most common understanding as referring to Greco-Roman polytheism. Aristotle or Plato, whom she mentions in the same Proem, are the pagan philosophers that the "resuscitated Spirit" is not. Another common meaning of the word "pagan" is "non-Christian", a meaning which often carries derogatory connotations against non-Christian religions. As the issue of Christianity versus paganism is an important one in *Romola*, I take "pagan" to mean here, without any kind of derogatory or pejorative inclinations to whatever religious creed, non-Christian and related to Greco-Roman polytheism. This, I believe, is the meaning George Eliot would have ascribed to the term.

In the juxtaposition of history and fiction are implied so many other themes of RML: public and private, male and female, present and past, Renaissance and Victorian. Although RML is GE's first declared attempt to write historical fiction, most of her novels bear a strong relationship to history. Even *Silas Marner* and *The Mill on the Floss*, novels with recognizably symbolic overtones, rely greatly on history.

It is interesting to observe the antithetical directions in which the proem and the text of the novel move in order to achieve the historical vision of "the broad sameness of the human lot" (ibidem). The proem starts from a great vision of the whole of humanity (with the angel of the dawn becoming the spirit of a fifteenth-century Florentine citizen) and moves into the individual lives of Medieval Florentine people (with the spirit going down San Miniato hill to mingle in Florence's everyday affairs and with common Florentine citizens). The text of the novel, on the other hand, moves on the contrary direction. It starts from individual lives (with Tito Melema and Bratti Ferravechi moving through the hubbub of the Mercato Vecchio and with Bardo and Romola enclosed in their own little world) and moves to greater and greater affairs (the rise and fall of Savonarola and the Medici, the political life of Europe) until it symbolically reaches a more universal awareness of history in the epilogue. History and fiction are, therefore, themes of the novel.

The proem has still another function which I believe to be of capital importance and which has special relevance for the purposes of this work. One of the most common criticisms against RML is that its historical background and setting are unnecessary, Florence and the Renaissance being the most uncomfortable points to deal with.

GE probably knew her choice of setting and historical background might be misunderstood and included in the proem justifications, although never directly, for them. Florence, she explains, stands "as an almost unviolated symbol, amidst the flux of human things" (ibidem). It is given the reader to interpret what it is a symbol of. The movement back to the fifteenth-century would be unnecessary, since the novel is about contemporary issues, as I comment on section 1.4.2. However, GE's movement to the Renaissance is "to remind us that

we still resemble the men of the past more than we differ from them" (ibidem, pp. 1-2). So, by looking at the men of the past, we would actually be looking at ourselves unconsciously and therefore more freely. In this sense, the fact that RML is about contemporary issues is not a reason to discard a return to the past. Rather it is all the more reasonable that looking at the past will shed light on the present.

Much more than either opening or closing the book, I believe the proem's importance is that it sets the tone GE intended for RML. The proem is GE's way of explaining artistically her new aesthetic project. She needed to tell her readers that this was a novel which demanded a new reading posture from them and so she uses the proem to invite the readers to think symbolically. It invites them to abandon established definitions of realism and to question the strongly-built fence that used to separate categories such as poetry and prose or history and fiction.

Written in poetic and symbolic language, with passages that can be said to reach lyric beauty, the proem announces the blurring of literary genres that *Romola* brings forth. It is in the proem we start to realize that Eliot's prose has become poetic, or rather that the poetry in the book cannot be separated from the prose. It is also in the proem that Eliot tells her readers that, instead of being realistic through almost scientific observation of life, this novel is realistic through an intricate system of symbols.

1.3 The Epilogue

Just as the proem, the epilogue is one of the points of discomfort in RML. Leslie Stephen said that *"Romola* is in presence of a great spiritual disturbance where the highest aspirations are doomed to the saddest failure"[19], indicating how inadequate he considers the conclusion of the novel to be.

[19] Leslie Stephen's essay, entitled "George Eliot", is not to be confused with the biography he wrote of her, which bears the same title. The version of the biography that I consulted is the one published by the University of Toronto Library and is referred to in the bibliography of this work. The essay I quote above was first published in the *Cornhill Magazine*, in February 1881 about two months after the death of Eliot,

Just as the proem, the epilogue does not make sense when taken in its own. Many are the interpretations of the possible meanings conveyed by the epilogue. The common criticism that, in RML, GE's intellect overcomes her artistic powers is perhaps most noticeable in the epilogue. Whereas the proem resounds with vibrant poetic imagination, the epilogue seems to drop dramatically in beauty, power and verisimilitude. I am bound to agree that what Sir Leslie Stephen (STEPHEN, 1965, p. 145) says of GE's later novels may apply to the epilogue of RML. "The reflective faculties" he says, "have been growing at the expense of the imagination". Some passages in the epilogue reveal a "tendency to substitute elaborate analysis for direct presentation" (ibidem). Lillo's reply to Romola's account of her father's life is one such passage. He says: 'I should not like that sort of life', said Lillo. 'I should like to be something that would make me a great man, and very happy besides – something that would not hinder me from having a great deal of pleasure.' This strikes me as something that would hardly come from a child, but most of all, this seems to be a rather explicit way of saying that Lillo is turning out to take too much on his father's character flaws; a rather explicit way of making the reader fear that his life might be a re-enactment of his father's. For some reason, GE did not satisfy herself with the more subtle ways of showing this, like the similarities between father's and child's names and physical features.

That Lillo should be a re-enactment of Tito seems quite "a faithful account of man and things" (ELIOT, 1980, p. 221) and, even if done too explicitly, this is coherent with the outlook on life and history presented in the proem. "We are impressed with the broad sameness of the human lot, which never alters in the main headings of its history" (ELIOT, 2005, p. 1). However, the new family made up by Romola, Tessa and Tito's children is something hitherto unseen in the headings of history and functions not as a reinforcement or repetition of "the flux of human things" (Eliot, 2005:1), but as a radical reinvention of history. The formation of this new family stands as a revision of the role of women and their potentiality in society, a political, religious and social revision of western history.

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which was on 22nd December, 1881. The version of the essay that I consulted was reprinted in Gordon Haight's *A Century of George Eliot Criticism*, which is to be found in the bibliography at the end of this.

As Mark W. Turner well observes, “the Epilogue both reasserts the basic social unit, the family, while fundamentally radicalizing its power structure” (LEVINE and TURNER, 1998, p. 29).

The ending of RML strikes us as unlife-like because it is so idealistic. Mark W. Turner searches for possible reasons for the alleged lack of reality in GE’s concern with her reading public.

> It is possible that Eliot had in mind her *Cornhill* reader, mostly conventional and respectable women of the middle class, for whom a total rebellion against the domestic would not be a real consideration. And there is the problem of historical truth, both in Renaissance Florence and mid-Victorian England, neither of which would have granted Romola many opportunities outside of the home. *The Westminster Review*, reviewing the first book edition, found the depiction of the sexes too modern and Romola’s aspirations too unlike the fifteenth century. (LEVINE and TURNER, 1998, p. 29).

Notable critics such as Ian Watt (1959), Walter Allen (1975) and Bakhtin (2004) agree that the novel is a somewhat formless genre that tends to have a biography-like structure. Ending a novel is, therefore, a rather abrupt act, unless perhaps it is ended by the death of the protagonist. When there is no death, the choice of where exactly to end a novel is an arbitrary decision “for the fragment of a life, however typical, is not the sample of an even web” (ELIOT, 2000, p. 683). GE could have ended RML with chapter seventy-two. Or she could have stretched the epilogue to let the reader know whether Lillo will turn out to be more like his father or like one of his mothers, after all “who can quit young lives after being long in company with them, and not desire to know what befell them in their after-years?” (ibidem).

It is characteristic of GE’s novels that they never really end, at least not with any specific event that definitely closes the action. An exception could be made for *The Mill on the Floss*, in which the ending coincides with Tom’s and Maggie’s death. But even then, a conclusion is added after the last chapter. Indeed, ending a novel seems to GE almost unnatural. This is most evident in the finale of *Middlemarch*, in which she states that “Every limit is a beginning as well as an ending” (ELIOT, 2000, p. 683). Even if the proem and the epilogue might seem to critics and readers out of place in RML, they actually resemble most of

her other novels. The conclusion to *The Mill on the Floss* happens five years after the end of the events in the final chapter. Something similar happens in the epilogue of *Adam Bede* and in the conclusion of *Silas Marner*. The conclusion to *Felix Holt* moves just a few months ahead of the end of the events in the last chapter, but it is *Middlemarch* that most resembles the opening and closing of RML. The structure of proem and epilogue is repeated in *Middlemarch* as prelude and finale. As well as the proem to RML, the prelude to *Middlemarch* does not bear any obvious relation to the plot of the novel. As well as the epilogue, the finale does not conclude the novel, not in the sense of solving dilemmas or finding answers. GE probably thought that ending a novel with a resolution would not be true to her artistic project of avoiding "to represent things as they never have been and never will be" (ELIOT, 1980, p. 221).

The epilogue to RML certainly does not surrender itself to comprehension at a first reading. I agree that it does not seem entirely verisimilar for Romola to end up assuming Tito's role in his illegitimate family. However, as I have mentioned above, passages of RML that may strike us as particularly lacking in verisimilitude usually acquire significance when set in a historical and symbolical perspective. It has often been said that RML was written under the light of Comte's philosophy of history[20], whose influence in nineteenth-century Europe was wide-spread and reached thinkers of GE's circle such as John Stuart Mill, Herbert Spencer and George Henry Lewes, her husband. According to Comte's positivism, social history was an evolutionary process that would undergo three stages: the theological, the metaphysical and the positive. The theological stage is the era in which nature is understood as a living organism with which man interacts more or less harmoniously. In this phase man's understanding of the world is based on the idea of the existence of several personified gods and deities. The theological stage is one of belief. The advent of the metaphysical stage sees the disintegration of the theological and moves towards a replacement of concrete ideas with abstract concepts. In this phase, man and nature are freed from the domain of the supernatural. The metaphysical stage is one of humanist

[20] Some critics who subscribe to this view are Dorothea Barrett (2005), Felicia Bonaparte (1979), J. B. Bullen (1975), Bernard Paris (1962) and Leslie Stephen (1881).

rationalism. Finally, in the positive stage, natural phenomena are observable only through scientific observation and can no longer be explained by abstract or supernatural concepts such as the idea of god. The positive stage is one of confidence in man's ability to use his individual authority and free will for the best. It is, therefore, essentially utopian and shed some light on the events of the epilogue.

Indeed it is not difficult to see Romola progressing through her life according to these three stages Comte ascribes to historical development. At the beginning of the novel, Romola lives in her father's world. His dedication to Greek history, philosophy and values circumscribes him (and consequently Romola too) to the world of ancient Greek polytheism, thus roughly corresponding to Comte's first phase. Girolamo Savonarola's appearance in the novel, clearly represents the rise of Christianity in the western world. His conflicts with the Renaissance outlook (mainly represented by his divergences with the Medici) remind one of the conflicts between medieval Catholicism and the rising humanism, which is characteristic of the metaphysical phase in Comte's scheme. Finally, after Romola has broken free form the influence of her family circle, her former husband and her confessor and takes control of her own life, she seems to be moving to a positive stage in which she is the dominating authority in her own life. She has grown into a confident and altruistic human being and moved from being protected by her family to being the protector of her new one. The ideal person which she has become, just like Comte's third phase, entails a utopian concept. This correspondence may seem shrewd but, although there is more to the epilogue than a strict positivist allegory, it does shed some light on its apparent strangeness.

Although positivism may look to us today too inclined to reducing phenomena to easily explainable causes, it is not difficult to understand why it became so appealing to nineteenth-century thinkers. Some of its implications met GE's needs of a theoretical thought on which to base her ideas on moral and religious awareness. By the time she became acquainted with Comte's philosophy, her solid religious faith had been shaken. Soon she began redefining her own notions of God, religion and faith. Her intellectual musings were fertile soil for

Comte's ideas, which offered her a more systematic stand for her new unfolding outlook on the world. Positivism, says Bernard Paris (1962, p. 427) "led George Eliot to see reality as composed of an alien cosmos within which there exists a moral order", one of GE's main concerns with her artistic project being precisely the definition of a moral, social and religious order that would provide people with standards according to which they could lead their lives. In a society in which mythology and religion have ceased to perform the role of a moral order, GE rightly feels the necessity of finding "a coherent social faith and order which could perform the function of knowledge for the ardently willing soul" (ELIOT, 2000, p. 3). J. B. Bullen (1975, p. 426) states that Positivism "was a system which claimed to unite social order with progress by fusing the best of previous philosophies with modern enlightened humanitarianism". Enlightened humanitarianism was, just like Positivism, secular but at the same time shared principles with Christianity. The understanding to which Romola comes in the epilogue is the understanding that, although she can no longer bring herself to follow the precepts of Christianity, they are not all false or illusory. She can secularize the Christian values in which she truly believes and, at the same time, free herself from dogmatic constraints and set these values up as her own moral order. One that is conscious, human, political and social, but not dogmatic.

Readers and critics often complain about the awkwardness of the epilogue. If, on the one hand, it really seems unconvincing, it is also the practical realization of the philosophical perspective of the proem, and, in this sense, it is quite purposeful. More than being an illustration of utopian positivist ideals, the epilogue represents the worldview that GE developed throughout her life and which is announced in the proem. In it, she has Romola achieve the compromise at which she had been aiming: the compromise between leading a morally conscious life and breaking free from the oppression of dogmatic religions in which a moral attitude is induced by fear instead of being consciously constructed. "Although *Romola*, like most historical novels, is set at a specific time and place, it contains within it an allegorical account of the development of man's moral consciousness from the earliest times" (BULLEN, 1975, p. 5) and so GE has Romola achieve the independence and selflessness she thought humanity would

be able to achieve as it progressed historically to a more elevated spiritual, political and human level.

1.4 Setting and Historical Background

Many contemporary and even later critics of *Romola* thought that GE's choice of setting and historical background was both inadequate for a novel and useless for the purposes of this particular one. In October 1863, the same critic from the *Westminster Review* who stated that RML is "its author's greatest work" went on the express the opinion that

> We think it is to be regretted that *Romola* is an Italian story, and a story of the fifteenth century. By departing so far from the life around her she enters into a more full command of her whole material, which forces her to rely upon her imagination for those parts of her fable which the character of her mind strongly leads her to neglect. (ROMOLAb, 1863, p. 27)

The essay is anonymous, but the opinion is shared by other better known critics and historians of literature, Joan Bennett, Walter Allen and F. R. Leavis, for instance. As already mentioned, in writing RML, GE disappointed many of her readers' expectations by moving beyond the already established and, for her, worn out limits of the realistic novel. To allow her book to remain "a faithful account of man and things" (ELIOT, 1980, p. 221) and at the same time to be able to express her more and more complex view of the world, she stretched the limits of the English nineteenth-century novel form to include elements which were not usually recognized as belonging to it. Two of the most outstanding of these elements are the city of Florence as the setting and the end of the fifteenth century as the historical background.

The conservative literary criticism of the time was not prone to accept the introduction of such elements and the consequence of this is that "*Romola* does not fit our notions of what a novel ought to be" (BONAPARTE, 1979, p. 13). And what was expected from Eliot was that she would write a realistic novel. Fifteenth century and Florence could belong in a historical novel, one by Walter Scott, perhaps, with heroes and knights and ladies of the lake. When the device

was used by GE, it caused the impression of inadequacy. One of the central arguments of this work is that what GE was doing by writing *Romola* was something that the novel as a genre seemed to be ready to accept but that the contemporary reading public and literary criticism was not yet ready to grasp. Because Eliot was causing the novel to encompass a much wider range of life and art than it had encompassed hitherto, contemporary notions of what was or was not appropriate for a novel could not account for the purposes of *Romola*, purposes that, I believe, remain to this day very little understood.

In this section I wish to argue how coherent it is that GE should have made the very peculiar choice of Florence at the close of the fifteenth-century as the setting of her book. The anonymous reviewer I mention in the introduction thought the theme of *Romola* was as dead as "the bread and wine found in the ruins of Pompeii" (UNSIGNED, 1863, p. 169). I believe it is quite easy to demonstrate how utterly mistaken his argument is. At least since the appearance of the works of Sir Walter Scott and the nineteenth-century Romantic Movement, English writers have found much inspiration both in the Middle Ages and in Italy, the Renaissance, its art, politics and philosophy, being a very popular topic. A definite evidence that the theme is still of interest today is Salman Rushdie's novel *The Enchantress of Florence*, published in 2008. The book shares quite a few similarities with *Romola*, the most interesting to notice for the purposes of this thesis being that a great many chapters in it are also set in Florence at the close of the fifteenth-century. We find in Rushdie's novel the very same historical events we find in *Romola*: the death of Lorenzo de' Medici, the martyrdom of Girolamo Savonarola and all the political and social turmoil in Florence at that time. When Eliot wrote about it some one hundred and fifty years ago, critics received it "with a howl of discontent" (BONAPARTE, 1979, p. 1), but Rushdie's novel was deservedly received as "[A] splendid farrago … an all dancing colourful performance leaping up from the pages"[21]. This only demonstrates that the problem does not lie in GE's choice of setting and historical background but in the interpretation which is made of it.

[21] This was written by Stephen Abell and printed on the back cover of the first edition of *The Enchantress of Florence*.

Now why would GE, right in the middle of the nineteenth century, want to write about Florence and the Renaissance?

The obvious answer is she does not write only about Florence and the Renaissance but also a good deal about England and the nineteenth-century. “The issues she attacked in *Romola* were recognizably as true of the modern world as of the Renaissance” (BONAPARTE, 1979, p. 12). This has led some critics to believe that both the setting and historical background of RML are unnecessary. Are they?

1.4.1 Florence, “an almost unviolated symbol”

The city of Florence can claim to itself a title that no other place in the world would be eligible to claim: it is the birth place of the Renaissance. This single fact is enough to make it one of the most interesting places in the world, especially for artists and historians. George Eliot was both an artist and a historian. Many of her novels are great living pictures of history and *Romola* is no exception.

By the 1490’s, Florence was the home of artists and thinkers that reconfigured man’s understanding of himself and of his world. It was there and then that the Medieval world came to an undeniable end. It was there and then that mythology and religion began being replaced by science. The ideas developed in Florence in those decades shook the world upside down. The end of the fifteenth and the beginning of the sixteenth-centuries are the historical landmark that signals the emergence of the modern world. The city of Florence is its geographical landmark. It is not by chance that professor Felicia Bonaparte states that “Renaissance Italy was to all historical periods the most welcome to the Victorian reader” (1979, p. 11). I comment on some striking resemblances between the Renaissance and the Victorian era in the next section.

Florentine history, art and artists are one of the most probable reasons for GE’s choice of Florence as a setting. The city was either the home, the birthplace or the workplace (even if temporary) of Dante Alighieri, Sandro Botticelli, Niccolò Machiavelli, Piero di Cosimo, Raffaello Sanzio, Michelangelo

Buonarroti, Leonardo da Vinci and Filippo Brunelleschi, just to name the most celebrated artists. What do they have in common? All of them, apart from Dante, lived and created during the Renaissance, but, more than that, to include Dante, all of them were artists who managed to join in their art tradition and modernity by providing their works of art with classical beauty and essentially new perspectives. Let us take Filippo Brunelleschi as an example. He is the author of a work of art which has been the pride and joy of Florence for more than five hundred years: the dome of Santa Maria del Fiore cathedral, one of the biggest domes in the world.

The construction of the cathedral had started in 1296 and one hundred twenty four years later, in 1420, it still lacked a dome. When Cosimo de' Medici commissioned the building of a dome from Brunelleschi (see PBS, 2004), the city began to feel anxious and incredulous that their cathedral would finally be completed. Both political and religious authorities were eager to see the work successfully concluded. The pressure on the architect was heavy. When he came up with a bold project proposing the construction of the largest unsupported dome in the western world, the feeling of incredulity was general. For inspiration, Brunelleschi looked back to the Pantheon, in Rome, the largest free standing dome to survive in the world until then. Knowledge of the architectural technique used in the construction of the Pantheon had long been lost and remained a mystery. Joining the hints from the structure of the Pantheon, much hard work and artistic genius, Brunelleschi accomplished what then seemed impossible: the successful planning and construction of the largest unsupported dome the Christian world had ever seen. His essentially modern perspective on an ancient structure enabled the creation of a unique work of art. It stands there today, more than five centuries later, definite evidence of Filippo Brunelleschi's genius and of Renaissance daring and craft.

The city of Florence is also an epitome of a latent, although clearly designed, theme in *Romola*: the clash of Christianity and paganism. The very architecture and organization of the city reflect this clash. At the historic centre of Florence, we find the two most important spots in the city: the area around the Palazzo Vecchio, Florence's political and administrative centre at the time of RML,

and the area around Santa Maria del Fiore, Florence's cathedral. These were the busiest spots in town then and are still the busiest today, providing Florence's most famous tourist attractions and post card images.

The Piazza della Signoria, which opens up in front of the Palazzo Vecchio is fully decorated with pagan images. At the door of the Palazzo stand two magnificent sculptures: a copy of Michaelangelo's David (1501-1504)[22] and Bandinelli's Hercules and Cacus (1533). In the Loggia dei Lanzi, just to the left of the Palazzo, is the famous Perseus (1554), by Benvenuto Cellini. There are also Giambologna's well-known The Rape of the Sabine Women (1583) and Hercules and the Centaur (1599). But probably the most celebrated monument in the Piazza is the fountain of Neptune (1563-1575), to the right of the Palazzo. These are works of art that pay tribute to pagan Greek gods and heroes. However, just a few steps from the fountain, right in the middle of the Piazza della Signoria, stands the site of Girolamo Savonarola's martyrdom, just like a flash of Christianity in a pagan temple. Of course there was no commemorative plaque at the time of RML, but the awareness that that had been the spot where he had been burnt to death had been there ever since the event occurred. Savonarola's death was not remarkable to GE only, but also to the Christian community as a whole, to historians and to artists interested in the period. The number of paintings that depict the event testify to its impact and Salman Rushdie's 2008 novel, *The Enchantress of Florence*, is definite evidence of the enduring appeal of the theme to artists.

Santa Maria del Fiore cathedral and the Florence Baptistery, Christian counterparts of the pagan Piazza della Signoria, stand just four or five blocks away in a straight line. Following her design of juxtaposing Christianity and paganism, GE chose Piazza San Giovani, which surrounds the Baptistery, as the location of Nello's shop. The barber thus describes his own shop:

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[22] Michelangelo's *David* was first displayed publicly on the 8th September, 1504 and it was placed at the entrance to the Palazzo Vecchio, then called Palazzo della Signoria, the seat of Florentine government. Its position eventually turned the sculpture into a symbol of the city's constantly threatened political freedom and independence as a city-state. Although the theme is biblical, the style is of pre-Christian Greek pagan sculpture. The statue that now stands at the entrance to the Palazzo is a copy. The original by Michelangelo has been moved to the Galleria dell'Academia.

> Ah, Messer Greco, if you want to know the flavour of our scholarship, you must frequent my shop: it is the focus of Florentine intellect, and in that sense the navel of the earth--as my great predecessor, Burchiello, said of *his* shop, on the more frivolous pretension that his street of the Calimala was the centre of our city. And here we are at the sign of "Apollo and the Razor." Apollo, you see, is bestowing the razor on the Triptolemus of our craft, the first reaper of beards, the sublime *Anonimo*, whose mysterious identity is indicated by a shadowy hand.' (ELIOT, 2005, p. 33).

Just like the site of Savonarola's martyrdom in the middle of the Piazza della Signoria, Nello's shop stands as a pagan spot (although a fictional one) in the middle of Piazza San Giovani, the Christian centre of Florence. His shop is not directly but always symbolically associated with pagan motifs. His references are to the poet Burchiello[23], on whom Nello is probably based, who wrote satirical and critical poetry; to Apollo, Greek god of knowledge, to whom Nello sometimes identifies Tito and to Triptolemus, a character from Greek myth.

These being some of the most important places in *Romola*, a great deal of the action naturally happens in or around these places. Indeed the very first sentence in chapter one is "The Loggia de' Cerchi stood in the heart of old Florence" (ELIOT, 2005, p. 11)

The 'Loggia de' Cerchi', house belonging to the ancient family of which it takes its name, stands on the corner of Via dei Cerchi and Via dei Cimatori, just two blocks away from the Palazzo Vecchio and almost halfway between the Palazzo and the cathedral. It is there that the story starts, "under this loggia, in the early morning of the ninth of April 1492" (ibidem) and from there Bratti Ferravecchi and Tito Melema, the first characters we get in touch with, walk to Florence's old market, the Mercato Vecchio[24], where Tito is going to meet Tessa.

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[23] Domenico di Giovanni, *aka* Burchiello (1404-1449) was a Florentine poet who worked as a barber and kept a shop on Via Calimala in Florence. His shop was frequented by artists and intellectuals of Florence at that time. Both his poetry and his life were marked by a satirical and political strain which differentiated him from the so many poets writing religious verses at the time. Burchiello opposed the rule of the Medici and Florence and was exiled by Cosimo, Il Vecchio (the first Medici to become a powerful ruler of Florence) in 1434. He died fifteen years later in Rome.

[24] The Mercato Vecchio is one of the few sites mentioned in *Romola* which has not been preserved. It stood at the site of the Roman Forum in ancient Florence and was torn down between 1885 and 1895 to make room for the Piazza della Repubblica (STOPANI, 2008, p. 8), which stands half way between the Palazzo Vecchio and the Florence cathedral. It was a vital spot in the social life of Florence up to the

GE uses the Mercato Vecchio to characterize the flow of ordinary life in Florence. There the simple people worked, traded, met, gossiped and talked about politics, religion, art, literature and philosophy. Everything that was happening in the city's private and public life passed though the Mercato.

The street where Romola and Bardo live, the Via de' Bardi, lies just across the Ponte Vecchio, four blocks away from the Palazzo. The church and convent of San Marco, where Savonarola lives and where Romola goes to see her dying brother Dino, is five blocks to the northeast of Santa Maria del Fiore cathedral. It is in San Marco that Romola first meets Savonarola. Apparently, and apparently only, the importance of Romola's visit to the convent is to listen to her brother's vision, which turns out to be prophetic and acquires special significance later on in the novel. However, the scene is also of vital importance in the sense that it foreshadows many of the developments of the plot.

To the standards of the time, Romola was a woman with a particularly independent spirit. Because of the peculiar character of her father, she had, for instance, access to a library. She would often read and write for him, which provided her with an intellectual stand not to be found among the bulk of Florentine women at that time. From her father, Romola learned disregard, sometimes even rebellious hatred, for the Roman Catholic Church. The idea of visiting her dying brother in a convent under the care of a Dominican friar was far from comfortable to her. She knew of Savonarola's fame and arrived at San Marco with a warning in her heart against him. However, when she eventually found herself in his presence, deep feelings were stirred.

> Romola felt certain they were the features of Fra Girolamo Savonarola, the prior of San Marco, whom she had chiefly thought of as more offensive than other monks, because he was more noisy. Her rebellion was rising against the first impression, which had almost forced her to bend her knees.
> 'Kneel, my daughter,' the penetrating voice said again, 'the pride of the body is a barrier against the gifts that purify the soul.'
> He was looking at her with mild fixedness while he spoke, and again she felt that subtle mysterious influence of a personality by which it has been given to some rare men to move their fellows. (ELIOT, 2005, p.157).

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nineteenth century and therefore fit to Eliot's purposes of using the city as a symbolic floor plan to her novel.

Knowing Romola as an intelligent, independent and rebellious young lady, one might be tempted to think, as I was when I first read the novel, that she would sooner laugh right across the prior's face than submit to his humiliating order that she should kneel down. However, the narrator goes on to state that "slowly Romola fell on her knees, and in the very act a tremor came over her; in the renunciation of her proud erectness, her mental attitude seemed changed, and she found herself in a new state of passiveness" (ibidem).

Thus Romola submits to Savonarola's guidance and symbolically to everything that he represents, entering a state of 'renunciation' and 'passiveness' apparently contradicting her personality and 'proud erectness'. Her submission to him is a symbolic event that works in more levels than one. It represents things as diverse as female submission to male dominance, the submission of social, political and religious rebelliousness to socially accepted patterns of behaviour and, in a wider sense, it represents conversion to Christianity.

The choice of Florence for a setting has been one of the most frequent complaints critics have had against RML. "We do not recognize the truth of detail in a description of public life so remote from us as we should the features of our own" (ROMOLAb, 1863, p. 28). It seems criticism has consistently overlooked the fact that Florence "is important not as a curious and ornamental adjunct to the story but as an effective means of adding dimension and verisimilitude to the characters" (HUZZARD, 1957, p. 159). Florence, perhaps more than most cities in the world, and certainly much more in GE's time than today, is a city that provokes a strong visual impact on passers-by. The city is an open air museum: everywhere works of art bring the Medieval world back to life. The great Palazzo Vecchio keeps the Florentine political fuss alive while the imposing cathedral constantly reminds one of the power of God. One of the most impressive religious images found in the city is the painting of Christ on the ceiling of the Baptistery. It is a huge image of Christ with open arms showing his crucifixion wounds. It dominates the ceiling and imposes itself on whomever looks up at entering the Baptistery. The image was certainly designed with the intention of proving the power of Christ, at which I believe it to be immensely successful. It is so today. It

must have been even more successful at the time of Eliot and undeniably powerful at the time of *Romola*. It is able to provoke a strong emotional reaction similar to the reaction of Romola when she kneels down at the command of Savonarola.

The visual impact that the city of Florence causes on people, its symbolic and historical power and the ways in which it is reminiscent of the Middle Ages render all the characters and events in RML much more verisimilar and credible than if they were set anywhere else in the world. A different setting would only make sense for a completely different story and very different characters.

A number of readings of RML, especially early ones, have also overlooked GE's justifications for her choice of setting included in the very text of the novel. On the opening page GE presents Florence "as an almost unviolated symbol" (ELIOT, 2005, p. 1), thus hinting at the city's role of symbolic floor plan to the novel. Her choice of setting and historical period raise the question of where history ends and fiction begins, so she intertwines the lives of her characters to the flow of history in such a way as to make it clear that one interferes with the other. This GE states more clearly than elsewhere in the opening of the second book of Romola, where she states that "the fortunes of Tito and Romola were dependent on certain grand political and social conditions which made an epoch in the history of Italy" (ELIOT, 2005, p. 205).

The changes that happen to come over the prospects of Florence, we learn from reading *Romola*, necessarily come over the prospects of its inhabitants and vice-versa. This is no different from what happens in any other novel by Eliot. Through her readings in history and philosophy, she came to develop a worldview in which all aspects of life – psychological, political, sociological – are always interrelated. We must not forget that GE was a student of the works of Auguste Comte, one of the founders of sociology as a discipline, and of Baruch Spinoza, a meticulous determinist. Her characters never exist *in vacuo* and the historical background of her stories are never mere background.

1.4.2 The Historical Background: "In the mid spring-time of 1492"

It was certainly not by coincidence that GE picked 1492 and the day of the death of Lorenzo, Il Magnifico as the date in which to open her novel. The choice was, of course, very much in accordance with the reasons why she chose Florence as the setting. Most of GE's life concerns (history, art, religion, politics and morals) were being fervently discussed in Florence by the end of the fifteenth-century.

> As is well known, the final quarter of the fifteenth century, particularly the last decade, was one of the most volatile periods in Florentine history, traversed by deep and unsettled currents of political, religious and moral reform. (...) In the 1490s, Florentines witnessed the passionate but ill-destined flash of religious fervour from Savonarola's pulpit and the awesome moment of his demise at the stake in 1498. Plagues (...) as well as typhus and French pox ravaged the city throughout the same troubled decade at the century's close. A row of poor grain harvests led to catastrophic famines, pushing the city even closer to breaking point (GERONIMUS, 2006, p. 3-4).

Both the city and the period provided GE with the perfect material to join these concerns with her developing artistic aims. As already mentioned elsewhere in this work, by using the plot as a symbolic representation of western society's development, GE leads RML to achieve epic proportions. This has long been overlooked and has lead several critics to share Sir Leslie Stephen's (in HAIGHT, 1965) opinion that because so many of the issues addressed in RML were of contemporary concern, the setting and the historical period were unnecessary, especially because by drifting away from the England and the nineteenth-century that Eliot knew so well, she could not rely on her keen powers of observation for composing the fictional universe and characters of her novel. The 1863 anonymous reviewer of *The Westminster Review* wrote he wished "Romola had been a modern English woman, she having so much more the character of one than that of an Italian lady of four centuries since". He then proceeds to state that "we cannot escape from the feeling that the chief interest of *Romola* reposes on ideas of moral duty and of right which are of very modern

growth and that they would have been more appropriately displayed on a modern stage" (ROMOLAb, 1863, p. 29).

Had Eliot set RML in her own time and country, as she did with most of her novels, she would not have been able to delineate *Romola*'s epic contours. The familiarity with the context, which elsewhere helped her draw her portraits with verisimilitude, would have hindered the sense of epic distance, both temporal and geographical, that we experience from RML.

It might have appeared to contemporary readers that GE's choice of setting and historical background was random or outdated but further investigation very soon reveals there is a very clear and an even magnificent design behind it. Nothing in RML is accidental. Eliot decides to open her novel "in the early morning of the ninth of April 1492" (ELIOT, 2005, p.11). When talking about the impact science has had on mythological thinking in *Myths to Live By*, Joseph Campbell says:

> I like to think of the year 1492 as marking the end – or at least the beginning of the end – of the authority of the old mythological systems by which the lives of men had been supported and inspired from time out of mind. Shortly after Columbus's epochal voyage, Magellan circumnavigated the globe. Shortly before, Vasco da Gama had sailed around Africa to India. The Earth was beginning to be systematically explored, and the old, symbolic, mythological geographies discredited (CAMPBELL, 1993, p. 6).

In the proem, when GE presents Florence and the close of the fifteenth-century to the readers, she also mentions Columbus and expresses her awareness of the impact of this moment in history even more clearly by stating that both the city and the period will impress on its inhabitants marks "that will be broader and deeper than all possible change" (ELIOT, 2005, p. 2). Setting the story in Renaissance Florence and allowing an angel of the dawn to fly across the western world and a mysterious narrator to question himself about "the life-currents that ebb and flow in human hearts" (ibidem, p. 1) in the proem enables GE to imply from the very beginning that RML is not only a book about the history of Florence or of England. RML is a novel about history itself. I do not mean to imply that her other novels are not also about history, just that RML is more

strongly and more self-consciously so. GE chose one of the historical periods that most appeals to artists (and indeed to anyone interested in history) and one that certainly appealed greatly to her and to her contemporaries. And having chosen the Renaissance, Florence, its birthplace, would naturally have to come along.

To dismiss the setting and historical background of RML on the grounds that the treatment of issues contemporary to the Victorians make them unnecessary means to imply a superficial view of GE's dealing with the Renaissance and, indeed, a naïve view of history. If treating of contemporary issues made the dive into the past unnecessary, historical novels would not appeal to the reading public so strongly as the novels of Walter Scott did in the nineteenth-century.

In the novels of GE, the past is always alive in that it greatly determines where characters' affections and values lie. There is usually a strong bond between past and affection and we often see how characters are a strange mixture of their past, the affections acquired in it and their present. When Tito sells Bardo's library, for instance, he does not only betray Romola's trust, he betrays her past, her father's memories and the dear affections attached to it. One of the greatest dilemmas Romola has to deal with is how to reconcile her past affections, represented by her father, brother and godfather and by the values they stand for, with her present affections, represented by Tito and, later, by Savonarola. Maggie Tulliver struggles with the same dilemma. So many of her passions and desires seem to clash with her past affections, represented by her strong family ties, especially by her narrow-minded brother Tom. "The loves and sanctities of our life", writes Eliot in *The Mill on the Floss*, have "deep immovable roots in memory" (2002, p. 171). The past (which exists in our memories) is that which makes us what we are. What happens in RML is that, it being full of an epic intent, the book deals more with the sense of community than with the idea of individuals. The community in question is western society and therefore, it is to its past that it proves necessary to look back in order to understand what the present has become. In his *The Theory of the Novel*, Georg Lukács examines the novel form, in great part, as related to the ancient epic literature of Greece. "The novel", he famously states, "is the epic of an age in which the extensive totality of

life has become a problem, yet which still thinks in terms of totality" (LUKÁCS, 1983a, p. 56). GE symbolically recreates aspects of the world of ancient Greece and Rome in Bardo and in Tito and makes them phases in Romola's life, just like the times of ancient Greece and Rome are phases in the history of western society. Having thus represented the historical period to which the epic belongs, she is free to set her story in the Renaissance, a time with particular potential for the development of epic thinking. Lukács believes that "in Giotto and Dante, (...) the world became round once more, a totality capable of being taken in at a glance" (ibidem, p. 37). In *Romola*, GE goes back to about a century after the deaths of Giotto and Dante, both of which are present, even named, in her book, when those regained roundness and totality were about to collapse again. The chaos following Lorenzo de' Medici's death is a sure sign of the eminent collapse, of a society still thinking in terms of totality when one can hardly be found. The spirit in the proem, watching the whole of Florence from the top of San Miniato Hill, is a last attempt of taking a totality in at a glance. His hesitation to go down to the streets again points at the loss of the immanence of meaning in life that Lukács establishes as a defining characteristic of the world which produced the novel form.

It would be extremely hard, if not impossible, to look back at thousands of years in a single novel. What Eliot does is to move back to the point in history which sees the decisive emergence of modern man. When trying to account for the Renaissance in 1860, Jacob Burckhardt (1878) referred to it as the "civilization which is the mother of our own, and whose influence is still at work among us"[25]. It is therefore only natural that the issues GE addresses in RML be contemporary to the Victorian era. "Like other historical novels before and after it (...) *Romola* creates an entire network of correspondences between the time

[25] The view of the Renaissance as the birth of modern man, although widespread, is not consensual. Burckhardt proposed this interpretation in 1860, when GE was already working on *Romola*, but there are no evidences that she ever read this work. It was only translated into English in 1878, which would not have prevented GE from reading it beforehand, since she was proficient in German, its original language. The importance of the publication of Burckhardt's work for *Romola* does not reside in Eliot's having read it or not, but in the fact that his acknowledgement of the influence of the Renaissance upon Europe signals that the idea was already in the air. *Romola*, I believe, is evidence that GE was of the same opinion.

of its setting and that in which it is written" (BARRETT, 2005, p. xiii). Italy has often appealed to the imagination of British writers – we only need to look at the number of plays by Shakespeare and his contemporaries set there for evidence of that. During the Romantic Movement of the first half of the nineteenth-century, perhaps more than at any other time, the interest in Italy was great. The works of Shelley, Byron, Mary Shelley and of the gothic novelists testify to this. Although it looked unusual for Victorians to see GE writing about Italy, she was by no means doing something unseen. Also, as already noted, by writing about Renaissance Italy and establishing this network of correspondences, she ends up writing about England too.

> When George Eliot chose the place and the time for the setting of her 'historical romance', she was doubtless attracted by the apparent similarities between the Florence of Savonarola and the England of Cardinal Newman. There was a similar cleavage of thought between the Renaissance humanists and the religious reformers as there was in the nineteenth century between the rationalists and the religious revivalists (whether High Anglican or Evangelical). In both periods there was strong hope and belief in the expansion of human knowledge and power; there was also, among Christian believers in both periods, the recognition of a relaxation and even corruption in Church teaching and of a consequent deterioration in human conduct, resulting in a zealous desire to reform the Church (BENNETT, 1966, p. 148-9)

The political, religious and artistic turbulence of Florence at the close of the fifteenth-century is echoed by similar turbulence in Victorian Britain, a society that has been trying to accommodate the changes brought on itself by the industrial, scientific, and French revolutions. The emergence of Renaissance art is echoed by the recent emergence of Romantic art. The ebb and flow of the power of Florence as a state calls to mind the situation of the British empire, just established as the most powerful empire in the world.

But correspondences are not only between Renaissance Florence and Victorian Britain. By the time RML was being serialized, the political situation in Italy had strong resonances in England.

> The early 1860s was a crucial moment in Italian history. As George Eliot was 'industriously foraging – in old streets and old books', the long-awaited unification of Italy was being accomplished. (...) It was the end

> of a struggle that had fascinated British writers throughout the nineteenth century. For Byron, Shelley, and later for Swinburne, the republican struggle in Italy was symbolic of all movements for political freedom. In Victorian Britain, the campaign for electoral reform (which is central to George Eliot's next two novels, *Felix Holt* and *Middlemarch*) was the most successful movement of this kind. For Victorian readers, then, there was an unspoken contemporary dimension to the story of Savonarola's struggle for republican government, a triangle of correspondences between Renaissance Florence, nineteenth-century Italy and Victorian Britain (BARRETT, 2005, p. xiii).

Several other complex correspondences could be pointed out, such as the role of women in society, well problematised by Romola and always an important theme in GE's novels. GE's reliance on the power of image, in the tradition of *ut pictura poesis*, her redefinition of religion and her creation, in RML, of a new kind of art that joins the old and the new could all be interpreted in terms of correspondences with the Renaissance. I discuss more carefully about the role of history and historical awareness in RML along the next two chapters.

Much more than historical background, the Florentine fifteenth-century is the canvas on which GE paints her portraits and the symbolic mirror of our own world, one through which we manage more easily to look at the workings of our own society, one which can "remind us that we still resemble the men of the past more than we differ from them" (ELIOT, 2005, p. 1-2).

2. GENRES: "A NEW ORDER OF THINGS"

> "Artistic genres now cut across one another, with a complexity that cannot be disentangled, and become traces of authentic or false searching for an aim that is no longer clearly and unequivocally given."
> Gerog Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*

The English novel is now entering its third century of existence. One would think that it is about time we should know exactly what it is. Yet there is still much discussion about the forms, origins, motivations, peculiarities and future elaboration of the genre. Among the many theories of the novel, one of the most celebrated is certainly Georg Lukács's 1916 book, in which he famously stated that the novel is "the mirror image of a world gone out of joint" (1983, p. 17). I agree with this although I think some of the implications Lukács develops out of this statement have complicated the critical reception of a considerable number of British novels.

When I researched about Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* a few years ago, I was very surprised to notice that it was almost absent from most of the histories and compendiums of English literature available to me. The records that did exist were often small and superficial. I was even more intrigued by the fact that Jane Austen's novels were often given as examples of the prose literature produced during the English Romanticism, when I was precisely arguing that *Frankenstein* was the ideal representative.[26] This research lead me on to see that several other novels of the period were also neglected by the histories and compendiums. Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, Bram Stocker's *Dracula*, Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* and Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* are just a few examples of novels which were often treated as minor works or not even treated at all. It took me another few years to notice that George Eliot's *Romola* was also one of these.

What these novels have in common is not too hard to see. They were all written when the novel was a rising genre but already very popular with the British reading public and slowly on its way to becoming a prestigious genre.

[26] For more on this see DONADA, Jaqueline Bohn. "Spontaneous Overflow of Powerful Feelings": Romantic Imagery in Mary Shelley's Frankenstein. Saarbrücken: VDM Verlag Dr. Muller, 2009.

However, they present a very different view on art than the view of those novels considered to be the founders of the genre, namely, the novels of Daniel Defoe, Samuel Richardson and Henry Fielding[27]. These early novelists aimed at "the production of what purports to be an authentic account of the actual experience of individuals" (WATT, 1959, p. 26). When the nineteenth century novels I mention above (along, of course, with many others) started to make room for elements that reached beyond actual experience like the suggestion of the supernatural, the extreme feelings of passion, violence and hatred, Frankenstein's romantic contemplation of nature or Catherine Earnshaw's tragic incapability of choosing between nature and culture, it was felt that they were breaking the rule. They were therefore considered the negative pole of an opposition with the previous novels.

A good deal of what Lukács argues about the novel is influenced by Hegel's monumental system of the arts outlined in his *Aesthetics*, in which he argued that the novel is the epic of the bourgeoisie. Lukács's development of this idea is brilliant and fundamental for any study of the novel. It is not entirely impartial though. When he wrote that "the novel is the epic of an age in which the extensive totality of life is no longer directly given (...) yet which still thinks in terms of totality" (1983a, p. 56), he defined the novel as a genre which lacks something and the epic as the ideal, although lost, literary form. Lukács himself acknowledged that he wrote *The Theory of the Novel* in the despair of the First World War. His tendency to see in his present time (domain of the novel) a world gone out of joint and to look for meaning at a distant, ideal past (domain of the epic) is comprehensible. However, his expansion of Hegel's proposition established a hierarchical relationship between the epic and the novel, setting these genres into a binary opposition. The epic, naturally, was charged with the positive value.

A hierarchical relationship between genres is at the root of the negative reaction the previously mentioned nineteenth century novels received.[28]

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[27] I share Ian Watt's position that the novel originated in the first half of the eighteenth-century with these writers.

[28] I do not claim the hierarchical relationship between genres is the only cause of the negative critical reception of these novels. Questions of human and social values and morals, more or less accepted at certain times, and the passage of literary schools and periods also have an enormous influence on the

As an emerging genre, the novel remained marginal for several years after its definite appearance in the British Islands in the eighteenth century. New genres tend to initially remain marginal, but, in the case of the novel, its rise to prestige sent another important genre to marginality, causing many works to be appraised not for their inherent literary qualities (or for the lack of them) but for failing to be what was expected from a novel. Let us remember, as I have already quoted and shall quote again, that the overall problem highlighted throughout RML's complicated critical fortune is that it "does not fit our notions of what a novel ought to be" (BONAPARTE, 1979, p. 13), even if these notions are not precisely defined. The other important genre marginalized by the novel is, of course, the romance and if we look back at the titles I mentioned in the opening of this chapter, we realize that they depart from the epic objectivity and from the novel's depiction of everyday life by transcending objective reality through romance features. I comment further on this below.

Theorization on literary genres is, of course, very old and dates back to Aristotle, but the time of the rise of the novel in the eighteenth century "was also a time of unprecedented theorizing on literary genres, particularly the epic and the novel" (FUSILO, 2006, p. 50). As "the epic has always been enveloped in a sacred aura" (ibidem, p. 41), as the works of Hegel and Lukács reinforce, so the novel was aware of its secondary condition from the beginning. One of the strategies employed by early novelists to overcome its marginality was precisely to claim kinship with the epic. To see this strategy in practise, we can look at the preface to a very important and seminal novel, Henry Fielding's *Joseph Andrews*. By the time it was published, 1742, there was such a clear awareness of the newness of the novel form that Fielding felt compelled to say a word to his readers about the kind of book he had just written. These are his words,

> AS IT IS POSSIBLE the mere English reader may have a different idea of romance from the author of these little volumes, and may consequently expect a kind of entertainment not to be found, nor which was even intended, in the following pages, it may not be improper to premise a few

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critical reception of art works. However, the hierarchy between genres is a deeper, and often more silent, cause. It is therefore vital that it should be discussed.

> words concerning this kind of writing, which I do not remember to have seen hitherto attempted in our language (FIELDING, 2004, p.21).

Some of the works generally considered the first English novels had already been published,[29] but what Fielding sees as unattempted is the introduction of distinctly epic conventions into the novel. He starts from differentiating his book from the then popular romances[30], states the originality of his work and proceeds to describe it as an epic, although excusing it for not presenting one of its constituent elements, the metre. Fielding legitimates the kinship of his book with the epic by stating that "when any kind of writing contains all its other parts, such as fable, action, characters, sentiments, and diction, and is deficient in metre only, it seems, I think, reasonable to refer it to the epic" (ibidem, p. 21). His is not a work just like Homer's though. He proceeds to explain his book is a "comic epic poem in prose" (ibidem, p. 21) and takes care to differentiate this from both pastiche and burlesque. He seems satisfied to conclude that he has "thus distinguished Joseph Andrews from the productions of romance writers on the one hand and burlesque writers on the other" (ibidem, p. 26). Not by coincidence, he models *Joseph Andrews* on *Don Quixote*, a literary hybrid no more epic than novel or vice-versa.

Fielding's preface is not an isolated case. Several others could be remembered but I recall the preface Percy Shelley wrote to *Frankenstein*, in 1818. Because he knew its publication would be a scandal, as indeed it was, he tried to link the book to more canonical works. In the name of Mary Shelley, he wrote that

> I have thus endeavoured to preserve the truth of the elementary principles of human nature, while I have not scrupled to innovate upon their combinations. The *Iliad*, the tragic poetry of Greece, Shakespeare in *The Tempest* and *Midsummer Night's Dream*, and most especially Milton in *Paradise Lost* conform to this rule. (SHELLEY, 1994, p. 11)

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[29] *Robinson Crusoe* had been published in 1719 and *Moll Flanders* in 1722. Samuel Richardson had published his *Pamela* in 1740, but *Clarissa* would not come out until 1748.

[30] A few paragraphs ahead in his preface, Fielding actually claims that "those voluminous works, commonly called Romances, namely, Clelia, Cleopatra, Astraea, Cassandra, the Grand Cyrus, and innumerable others, (...) contain, as I apprehend, very little instruction or entertainment." (2004, p. 21). This exemplifies how much the novel subjected the romance to obscurity by declaring difference from it and affiliation with the epic.

It is also not by coincidence that *Frankenstein* refers to these books in particular. The references were meant to help the book acquire respectability and literary status. The novel rose to prestige quickly and naturally, but this prestige set it again in a binary opposition, this time with the romance, which was charged with the negative value. This hierarchy has influenced the history of English literature and has, in great part, determined which novels will get a place of evidence in this history and which will not. I believe this hierarchy to be one of the main reasons why Jane Austen's novels are recorded as a product of the English romantic period whereas *Frankenstein*, the more natural representative, is never mentioned as such[31]. So far, the hierarchy has confined RML to the background of English literature. Demonstrating the inadequacy of this accident is the main goal of this work. It seems to me that RML is a very early but appropriate translation to artistic form of Lukács's insight that, with the rise of the novel, artistic genres cut across one another like never before. However, unlike Henry Fielding, GE never wrote a preface to explain in what the newness of her book consisted, so this dissertation is an effort at accounting for this newness with hopes that GE herself would not entirely disagree with what is in these pages. What follows in this chapter aims at uncovering some of the mechanisms through which GE rearranges these artistic genres and effaces any hierarchy among them.

2.1 Novel, Romance and Epic

> First, the novel is for us a great anthropological force, which has turned reading into a pleasure and redefined the sense of reality, the meaning of individual existence, the perception of time and language. The novel as culture, then, but certainly also as form, or rather forms, plural, because in the thousand years of its history one encounters the strangest creations, and high and low trade places at every opportunity, as the borders of literature are continuously, unpredictably expanded. At times, this endless flexibility borders on chaos. But thanks to it, the novel becomes the first truly planetary form: a phoenix always ready to take flight in a new direction, and to find the right language for the next generation of readers. (Franco Moretti, *The Novel*)

[31] Jane Austen's novels, with their elegance and balance were much more respectful than *Frankenstein*, with its violence of feelings, and were therefore considered more appropriate to represent the nation during Romanticism.

This epigraph is here because much of what Franco Moretti says in it is strongly relevant to my discussion of RML. The novel's flexibility, he says, borders on chaos, and RML is definite proof of that. The impression that it caused when first published was exactly that of chaos. That is mainly why Felicia Bonaparte summarizes the bulk of the criticism on RML by stating that it fails to fit our notions of what a novel should be like. The notion that the novel has forms, in the plural, although not new, has just quite recently been assimilated. Mutations in the form were not always seen as a potentiality of the genre as much as they were seen as disruptions of the norm.

RML, beautiful and neglected as I argue it is, is certainly one of the strange creations to be found in the history of the novel. What is not entirely agreed upon is that such history is thousands of years old. The general disagreement over this seemingly small detail is actually one of the main sources of the common dissatisfaction regarding RML. "The Western obsession with origins", in Massimo Fisulo's phrase (2006, p. 39) has produced many accounts of the many alleged origins of the novel: British literary critic and historian Ian Watt (1959), in his classic *The Rise of the Novel*, makes a very specific point to argue that the novel emerged in the eighteenth century and in Britain, out of the writings of Defoe, Richardson and Fielding. Walter Allen (1975), also a British critic, places the appearance of the novel around the1700s and sees *Don Quixote* as the single book which has had the most influence in shaping the English novel, the first clear mark of its influence in the British Isles being Henry Fielding's 1742 *Joseph Andrews*. Both believe the novel to be a completely new genre and both try to account for its emergence through detailed studies of the social, historical and philosophic conditions that enabled such emergence. Georg Lukács also understands the novel as "an entirely new form" (1983, p. 41) but he speaks from his Hegelian point of view, in which history (and consequently literature) evolves to an end. Therefore he traces a line of development from the ancient epic down to the modern novel, which is, for him, "the epic of an age in which (...) the immanence of meaning in life has become a problem" (1983, p. 56). Like Watt and Allen, Lukács sees the novel as a new genre which has come into existence out of

a new social, historical and philosophical context. Unlike them, however, he ties the appearance of the novel to the disappearance of the epic. This is equivalent with saying that he sees the appearance of the social, historical and philosophic conditions for the birth of the novel as resulting from the disappearance of the social, historical and philosophic conditions for the existence of the epic.

A third major line of thought on the origins of the novel, acknowledged by Watt and Allen, but more consistently theorised by Northrop Frye, is that "the novel was a realistic displacement of romance, and had few structural features peculiar to itself" (FRYE, 1975, p. 38). This echoes Watt's statement that the novel originated as a reaction against "the old fashioned romances" (WATT, 1959, p.9). However, whereas Lukács sees the novel as an evolution of the epic, almost its natural consequence, Watt, with Allen, simply considers the novel as a reaction against the romance without going deep into claiming the existence of a line of succession from the former to the latter. Northrop Frye does not trace a line of succession from the romance to the novel either, but claims for the contiguity of both forms. He studies the romance in general terms throughout his work and more systematically in his book *The Secular Scripture. A Study of the Structure of Romance*. Frye, like Watt, Allen and Lukács, also places the advent of the novel somewhere in the early eighteenth century. This date being taken for granted by these four scholars, in this work, I assume rather than argue its validity[32].

The apparent contradiction between Watt's and Frye's argument (that the novel originated out of the romance) and Lukács's argument (that it evolved from the epic) reveals the problematics of the study of the novel: its origins,

[32] Some more recent studies tend to locate the birth of the novel earlier and earlier in time, sometimes reaching back even to Homer's *Odyssey*. Although they do work with consistent and plausible arguments, they seem to be echoing what Massimo Fusilo calls "the Western obsession with origins". Their efforts to establish a kind of antiquity for the novel, despite uncovering some valuable information, dissolve the concept of novel until it can hardly be understood as a genre. They also fail to notice that what they trace back to ancient Greece, rather than the novel form as we know it today, is a set of characteristics that will eventually belong to the novel, but whose presence in a given work does not transform an ancient epic or a medieval romance into a modern novel. I believe the existence of these characteristics is not evidence that the novel is an ancient form. It is just a sign of the obvious proposition that it did not originate from night to day, but had been on the make for a very long time. For more on this see FUSILO, 2006, p. 32-41. See also ALLEN, 1975, p. 13, in which he echoes Fusilo's opinion by stating that "the newness of the [novel] form made historians provide it with an unnecessary respectable antiquity".

influences and defining features are so many that consensus on them is still a fiction (with the many implications of the word “fiction”). Many have been the theories of the novel. Many have complemented each other and many have contradicted each other. I do not intend to present yet another. Instead, I aim at joining the pieces of the puzzle together in order to achieve a fuller understanding of the mechanism of the novel and, most of all, of how GE operates it in RML.

I believe Baktin hits the right mark when he states that the great difficulty in outlining a theory of the novel is precisely its newness. No matter how much critics and historians have tried to pin down the exact origins of the novel, its appearance and transformation into a major genre at a time when major genres were taken for granted has puzzled, if not shocked, the academic world. After the stupendous amount of research, paper and ink employed in trying to establish exactly what the novel is and exactly what its defining structural characteristics are, literary theory and criticism are still pretty much unable to do that with ease. Well up to the seventeenth-century, the world, or least its western portion, had been used to more or less fixed, well-defined genres. The difference between a tragedy, a comedy, an elegy or an epic poem, for instance, is easier to precise for these are primordial literary genres. The novel, as Bakhtin puts,

> is the sole genre that continues to develop, that is as yet uncompleted. The forces that define it as a genre are at work before our very eyes: the birth and development of the novel as a genre takes place in the full light of historical day. The generic skeleton of the novel is still far from having hardened, and we cannot foresee all its plastic possibilities (BAKHTIN, 2004, p. 3)

Bakhtin goes on to argue that whereas the other genres we know were inherited from another era, the novel is the only one that was actually bred by modern times. Therefore, while these other genres, partly dead, struggle to accommodate themselves to the present era, the novel is the only one that is naturally akin to it (ibidem, p. 4). One of the defining characteristics of modern times, we can say with some degree of certainty, is the speed with which it changes. Hence, it is inevitable that the novel changes significantly fast too. In a short span of time, it is possible to observe a considerable modification, such as

would be the great modification in tone, purpose and concept from the novels of Dickens (1812 – 1870) to those of Thomas Hardy (1840 – 1928), whose birth dates are separated by mere twenty eight years.

Out of the studies I mention above, it is possible to form a concept of the novel as a major literary genre which is entirely new and which appeared in Europe somewhere in the first half of the eighteenth century, when social, historical and philosophic conditions favourable to its appearance came to exist[33]. Saying it is new, however, does not mean to say that it was invented overnight. Being the artistic response of a new social, historic and philosophic order, the novel necessarily relates to and, to some extent, is defined by its antecedents, which I claim here to be both the epic and the romance, which characterises it as having a dual nature from birth. As a young genre come to existence when the other major genres had already established themselves, the novel subjects other genres or any of their features to its best interest or purpose. Bakhtin well defines the relationship of the novel with other genres by stating that

> The novel parodies other genres (precisely in their role as genres); it exposes the conventionality of their forms and their language, it squeezes out some genres and incorporates others into its own peculiar structure, reformulating and re-accentuating them. Historians of literature sometimes tend to see in this merely the struggle of literary tendencies and schools. Such struggles of course exist, but they are peripheral phenomena and historically insignificant. Behind them one must be sensitive to the deeper and more truly historical struggle of genres, the establishments and growth of a generic skeleton of literature. (2004, p. 5)

Although I endorse Bakhtin's account of the novel's manipulation of other genres, I do not attribute any degree of historical insignificance to the struggle of literary tendencies and schools. Instead, I believe an understanding of such struggle can eliminate much of the apparent incoherence attributed to RML. Of this I treat in chapter three. Bakhtin wrote this in 1941. Lukács had published his *Theory of the Novel* in 1916 and had also stated the novel's power of incorporating and reformulating other genres. Independently on whether or not

[33] These conditions are consistently documented in Ian Watt's *The Rise of the Novel*. To avoid tautological statements, I shall not comment on them here.

this idea was consciously known or accepted in nineteenth century Britain, the general reading public was certainly not enthusiastic to see this power put to use, as RML's negative reception testifies. The fact that it did not correspond to the accepted notions of what a novel is, as Bonaparte states, is caused by GE's experimentations with the flexibility of the novel, with its manipulation of other genres.

GE incorporates and reformulates several genres into RML, but the one which causes the most apparent strangeness is, I believe, the romance. But what exactly is the romance? And how is it manifest in RML?

The first question has had rather polemic answers. There is a trend of thought for which the concept of romance does not exist or simply does not matter. Margaret Doody, for example, in her *The True Story of the Novel*, completely ignores the term and refers to all the prose fiction produced from Antiquity to the Middle Ages as 'novel'. She mentions the "ancient novel", "the Roman novel" and falls into a small contradiction when she entitles one of the chapters in her book "The Novelistic Nature of Ancient Prose Fiction", thus implying that rather than being novels (in the sense used by Watt, Allen, Frye, Lukács and Bakhtin), the works of prose fiction she refers to only show some features later to be established by the novel.

But denial does not mean disappearance and the division novel/romance will go on existing. It might be simpler to use just one term instead of theorising on both and on their difference, but to argue that Apuleius's *The Golden Ass* and Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, for instance, are just the same kind of book is at least unreasonable. The word "novel" does mean "new" after all.

For Northrop Frye[34], romance is the proper term to refer to works of fiction written in either prose or verse from the late Classical period up to about the eighteenth century. Medieval productions such as the Arthurian legends, also called English metrical romances[35], the *chansons de geste,* epic poems such as

[34] It is important to note that Frye takes the validity of the term "romance" for granted and does not even take time to allude to studies that disregard it. I endorse his view but find it important to expose the polemics because I believe it has a direct relation to *Romola*'s negative critical reception.

[35] Dudley Miles and Robert Pooley, in their *Literature and Life in England*, actually refer to the Arthurian legends as "Arthurian romance" and "English metrical romances" (1943, p.12-13).

Beowulf and tales as those collected by Chaucer in his *Canterbury Tales*, all written in verse, also belong to the genre called romance. Many of Shakespeare's stories belong here too[36]. The domain of the romance, Frye claims, is "the mythological or imaginative universe" (1965, p. vii) and, although much of what was produced in the late Classical period is somewhat unknown (he excepts *The Golden Ass*), its importance is that these works show "the stock themes and images of romance with special clarity, as early works in a genre so often do" (ibidem, p. 4). This is particularly relevant when one wishes to argue, as I do, that much of what causes estrangement in RML comes from an interference of the conventions of the romance in the novel. Frye goes on to argue that, although Medieval romance acquires different characteristics[37], "in sixteenth century England with Sidney's *Arcadia* and similar works, the late Classical conventions reappear" (ibidem, p. 4). The term "romance" thus designates the works of fiction (either in prose or in verse) in which the mythological, the magical, the religious and/or the imaginative faculties are dominant and take precedence over the representation of everyday life events. Unlike the novel, these show highly stylised or idealised characters; they have plenty of room for "tragedy and the tragic emotions of passion and fury" and for "the supernatural or the suggestion of it"

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[36] Naturally, there is much more regarding literary genres to Shakespeare's plays than only romance conventions. However, several of his plays display a consistent romance-like atmosphere in their many unrealistic passages. Reginald Foakes expresses this atmosphere well when he says that "the term 'romance' provides a convenient label for a group of Shakespeare's late plays, *Pericles*, *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*. He goes on to explain that the term denotes "works that create a world dominated by chance rather than character or cause and effect, and plays in which we are attuned to delight and wonder at the unexpected". Common characteristics in works of this kind are, according to Foakes, "sudden tempests or disasters, separations between parents and children or between friends or lovers, wanderings and shipwrecks, wives and children lost and found, strange accidents and coincidences, encounters with the marvellous and eventual reconciliations and reunions" (All quotations FOAKES, 2002, p. 249).

[37] Piero Boitani, like Northrop Frye, argues for the stability of the romance as a genre by tracing its defining characteristics in an impressive number of works written from Classical Antiquity onwards. He analyses *Sir Gawain and the Green Night* as the prototypical medieval romance and comments on its distinguishing features: "This short poem has everything we consider typical of medieval romances (even if not all romances are this perfect): the court, the knight, the ladies, the festivals, the Other, the impossible challenge, magic, the fabulous, the journey, the forest, the castle, the hunt, and the discussion of love; symbols, virtues, adventures, tests, courtly conventions, and temptation. (…) We could say that, if Auerbach had committed a chapter in *Mimesis* to *Sir Gawain and the Green Night* rather than to Chrétien's *Yvain*, he would have been able to write the very same things" (2006, p. 271). Although RML displays quite a few of the ingredients listed by Boitani, most of them are absent. This is because RML's affinities are not so much with the medieval romance of chivalry as they are with the kind of romance written by Chaucer, Milton and Shakespeare.

(FRYE, 2000, p. 6). In these, the mythological and the archetypal thinking still prevail over the scientific or empiricist, which are the province of the novel. The world of Shakespeare, Chaucer and Milton, despite the novelistic features they might display, is the world of romance.

It is important to observe that the romance has never enjoyed much prestige as a genre, especially after the novel established itself as the major genre of prose fiction. Whereas critics such as Margaret Doody simply disregard it, others consider it a minor form, particularly devaluing its post eighteenth century manifestations[38]. GE arguably writes in the tradition of the novel and her works are great instances of its power and sophistication. How then is RML a romance?

Despite its lack of prestige, "the conventions of prose romance show little change over the course of centuries and conservatism of this kind is the mark of a stable genre" (FRYE, 1965, p. 4). Such stability makes it safe to isolate structural features that characterise the genre and make it and its influence recognisable and possible to analyse. Northrop Frye highlights some of these.

> In the Greek romances we find stories of mysterious birth, oracular prophecies about the future contortions of the plot, foster parents, adventures which involve capture by pirates, narrow escapes from death, recognition of the true identity of the hero and his eventual marriage with the heroine (FRYE, 1975, p. 4)

Surprisingly enough for the conventional Victorian reader, to a greater or minor extent, all of these are to be found in RML. When Tito arrives in Florence, he is a stranger, perhaps not with a mysterious birth, but with its equivalent, a mysterious origin. He introduces himself as a Greek although he was born at Bari, in Italy. And it is not that he was lying when he said he was Greek. Tito descends from "a Greek stock planted in Italian soil" (ELIOT, 2005, p. 30). His Greek origins mix with his Italian birth and produce a rather mysterious sense of identity. It is also through Tito that the first evident prophecy is introduced into

[38] The famous *Literature and Life in England*, by Dudley Miles and Robert Pooley, in its chapters about prose in the nineteenth-century, leaves out most writers whose novels are clearly influenced by the romance. Nothing is said about the Brontës, Mary Shelley, Bram Stocker or Oscar Wilde, for instance. F.R. Leavis's *The Great Tradition* clearly implies that the great English novelists are those who produced non-romantic novels.

the story: Fra Luca, later recognised as Romola's brother Dino, secretly manages to discover that she is engaged to be married to Tito. When he sends for her at the hour of his death, he gives her a warning against Tito in the form of a crucifix and a prophetic tale revealed to him in a dream-like vision. The development of the plot proves his oracle to be true, but this is just the most obvious prophecy confirmed by the plot. The text is filled with them, although they are given in abstract and symbolic images. The clearest and most complex example is the triptych given Romola by Tito on the occasion of their betrothal. He presents her with an empty triptych designed to conceal Dino's crucifix and ornamented with a scene from the story of the triumph of Bacchus and Ariadne. The prophecy is that of Tito's version of his relationship with Romola and is correct up to a certain point in the book. It is later turned into bitter irony by its hidden but intrinsic meanings. The fifth section of this chapter is dedicated to such visual prophecies.

Romola narrowly escapes from death when she abandons herself in a wandering boat and twice in the story she rescues a child who thus narrowly escapes death. Tito arrives in Florence after a narrow escape from death before which he and his father, which, by the way, is a foster parent, had been captured by pirates. His foster father, the only one he has ever known, narrowly escapes from death when he manages to run away from the pirates who had kept him prisoner. When he reaches Florence he appears as a shadow of the past, a threat to Tito's growing prestige because a sign of his mysterious origins. Although Romola does have a real father, she has in Bernardo del Nero a second paternal figure, a godfather being a kind of foster parent. Finally, when Romola becomes the head of the family forsaken by Tito, she is to the children, and to some extent even to Tessa, a foster parent.

When Baldassare escapes from the pirates and heads to Florence, he grabs Tito's arm in the steps of the cathedral in a desperate request for help. At this point in the story, Tito is still identified with the hero and he is about to marry the heroine, which he does, not eventually as in the typical romance, but early in the story, in a slight adjustment of the pattern. Tito desperately tries to keep the identity of his father secret because its revelation would bring about the recognition of the true identity of the hero. It is not, however, as it tends to be in

the classical romance, a revelation of a prestigious name and wealthy origin. It is a much more ironic revelation of a corrupted personality becoming selfish and cruel, as it tends to be in the novel.

The book also abounds with archetypal characters and images: Romola is first the archetypal dutiful daughter and then the archetypal dutiful wife. Bardo is the archetypal patriarch, Tessa the archetypal natural woman and Mona Brigida, the archetypal vain woman. Girolamo Savonarola represents the archetypal failed revolutionary, who breaks a paradigm only to install another equally oppressive one. Piero di Cosimo is the archetypal artist, who reveals the truth through his paintings[39]. Romola's journey in a boat is the archetype of rebirth and her sojourn in the plague stricken village resembles the archetypal descent into hell. While in the village, she plays the archetypal role of Virgin Mary.

It is no wonder then that RML did not fit any accepted concept of "novel". But simply explaining it away as being a romance rather than a novel does not solve the problems of the very negative reception, especially because RML is other things besides a novel and a romance, as the development of the present chapter intends to show. I am positive one of the reasons why critics and readers reacted so negatively to RML was that it is so closely associated to the conventions of the romance at a time when the novel was a dominant form reacting against it. This exposes the inadequacy of disregarding the opposition novel/romance. Much of the criticism that dismissed *Romola, Frankenstein, Jane Eyre, Wuthering Heights, Dracula* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, for instance, as inadequate books did so because they applied wrong standards to them. They tried to judge them according to the conventions of the novel (as it had been established by the late eighteenth century) and failed to notice that they conformed, in great part, to the conventions of the romance too.

In the particular case of RML, we have a novel that also conforms to several other genre conventions. One other genre that interferes with it as much as the romance, although perhaps less obviously, is the epic. In the beginning of

[39] Piero was one of the first characters to grasp Tito's true mean nature, which he reveals in his observation that he would be a perfect model for a traitor and his painting of the frightened Tito in chapter four when he wants to have Tito's likeness for his portrait of Sinon deceiving Priam.

chapter one, I quote Robert Browning's appraisal of RML as the noblest and most heroic prose-poem he had read. With this, he was not merely expressing his deep admiration for the beauty and grandiosity of the book, he was also hinting at aspects of RML that have to this day, at least in great part, remained unnoticed: its epic proportions and its poetic profusion.

In the mass of criticism that considers RML either a mistake or a failure, two points stand out as particularly inadequate and even useless in the book: the proem and the historical setting. Among the so many functions I attribute to the proem in chapter one, is also its function of creating an epic atmosphere for the story and making it symbolically manifest to the reader.

> The opening lines introduce us to an "angel of the dawn," a figure that implies an interest in origins, and, as this angel surveys the continent of Europe from the Levant to the Pillars of Hercules, we realize that he is following exactly the geographic migration of the western civilization, from its beginnings in Asia Minor to its later development in the Western Isles, and even – for we learn early that the opening date of the action is 1492 – across the Atlantic to the American continent. It is important to remember these opening lines (...). They prepare us to see that it is not, after all, Florence in 1492 that Eliot is writing about but rather the whole history of Western civilization, of which late fifteenth-century Florence must somehow be the symbolic representation (BONAPARTE, 1979, p. 13).

The passage exposes RML's epic intention and demonstrates that it is brought to effect by symbols: Florence symbolizes the Western civilization; the angel of the dawn symbolizes the interest in society's foundational myths, which are usually at the centre of epic poems, and the angel's flight symbolizes Western society's geographical extension. Because the epic conventions are symbolic rather than concrete, whereas it was possible for me to isolate very specific structural characteristics of the romance and point out to very specific structural elements in RML that attest to the kinship, the exact same cannot so easily be done in relation to the epic and the main reason for this is that the epic, differently from the romance, does not survive in its form, but only in its essence or concept, which a more formalist or structuralist approach would call 'content'. What then survives of the epic in RML? To answer this question, I look at what Massimo Fusilo identifies as three "constants" of the epic: "the narrative of a

community's founding heroic, mythical or historic deeds; elevated, sublime language; encyclopedism" (2006, p. 41).

These are all present in RML and I shall treat first of the most evident trait: encyclopedism, which I spell "encyclopaedism" from now on. "Encyclopaedic" is indeed an adjective that has been pointed out as a negative characteristic of the book. That RML contains a daunting number of references, pretty much like an encyclopaedia, is evident. It is much harder to communicate just how much preparation GE actually underwent to write her novel. The following passage, although long, conveys a good impression of the work done.

> Ages and the Revival of Learning; Montalembert, and Mrs. Jameson, and Helyot for the history of the monastic orders. She pored over books on the topography and history of Florence – Nardi, Varchi, Sismondi, Nerli, Litta, Ammirato, Villapi, and especially, Lastri's *L'Osservatore Fiorentino*, which she indexed in her Notebook. The biographies of Savonarola by Burlamacchi and Villari she used of course, and those of the Medici by Roscoe, and the lives of the painters by Vasari. Not content with histories of Italian literature like Tiraboschi's and Manni's, she read widely in the original works – Sacchetti, Boccaccio, Filelfo, Politian, Macchiavelli, Petrarch, Marullo, Pulci and many others. Langford brought her *Le moyen âge illustré*, in which she studies details of costume. (...) her journal for 8 December 1861 says: 'In the Afternoon walked to Molini's and brought back Savonarola's Dialogue de Veritate Prophetica and Compendium Revelationum, for £4!' From Cambridge Lewes's friend W. G. Clark sent her scarce books on the condition of Greece in the Middle Ages, and she consulted others in the London Library. She went on to the British Museum to verify particulars about Lorenzo de' Medici's death, the possible retardation of Easter, the celebration of Corpus Christi, and Savonarola's preaching in the Quaresima of 1492. On another visit she 'picked some details from Manni's life of Bartolommeo Scala – also from Borghini's Discorsi, about the simplicity of Florentine table equipage'. She looked at prints in the Print Room. One day her Journal notes: 'Busied myself with a plan of rational mnemonics in history' (HAIGHT, 1985, p. 349-50).

From the main historical events and philosophical trends to tableware, GE studied whatever there was to be studied about Florence and the text of RML shows that. In this passage, Haight names thirty-three authors or books studied by Eliot and this was just the very beginning of her work. It is not without reason that an anonymous reviewer of the *Saturday Review* in 1863 complained that "sometimes the antiquarian quite drowns the novelist" (ROMOLAa, 1983, p.21). The same wealth of details that makes RML an

astonishingly accurate portrait on fifteenth century Florence and could be considered a landmark in realism has also been seen as one of the novel's weaknesses. The same 1863 reviewer was particularly annoyed by the "long accounts of Florentine antiquities, and translations of sermons by Savonarola, and extracts from chronicles of processions" (ibidem, p. 21). The unidentified writer has a point. RML does have a few pages one would not mind turning without reading to the end. Yet it is important that their function in the whole of the book be considered. However tedious or uninspiring these passages may be, they are not mere "artless contrivances" (ibidem) of Eliot's. One would complain about them just as s/he would complain about the Catalogue of the Ships in Book II of the *Iliad* or the passages in the Genesis that describe Adam's offspring from Seth down to Noah. The descriptive passages in RML are no different from Thomas Mann's long accounts of Hans Castorp's ordinary routine at the sanatorium where he is visiting his cousin in the first part of *The Magic Mountain.* They are no different from Marcel Proust's illustrious description of a biscuit, which took him something like three pages. They are the marks of grand books and natural to any great epic because they provide the equivalent of an omnipresent and omnipotent view of the universe, or at least, of the fictional universe of a given book.

In the case of RML, Eliot represented her magnificent view of her chosen universe with such care for detail and veracity that she worried her husband Lewes, who felt compelled to ask her publisher to assure her she had done enough research. Lewes wrote to Blackwood, "when you see her, mind your care is to discountenance the idea of a Romance being the product of an Encyclopaedia" (HAIGHT, 1985, p. 353). The result of this massive research is that RML is indeed encyclopaedic, but not as a miscalculation of the author. The book's encyclopaedism is reminiscent of the Greek epics.

Elevated, sublime language is the distinguishing feature of some passages in RML. It is important to acknowledge that a nineteenth century novel, no matter how epic in scope, could not use language as elevated and as sublime as a Greek epic poem. The times are too different for the same mode of expression to be valid. If we think of Eliot's novels as a whole, we probably remember that

one of its distinctive features regarding language are the narrators' philosophic ramblings and the accuracy in representing characters' speech. The narrator's philosophical ramblings are as characteristic of RML as they are of any other of her novels. However, the very life-like reproduction of speech, although carefully studied and attempted, is somewhat impaired by the historical and cultural distance of the story. Although not recognizable to the English year, the speech of one character in particular is actually a theme in the book. Not by chance does GE quote from Savonarola's sermons in the text of RML. Even though it displeased the anonymous reviewer quoted above, his sermons are an instance of elevated, sublime language. His sermons did not only have a strong impact in Romola's mind, they also functioned as words of order for the Florentine people in times of distress. Regardless of any religious or political bias, Savonarola played the epic role of keeping the nation together in times of war and he did that with language only. The power of his speech reached even the pagan barber Nello. "I confess, when the Frate was preaching in the Duomo last Advent, I got into such a trick of slipping in to listen to him that I might have turned Piagnone too" (ELIOT, 2005, p. 166), says Nello in chapter sixteen. But it is in chapter twenty-nine that Pietro Cenini, a minor historical character in the story, explains what the heroic importance of Savonarola's preaching is to the state of Florence.

> We are all indebted to him in these weeks for preaching peace and quietness, and the laying aside of party quarrels. They are men of small discernment who would be glad to see the people slipping the Frate's leash just now. And if the Most Christian King is obstinate about the treaty today, and will not sign what is fair and honourable to Florence, Fra Girolamo is the man we must trust in to bring him to reason (ELIOT, 2005, p. 260).[40]

Independently of the future developments in the story, it is Savonarola's elevated use of language that holds the nation together in such a time of trouble. Cenini's words show that the people rely on him, pretty much as they would on a national hero, for matters both of politics and religion. It is in the proem, though, that several instances of elevated, sublime language are to be

[40] "The Most Christian King" was a title given to the kings of France, which started to be used in the reign of Charles V.

found. Some of the phrases in the proem display a clear epic intent in their grandiosity and allusion to images and places central to Western civilization. The "Levant", "the Pillars of Hercules", "Syria" and "the summits of the Caucasus" are all places of historical importance whereas "Columbus", "Aristotle" and "Plato" are some of the pillars of Western history and philosophy. The "angel of the dawn", "hidden knowledge", "an immeasurable circle of light and glory", "hunger and labour, seed-time and harvest, love and death" all find an echo in Western literature, art, history and iconography.

The most distinctive epic constant, the narrative of a community's founding heroic, mythical or historic deeds, is actually symbolically represented in the plot of the book. Many passages that seem odd can only express their full meaning if understood as a piece in the symbolic mosaic that the plot is. When Romola realizes she has no more feelings of love or respect for Tito, she decides to start a new life away from him and from the ruin he has brought upon her. She puts on a "grey serge dress of a sister belonging to the third order of Saint Francis" (ELIOT, 2005, p. 318) as a disguise and sets forth on a journey that would take her away from Florence for good. When she is well advanced on her route, an unexpected encounter changes her course. Meeting her on the way and aware of her purpose, Fra Girolamo Savonarola thus addresses her.

> '...it is declared to me that you are seeking to escape from the lot God has laid upon you. You wish your true name and your true place in the world to be hidden, that you may choose for yourself a new name and a new place, and have no rule but your own will. And I have a command to call you back. My daughter, you must return to your place.'
> Romola's mind rose in stronger rebellion with every sentence. She was the more determined not to show any sign of submission, because the consciousness of being inwardly shaken made her dread lest she should fall into irresolution. She spoke with more irritation than before.
> 'I will not return. I acknowledge no right of priests and monks to interfere with my actions. You have no power over me.' (ELIOT, 2005, p. 355-356)

The answer is everything we expect from a daughter of the proud Bardi family. Brought up in scorn of religious dogma, she proudly refuses the priest's commands. However, her disposition was not entirely exempt from doubt and the refusal to submission is made keener precisely by the awareness of its

possibility. When Romola stands up to face her interlocutor, an uncalled for change starts to take place.

> She had started up with defiant words ready to burst from her lips, but they fell back again without utterance. She had met Fra Girolamo's calm glance and the impression from it was so new to her, that her anger sank ashamed as something irrelevant. (...)
> As the anger melted from Romola's mind, it had given place to a new presentiment of the strength there might be in submission, if this man, at whom she was beginning to look with a vague reference, had some valid law to show her. But no – it was impossible; he could not know what determined her. Yet she could not again simply refuse to be guided; she was constrained to plead; and in her new need to be reverent while she resisted, the title which she had never given him before came to her lips without forethought.
> 'My father, you cannot know the reasons which compel me to go. None can know them but myself. None can judge for me. I have been driven by great sorrow. I am resolved to go.' (...)
> 'Of what wrongs will you complain, my daughter, when you yourself are committing one of the greatest wrongs a woman and a citizen can be guilty of – withdrawing in secrecy and disguise from a pledge which you have given in the face of God and your fellow-men? (...)'
> The blood had rushed to Romola's face, and she shrank as if she had been stricken. 'I would not have put on a disguise,' she began; but she could not go on, - she was too much shaken by the suggestion in the Frate's words of a possible affinity between her own conduct and Tito's.
> 'And to break that pledge you fly from Florence: Florence, where there are only the men and women in the world to whom you own the debt of a fellow-citizen.'
> 'I should never have quitted Florence,' said Romola, tremulously, 'as long as there was any hope of my fulfilling a duty to my father there.' (ELIOT, 2005, p. 357-358)

This rather long passage shows Romola going from her habitual and proud rejection of religious submission, which, in great part, she inherited from her father, to an unpredicted acceptance of Savonarola's preaching. This may seem to contradict her life story, but although unpredicted, the acceptance was neither sudden nor unjustified. Earlier in the novel, in chapter fifteen, The Dying Message, Romola had already felt it impossible to resist the priest's commands when he told her to kneel down at the imminent death of her brother. The most attentive reader will also recall earlier instances of the strong effect of Savonarola's words upon her.

What I see in her contradictory return to Florence at a moment when she had very pungent feelings and very consistent arguments not to do so is the

fulfilment of her role of epic heroine. As I say above, RML does not preserve the form of the epic, but its essence and, therefore, its relationship to the epic is not as structural as it is with the romance; it is symbolic. When she returns to Florence after Savonarola's order, she ceases to be the individual in its subjectivity which is the protagonist of the novel genre and so does Savonarola. They both begin to symbolize wider, more encompassing categories. Savonarola said many things to persuade her to return, but his arguments could be summarized in the simple statement that she swore loyalty to her husband before God and the Florentines and therefore by fleeing from her husband and her city she would be breaking an allegiance made to both. It is striking that, even while Savonarola reminds her of her duties as a wife, he never leaves her duties as a citizen on the background, as something minor. He implicitly puts her obligations as a wife on a level with her obligations as a citizen.[41]

In the history of the western world, wives have forsaken their husbands without being accused of betraying their fatherland, but that prerogative was denied to Romola. Neither did she really betray her city, like Antigone, for instance, of whom Romola is, in many aspects, an alter-ego. Antigone deliberately acted against her city laws by attempting to bury her dead brother, Polynices, who had also deliberately taken action against his city by attacking it (even if assisted by the pact that his brother should renounce the throne in his favour after one year).[42] Romola never acted against Florence in any way. Why then does she return?

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[41] The reader will remember that Tito has two wives. Romola, his lawful wife, is always identified with Florence. Her family is a traditional Florentine family and her godfather, a prominent figure in Florentine politics. Romola is often called a lily, which is the symbol of the city and the emblem of its coat of arms. Twice in the story, Nello, the barber, calls her the "Florentine lily", which is actually what the coat of arms is called: *il giglio di Firenze*. First he compares her to the floral emblem of the city in chapter three, "Romola, who is as fair as the Florentine lily before it got quarrelsome and turned red" (ELIOT, 2005, p. 39). Then, in chapter forty-five, he identifies her directly with the flower in a very clear metaphor, "nothing that is not dainty ought to approach the Florentine lily" (ibidem, p. 394). Tessa, Tito's illegitimate wife, is more identified with nature and contrasts with Romola's sense of civilization. Accordingly, it is Tessa who performs the more natural act of giving birth to Tito's children and lives with them outside the domain of Florentine civilized life, that is, outside the city walls.

[42] Savonarola's insistence on Romola's duties towards her city clashes with the strong emotions that compel her to leave it. On the one hand, the scene is tragic because it reenacts Antigone's dilemma. Romola's duties towards the state of Florence are incompatible with her duties towards her father's memory. On the other hand, by equating Florence with Romola and Christianity with Savonarola, it is also essentially epic, with the characters enacting the destinies of their communities.

According to Felicia Bonaparte, quoted above, the proem reveals that GE was not writing exclusively about Florence in the late fifteenth century, but about the whole history of the Western world, symbolized in her novel by Florence and the fifteenth century, and about the history of Western man, symbolized by Romola. Romola's acceptance of Savonarola's commands and return to Florence may contradict her life story. However, they confirm her story as an epic heroine.

> The epic hero is, strictly speaking, never an individual. It is traditionally thought that of the essential characteristics of the epic is the fact that its theme is not a personal destiny but the destiny of a community. And rightly so, for the completeness, the roundness of the value system which determines the epic cosmos creates a whole which is too organic for any part of it to become (...) a personality (LUKÁCS, 1983, p. 66).

When she accepts to go back home, both she and Savonarola cease to be individuals and become representatives of their community, Western society. Savonarola thus symbolises Christianity and Romola's acquiescence to his words symbolises the conversion to Christianity which is prefigured in the proem: "For had not the world become Christian?" (ELIOT, 2005, p. 5).

To say that Romola's return to Florence symbolises western society's conversion to Christianity may sound abrupt, but looking at the plot of the novel so as to understand it as symbolic structure reveals the coherence of the argument. For this, I propose a rough division of Romola's life in three parts: i) her life previous to the Christian conversation, when she lived first with her father and then with her husband; ii) the time when the conversion was taking place and then strengthening and iii) her rejection of Christianity and establishment of a new *modus vivendi* as a matriarch.

Romola's story starts when she is living in the strict circle of her father's society and soon in that of Tito's. Bardo de' Bardi lived "among his books and his marble fragments of the past" (ELIOT, 2005, p. 47). Most of his books are copies of Ancient Greek writers or manuscripts of his own annotations and comments on these. Almost everything about him recalls Ancient or Hellenistic

Greece, the very word “marble” bringing Greek sculpture to mind[43]. Bardo is no Greek, though. He “is primarily a Roman and represents primarily the Roman world, as Tito represents the Greek” (BONAPARTE, 1979, p. 39). Whereas Tito is introduced in the story as a Greek and is almost readily identified to Greek culture through his connections with Bacchus, Bardo is all the more a Roman because of his dedication to everything Greek, Roman culture being, to a great extent, an Italian interpretation of the Greek world. By revealing the epic proportions of the book, this view of Bardo and Tito as representing the Roman and Greek worlds also reveals the coherence, if not the necessity, of Eliot’s choosing Renaissance Florence as the setting for RML. What other place and time could so easily have produced a man like Bardo de’ Bardi? Bardo, just like Renaissance Florence, is the meeting point of Greece and Rome, the union of the main streams of historical and cultural development of the Western world, and therefore, the precise point where modern consciousness is born.

By having Romola live through the Greek and Roman worlds and then placing her in Renaissance Florence, GE sets the first stones to symbolically reconstructing the main stages of the historico-philosophical development of Western society. Romola lives through them not as an individual, but as an epic heroine and enacts not her own personal lot, but, as Lukács would have it, the destiny of a community. This explains, at least in part, why it has often been felt that Romola is a too ideal young woman. She is idealized because she is not only a novel character. She is that, but she is an epic heroine too and, as such, she needs to distinguish herself among her peers. Besides, as I comment in the next section, she is also a tragic heroine, another reason why she stands up as better than most common people. So, if on the hand critics are right to say Romola is idealized, they are sadly mistaken to imply that this is a miscalculation on Eliot’s part.

[43] Actually, the very expression “marble fragments of the past” recalls the several pieces of Greek sculpture either preserved from ancient times or unearthed by archaeologists.

In such a context, it is inevitable that she should convert to Christianity. Thus, with Savonarola representing Christ[44] and the return to the city representing conversion, Western history, represented in the plot, moves on. Following the conversion, Romola acts out the Christian values of charity, penitence and compassion. It is in this phase that she is mistaken for the Virgin Mary by the Florentines stricken by plague and famine, whom she attended to. This is when she comes to the highest point of her conformity to Christianity. In chapter forty-one, when Romola arrives home from her failed attempt to leave Florence, one of the very first things she does is to undo the trick Tito had played on her with the triptych. "She had thrown all the energy of her will into renunciation. The empty tabernacle remained locked, and she placed Dino's crucifix outside it" (ELIOT, 2005, p. 365). By removing the crucifix from its tomb, as Tito says, Romola symbolically enacts Christ's resurrection, the phrase "the empty tabernacle" recalling Jesus' "empty tomb".[45] The triptych, inversely from the tomb, remains locked and the reason for this is a matter of interpretation. The way I see it, Christ's tomb was left open to announce the good news and so that no one would doubt that Jesus had resurrected from the dead. The open tomb stands as a symbol of the truth of what he had preached. It is a sign of the validity of the Christian faith and scripture. As I quote below, Romola's faith was weak, so weak that she had to make a conscious effort not to think about the controversies of her new religious creed. The tabernacle thus remains closed as a symbol of her doubt.

Any reader familiar with the Bible will remember that Jesus went through his passion exactly the way he did "so that the Scripture would be fulfilled" (John 19:28) (BIBLE, 2008, p. 1168). Similarly, in an epic rewriting of the rise of Christianity, Romola goes through her torments and returns to Florence so that the secular scripture of Western history should be fulfilled. In the classic

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[44] One must remember that Savonarola is tried and condemned to death by fire similarly to the way Christ is tried and condemned to death by crucifixion.

[45] The 2008 edition of the 1984 New International Version (of the Bible) Anglicized, which I use for this work, actually has the very phrase "The Empty Tomb" as the title of John's account of Mary Magdalene's discovery of the resurrection (JOHN 20:1) (BIBLE, 2008, p. 1102).

epic, “an entire people sees itself” (FUSILO, 2006, p. 34). So, just as the Greeks may see themselves in Agamemnon, the Trojans, in Hector, or the Romans, in Aeneas, so can the Western people see themselves in Romola.

Still in the zenith of her Christian faith, in chapter forty-four, the title of which (The Visible Madonna) actually refers to her, Romola is found dedicating her life to charity, compassion and submission to the sacred laws of marriage through social service as a way of making sense of her life.

> She thought little about dogmas and shrank from reflecting closely on the Frate’s prophecies of the immediate scourge and closely-following regeneration. She had submitted her mind to his and entered into communion with the Church, because in this way she had found an immediate satisfaction for moral needs which all the previous culture and experience of her life had left hungering. Fra Girolamo’s voice had waked in her mind a reason for living, (...) but it was a reason that seemed to need feeding with greater forces than she possessed within herself (...). The pressing problem for Romola just then was not to settle questions of controversy, but to keep alive that flame of unselfish emotion by which a life of sadness might still be a life of active love (ELIOT, 2005, p. 388-9).

The passage is full of subtle intricacies. At one level it exposes all the already known and deeply criticised blemishes of the Christian church: the mind control it exercises on people through dogma and the furtherance of uncritical behaviour; its motivation of hypocritical love and selflessness through fear of hell or as a means to escape a miserable life. At another level, that of the epic, it analyses Romola’s behaviour towards her new religion as a mirror image of western society’s behaviour towards it. At this level, some degree of criticism against Christianity is practically inevitable for one who has lived to see the development of its history, of its inhuman ferocity and ultimate failure. At yet another level, one accessible only to those familiar with Eliot’s work and religious views, the passage reveals GE’s own appraisal of Christianity, an appraisal which points a very critical finger at the procedures of the Christian church but takes care not to dismiss any good outcomes it might have produced.

Following the course of her community’s destiny, Romola comes to be disappointed in Christianity and Savonarola loses his power of influencing her just as Christianity has lost much of its political, economic and spiritual hold on

society. No longer does Romola feel bound to the vow she made to Tito before God than Western society feels as tightly bound to the laws of the church as it would have felt in the Middle Ages.

With all this is mind, it is unconceivable that Eliot would choose any other period or place to set her epic in. The Renaissance is the homeland of modern man and modern consciousness. When GE departed from eighteenth and nineteenth century England, she did so precisely because she was searching for the moment in history in which things started to become as they were in her life time. Thus is the founding heroic, mythical and historic deeds of modern Western society symbolized in one place, Florence; in one period, the Renaissance and in one heroine, Romola.

2.2 Tragedy

> 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.
> George Eliot

Towards the end of the story, the narrator of *The Mill on the Floss* remarks that "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" (ELIOT, 2002, p. 454). This small comment holds the key to Eliot's concept of tragedy and to how her novels build on it. *The Mill on the Floss* is, in my opinion, the novel that most perfectly translates this concept into artistic material, although her other novels are tragedies no less than *The Mill* is.

As I state in the introduction, the source of this work is the perception that Eliot's appraisal of RML differed so radically from the critics' and the reading public's appraisal. It seemed too unusual to me that RML should be her least popular work but also, in her own opinion, her best. It is true that

authors are not necessarily the best judges of their own work, but GE was an experienced literary critic and too strict about concepts, definitions and methodology to be so utterly mistaken. Perhaps we have not considered the full extent of GE's evaluations about her own writings. GE scholars and students are particularly lucky because the amount of comments she left us in letters, essays and reviews throw valuable light on the interpretation of her work. It is high time we should heed more closely to what she says.

> One of the claims we have seldom heard and never taken quite seriously is Eliot's assertion that her novels were, in the strictest sense, tragedies, and, moreover, Aristotelian tragedies. When we have considered the matter, we have generally concluded one of two things: that there may be some elements of tragedy in Eliot's fiction but that these are neither comprehensive nor central and that therefore she meant to call her novels tragedies in a very loose sense; or, since her novels conform to none of the conventional features of tragedy, that she was simply mistaken. But it is uncomfortable to rest on such conclusions, for Eliot uses terms with mathematical precision. (BONAPARTE, 1975, p. xi)

Such mathematical precision makes it very significant when she referred to RML as a romance or to any of her novels as a tragedy. But we know that neither of her novels presents the form or the structural elements of a tragedy as Aristotle described it. So what does it mean to say, with Eliot, that RML is a tragedy and, with Felicia Bonaparte, that it is Aristotelian?

In her essay "The *Antigone* and Its Moral", GE rejected the view that "the dramatic motive of the *Antigone* was foreign to modern sympathies" (ELIOT, 1990f, p. 363) and argued that even if society has ceased to believe in the sacredness of burial rites or in divine punishment of the unburied dead, Sophocles's play would still strongly appeal to contemporary readers because "these beliefs are the accidents and not the substance of the poet's conception" (ibidem, p. 364). This differentiation between accidents and substance is vital for the understanding of RML as a tragedy.

In the sixth part of his *Poetics*, Aristotle explains that tragedy exists "in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions" (2000, p.10). He then proceeds to list its structural elements. "Every Tragedy, therefore, must have six parts, which parts determine

its quality—namely, Plot, Character, Diction, Thought, Spectacle, Song" (ibidem). It is clear that RML does not conform to this description, although it presents some of the elements. However, as Aristotle progresses in his explanation of the parts, he concludes that

> most important of all is the structure of the incidents. For Tragedy is an imitation, not of men, but of an action and of life, and life consists in action, and its end is a mode of action, not a quality. Now character determines men's qualities, but it is by their actions that they are happy or the reverse. Dramatic action, therefore, is not with a view to the representation of character: character comes in as subsidiary to the actions. Hence the incidents and the plot are the end of a tragedy (2000, p.10-11).

For one who has read and heeded what GE has to say about her own work and about her views on life and art, the parallels with Aristotelian theory of tragedy are striking. The philosopher's "character determines men's qualities" closely resembles GE's "character is destiny", from *The Mill on the Floss*, and establishes morality as a central issue in a tragic work. Furthermore, if we focus on what is one of Aristotle's best known and most pivotal theoretical concepts of art, *mimesis*, the harmony between his and Eliot's theory of art becomes evident. GE's best known and most pivotal theoretical concept of art, I have already mentioned here, is stated in the notable seventeenth chapter of *Adam Bede*, in which she declares her commitment to "give no more than a faithful account of man and things" (1980, p. 221). In other words, what Eliot professes to do is *mimesis*, or "an imitation (...) of action and of life". Also, Aristotle's and GE's idea of action is rather similar. When she says, in RML, that "our deeds are like children that are born to us; they live and act apart from our own will" (2005, p. 161), she means, by implication that it is by their actions that people bring either happiness or sadness upon themselves.

When we look more closely to Aristotle's statement that, in tragedy, the most important of all is the structure of the incidents, we can begin to make sense of the assertion that GE's novels are Aristotelian tragedies. If "the incidents and the plot are the end of a tragedy; and the end is the chief thing of all" (ARISTOTLE, 2000, p. 11), the other elements, the ones not to be found in RML,

are the accidents and not the substance of a tragedy. Although RML exists in the form of narrative, not of action, and has neither song nor spectacle, its plot, or structure of incidents, preserves its tragic substance. In order to establish RML as a tragedy, it is vital to ask what this substance consists of.

If, on the one hand, Eliot uses terms with mathematical precision, on the other hand, she never sacrifices historical accuracy and truthful representation to this precision. Her novels are tragedies not because she treats her characters atemporally, but because her worldview entails a tragic universe. Greek tragedy, although belonging to a socio-historical context very different from GE's, mirrors some of her dearest life concerns, namely morality and responsibility. Her rewriting of ancient tragedy, rather than an escapist or nostalgic return to the past, is actually a very serious reflection on her present times.

As I comment more thoughtfully in chapter three, GE's mind was scientific, and her approach to life and art was empiricist. She understood the world as a web of causal relationships, ruled by the natural laws of cause and effect. This has been thought as incompatible with tragedy, since, in Eliot's case, the belief in gods, oracles and divine punishment is lost. Arthur Miller attributed the small number of tragedies produced in his time to the fact "that modern man has had the blood drawn out of his organs of belief by the skepticism of science" (1981, p. 3). But GE's scientific mind, instead of making tragedy impossible, actually made it all the more inescapable. Because she was so deeply committed to representing her views about this world as truthfully as possible in her art, the fictional universe of her novels corresponded very closely to the real world of her mind. The latter being scientific and causal entails an indifferent fictional world, alien to characters' joys or sorrows, in which there is neither divine punishment nor godly rewards, but only cause and effect. Thus, Gwendolen Harleth puts money on the roulette table and loses it; Tertius Lydgate marries the spoilt Rosamond Vincy and suffers the consequences; Godfrey Cass abandons his daughter and is forced to accept her rejection of him later in life. Such an indifferent universe is the ideal soil for tragedy precisely because it is careless of human passions and desires, which defy causal laws.

In “The *Antigone* and Its Moral”, in a way Eliot’s treatise on tragedy, she rejects the claim that the play no longer interests contemporary audiences by stating that it is a fine tragedy and fine tragedies “appeal to perennial human nature, and even the ingenious dullness of translators cannot exhaust them of their passion and their poetry” (1990f, p. 363). She goes on to say that “the struggle between Antigone and Creon represents that struggle between elemental tendencies and established laws” (ibidem, p. 365), making it clear that, for Eliot as well as for Aristotle, the substance of a tragedy is a struggle, a dramatic collision, a conflict, an antagonism, all of which terms are used by GE in her essay. The substance of tragedy is an inescapable dilemma: so Oedipus swears to exterminate the cause of the pest in his realm not knowing he himself to be the cause; Orestes needs to avenge his father’s death by killing his mother and Antigone needs to bury her dead brother although this would betray her city laws.

Sacred laws and divine curses no longer appeal to modern feelings; “antagonism between valid claims” (ELIOT, 1990f, p. 365) still does and it is by updating the conflict between elemental tendencies and established laws and bringing it to the fifteenth century (and symbolically to the nineteenth) that GE rewrites Greek tragedy in her novels. So she has Maggie Tulliver choose between her love for Philip Wakem and respect for her brother’s and father’s values; Gwendolen Harleth has to choose between poverty and a cruel husband; Hetty Sorrel is torn between respectable but unbearable humility and a disgraceful love affair with the lively Arthur Donnithorne.

Romola’s story is a sequence of such conflicts. She is first torn between loyalty to her father (who expects Tito to fulfill the promise of helping the old man with his studies) and loyalty to her husband (who breaks more and more promises). She is then torn between a moral impulse to leave a treacherous husband and the sacred vows she gave him. She is also torn between an inherited disdain for Christianity, love for easy pleasure and a growing influence from Savonarola. She is caught between Bacchus and Christ, between old and new historico-philosophical paths. This is no small dilemma. Although Romola is not a tragic heroine in strictly Aristotelian terms, she resembles one very closely. Aristotle says the tragic hero is

> a man who is not eminently good and just,-yet whose misfortune is brought about not by vice or depravity, but by some error or frailty. He must be one who is highly renowned and prosperous,—a personage like Oedipus, Thyestes, or other illustrious men of such families (ARISTOTLE, 2000, p. 17).

GE never creates exact correspondences; this would be a mere "clinging to the outward forms of tragedy" (MILLER, 1981, p. 4). So although she does come from an illustrious family, Romola is not highly renowned or prosperous. The Bardi family may be renowned, but, at the time of the novel, they are best known precisely for having long lost their prosperity. Neither is she noble, or "a personage like Oedipus". And this is an important point for it is here that GE more significantly updates Greek tragedy. In some ways, Romola is superior, let us say, just like an Aristotelian heroine. She is educated, beautiful, good and honest. She comes from a traditional family and she has a keen moral sense of duty towards the law, be it civil law or the law of her affections. Romola is indeed eminently good and just. But, although idealized in some points, she is not, nor could she possibly be, a noble woman, higher in ranks than the vast majority of common people.

By making a common woman the heroine of a tragic story, GE updates Greek tragedy and makes sense of it in modern times. She translates the essence of the classic tragedy to a world in which the gods, kings and queens are no more protagonists than the common people are. She translates the essence of the classic tragedy to modern man and starts to create what is soon going to become the modern novel – and later on, even the modernist novel. In "The *Antigone* and Its Moral", Eliot implied that, in terms of tragedy, Sophocles is to the Greeks what Shakespeare is to the Elizabethans. One could claim that GE is to the Victorians what Sophocles is to the classic Greeks. Her modernization of tragedy is a very new, very deep, but also very subtle change. In 1978, more than one century after the publication of *RML*, Arthur Miller published his views on tragedy. These are strikingly in accordance to GE's. Miller wrote his "Tragedy and the Common Man" in part to account for the tragic coherence of Willy Loman, the protagonist of *Death of a Salesman*, his most acclaimed play. For Miller,

> If rank or nobility of character was indispensable, then it would follow that the problems of those with rank were the particular problems of tragedy. But surely the right of one monarch to capture the domain from another no longer raises our passions, nor are our concepts of justice what they were to the mind of an Elizabethan king (1981, p. 4).

He is stating what Eliot had realized more than a hundred years earlier: that the nobility of the hero, the presence of the gods, the sacred rites and laws, the chorus, the dramatic form are the accidents and not the substance of a fine tragedy. Its substance, its essential material is "an antagonism between valid claims" (ELIOT, 1990f, p. 365). Romola lives this antagonism symbolically in her relationships with the men in her life: Bardo then Tito and then Savonarola are the valid claims she struggles with. She does not die in the end, like a classic tragic heroine, again because Eliot never creates exact equivalents. But, like an Aristotelian tragic heroine, Romola finds it impossible to conciliate all these claims satisfactorily and she keeps suffering blow after blow while trying. It is only when she steps out of the antagonism (and consequently out of tragedy) by eliminating or, at least, diminishing, the influence of these men in her life, that she can find an ending which, if it cannot be called happy, at least saves her from death.

GE's view of life, I stated earlier, entails a tragic universe and her rewriting of Greek tragedy into her novels serves her artistic purposes precisely for transforming her moral concerns into artistic material. By making her novels modern tragedies GE brings together the issues of realism, morality and responsibility. In her book *Will and Destiny*, Felicia Bonaparte explains that

> the fictional world becomes for Eliot bound to the real one (...). The influence of the fictional world was "inevitably" in the real one. But, since in the real world few actions were morally neutral, the artist could not avoid adding to the good or evil of human existence. (...) It was the reader whom the artist had to return from the pages of fiction to the real world with the sharpened perception that inspired a keener moral sensibility, and it was essential, for this reason, that the fictional world allow the reader no possible escape from the reality of his own life; quite the contrary, in fact, it was necessary that it reflect that life so intensely that the reader could not ignore in fiction what he might have managed to ignore in fact. It was thus that Eliot concluded that since fiction had its effect in real life, real life had to be the subject of fiction. (1975, p.3)

Aristotle had already observed the effect of fiction in real life and, when coming out of tragedy, he called this effect catharsis. I would not claim GE's novels to stimulate a feeling of purgation or cleansing as is implied in Aristotle's catharsis nor do I think she ever intended that. It is clear, though, that some kind of effect should exist since she did not conceive of art, much less of her art, as independent from real life. The effect GE attempted to produce with her novels was a "sharpened perception that inspired a keener moral sensibility", for which she has often been mistaken for a frivolous moralist, merely concerned with patterns of conventionality, whose work is filled with shallow didactic intent. I will not argue against the existence of some didactic intent in her work, especially because I cannot come to terms with the idea of neutrality in art and cannot help seeing some degree of didacticism in any good literature I have read. The very theory of art for art's sake seems to me to be filled with its own didactic intent.

As Joseph Campbell puts it in *Myths to Live By* (1993) (and actually implies with the title of his book), myths provided ancient societies with a moral order and cohesion. In classic Greek tragedy, myths are recounted as to emphasize the consequences of *hamartia* and *hybris* and the inexorability of the *Moirai*, which we came to call destiny. By updating Greek tragedy into her novels, and especially into RML, GE makes men and women the sole actors of the drama. The power of destiny, which the Greeks attributed to the *Moirai*, Eliot attributed to the causal fictional universe which she created to mirror the real world. With men and not gods as protagonists (one more reason why RML just had to be set in the Renaissance), GE recreated *hamartia* as an error in judgment or a moral weakness and *hybris* as an excess in arrogance or oblivion of the laws of cause and effect. With men and not gods as protagonists, Eliot brings to the core of her novels an issue that, although central to the classic tragic drama, remained obscure in it: the issue of responsibility.

There is a now long established discussion that attempts to understand the balance between "the sphere of human reflexion and freedom of decision" and "the sphere of divine intervention" (LESKY, 1966, p.78) in both Homeric poetry and classical Greek tragedy. The scholar N. G. L. Hammond starts a seminal paper on this issue by explaining that "there has been a tendency

in recent studies of Aeschylus to exalt Jupiter or Fate into a position of supremacy from which they dictate and determine the actions and the conditions of men" (1965, p. 42). The paper is almost fifty years old but is by no means out of date. It accounts for the contemporary view that tragic characters (not exclusively in Aeschylus) could not be held responsible for their deeds because they acted under the influence or by command of one or other god. It accounts for the contemporary view that tragic characters were never given the possibility of choice, since their lives had been determined for them by the *Moirai* and no personal will could alter their designs. According to this view, Clytemnestra, for instance, could not be charged with the death of Agamemnon, who could not be charged with the death of Iphigenia and so on. Oedipus would not be guilty of the death of his father and violation of his mother because an oracle had already manifested the unchangeable will of the *Moirai*. The history of this idea is long and complex and cannot be discussed more thoughtfully here, but it is interesting for the purposes of this work to observe that the thought that Homeric and tragic characters were mere puppets in the hands of some deity started being seriously questioned by scholars such as Bruno Snell, N. G. L. Hammond and Albin Lesky until it became reasonably clear that a tragic dilemma of a powerless puppet is hardly a dilemma at all. Much less is it tragic. If tragedy consists in an antagonism between valid claims, as Eliot puts it, than it is vital that there should be at least two different claims, and, at least, some degree of personal will and, consequently, responsibility involved. Albin Lesky believes that "a decision based on free choice" is actually "the most important element in the development of a genuinely tragic conflict" (1966, p. 78) and goes on to demonstrate his argument with, among other things, an analysis of Agamemnon in the homonymous play by Aeschylus. It is in this play that Agamemnon has to decide between the disrepute of deserting his fleet or the horror of sacrificing his daughter Iphigenia. We all know what his decision was; the question that remains is: "does Agamemnon's decision to sacrifice his own daughter spring from his own will? Is it the result of a free choice?" (LESKY, 1966, p. 82).

> Such eminent interpreters of Greek tragedy as Dodds and Kitto answer the question in the affirmative, whereas such outstanding scholars as

> Page and Rivier deny that there was a choice between two possibilities. Agamemnon could not act differently, he had no choice, for it would be unthinkable that he should stop his campaign and refrain from his punishment of Troy. (...) Agamemnon asks [himself how he could possibly desert his own fleet], and as soon as he utters this phrase, by which he envisages the disgrace and shame he would incur by deserting his post, the scales are no longer even. His decision no longer springs from a free choice between two equal possibilities: one has to be avoided at any cost. Iphigenia has to be sacrificed. It is still the king's personal decision springing from his own will, but the freedom of will is overshadowed by the overwhelming force of the situation which clearly influences the decision. Thus it is correct to speak of a free choice up to a point; as for the final decision, however, I agree with Rivier that *acte volontaire*, *nécessité*, and *perturbation* are united in it (ibidem, p. 82-83).

This seems to lead to a deadlock, which is precisely what a tragedy is. The valid claims in antagonism in a legitimate tragedy are always will and necessity, "the union of external coercion and personal readiness" (ibidem, p. 83). Lesky goes on to argue that, at the same time that the sacrifice of Iphigenia is a necessity for her father, it "is not only accepted but passionately desired by Agamemnon, and therefore he is responsible for it" (ibidem, p. 84). The main reason why I bring forth this discussion is because I do not believe Greek tragedy would have appealed to GE and provided such a coherent worldview to her work if its characters were treated as sheer toys in the hands of the gods. Such a presupposition would not influence GE's conception of fictional universe and character so deeply, precisely because her fiction mirrors her understanding of the real world and people, at the centre of which she places moral responsibility.

If we go back to Aristotle, we will remember he considers the tragic hero's misfortune to be "brought about not by vice or depravity, but by some error or frailty" (ARISTOTLE, 2000, p. 17). It follows that people are as responsible for their vices and depravities as they are for their errors and frailties because there is an undefeatable difference between intention and deed. An error, or an act of frailty, may be committed with the best of intentions, but the consequences, good or evil, that might spring from them are no less responsibilities of the perpetrator than if they had been intended[46]. Oedipus never meant to kill his father and espouse his mother, but no good intention can ever alter the fact that he did.

[46] For a more thoughtful discussion about the clash of deed and intention, see Felicia Bonaparte's 1975 *Will and Destiny. Morality and Tragedy in George Eliot's Novels*, pp. 31-35.

Antigone never meant to disobey her city laws. Her intention was to pay respect to her dead brother but it was not synonymous with her deed of actually breaking the law. Similarly, Creon never meant to kill Antigone, although no one would say he did not willingly decide to do it. Aristotle's and Eliot's view on responsibility and on the essential difference between intention and deed is fundamentally the same. So Romola never meant to pledge allegiance to an unscrupulous traitor, just as she never meant to break her vows but she committed an error in ignoring the oracle of her dying brother's vision and misjudging Tito. She did not err out of vice or depravity but out of frailty. Similarly, there is no evidence that Tito meant to betray Romola and I would not go to the length of saying his errors were caused by vice. Later on in his life, maybe this would be true, but when he keeps a secret family with Tessa and prefers the society of the Florentine elite than that of his wife's family, I see him as guilty of a deep moral frailty, not of some kind of depravity. Romola herself sees Tito in these terms. When she tries to account for her husband's life to Lillo, his son by Tessa, she tells the boy that

> he never thought of anything cruel or base. But because he tried to slip away from everything that was unpleasant, and cared for nothing else so much as his own safety, he came at last to commit some of the basest deeds—such as make men infamous. He denied his father, and left him to misery; he betrayed every trust that was reposed in him, that he might keep himself safe and get rich and prosperous. Yet calamity overtook him (ELIOT, 2005, p. 583).

The passage, which not by coincidence appears on the very last page of the book, stands as a reinforcement of GE's theory of the difference between intention (Tito never thought of anything cruel or base) and action (he committed some of the basest deeds). Thus, independently of their good or evil meanings, both Tito and Romola commit errors and acts of frailty, just like any human being. And this is a point in which Eliot diverges from Aristotle, as she necessarily would have to, in order to make sense of tragedy to her (and our) contemporaries. Classic Greek tragedy knows little about the mass of common human beings, its concern being focused on gods, heroes and nobles. Eliot's nineteenth century witnessed the death of God (and of the gods) and the birth of modern man in the replacement of a mythological, magic and religious system of though with a

scientific one, but it was the Renaissance that witnessed the beginning of this process. By rescuing the tragedy from ancient Greece and setting it in the Renaissance, Eliot re-contextualized it so it could speak to the common modern men about the common modern men, for whom gods and nobles are no longer supreme authorities.

> Eliot was one of the first writers to wrest tragedy from the stronghold of elitism and concede it to the democratized future of the average men. There is a strong political radicalism in this act, but, even more, there is a stronger humanistic radicalism inspired by her deepest awareness of man's limitations and her deepest moral passion (BONAPARTE, p. xv-xvi).

This is the same radicalism that led GE to write, in *Adam Bede*, that she would rather "turn without shrinking from cloud-borne angels, from prophets, sibyls, and heroic warriors, to an old woman bending over her flower pot" (ELIOT, 1980, p. 223). Because of this same radicalism, Tito and Romola, as well as Maggie Tulliver, Gwendolen Harleth, Tertius Lydgate or any other character, are ordinary human beings. Their story is the story of every common man's tragedy. And like any common human being, they are faced with the consequences of their acts, which, in Eliot's work, should never be confused with punishment. There is neither divine punishment nor reward in GE's indifferent universe; there is only cause and effect, action and consequence. The consequences of Tito's actions lead to his death whereas those of Romola's deeds lead her through much suffering to some kind of moral growth in the end.

In his seminal work *The Death of Tragedy*, George Steiner distinguishes between "tragedy in life" and "tragedy as a form of drama" (1996, p. 3). Needless to say, GE's work does not consist of tragedies in the form of drama, although it derives its founding concepts from these. Her novels are artistic renditions of tragedy in life which represent a rewriting of the tragic drama because GE never meant to reproduce the old forms of tragedy. What she meant to create was a fictional universe in which no character or reader could circulate without confronting his/her thoughts and actions with the empirical reality of an indifferent, causal real world. As I quote above, her artistic purpose was to mirror reality so closely that it would be impossible for the reader, in Felicia Bonaparte's

words, to "ignore in fiction what he might have managed to ignore in fact" (1975, p. 53).

Despite claims such as that by George Steiner, that tragedy has come to an end, GE's novels have made it possible for it to live through modern literature and are definite evidence that the ancient forms of epic and tragedy do survive in their essence, although not in their forms. Her novels are also evidence that the opposite happens to myths: they survive in their artistic form although they have lost their magical and religious essence. All of these are incorporated to the vivid symbolic structure that runs through her work and RML stands out as the point at which old and new forms and essences start to merge and at which future developments of literature start to draw their paths.

2.3 Historical Novel

> What has grown up historically can only die out historically, by the gradual operation of necessary laws.
> George Eliot

It has often been said that, generally speaking, all of GE's novels are historical because all of them are set in a particular place and time, the social and political circumstances of which are of central importance to the lives of the characters and developments of the plot. Doreen Roberts even considers "that *Middlemarch* is indeed a historical novel [and that this] is of crucial importance to its interpretation" (2000, p. ix). Likewise, it has often been said that the historical background in RML is only a piece of antique decoration made all the more unnecessary by the fact that the central issues tackled by the book are as contemporary to its author and readers as they are to its historical context.

In my opinion, these two propositions stem from the same misunderstanding that deems Walter Scott to be a romantic writer and the interest in history that arose in the nineteenth century to be nothing new in the development of English literature. A few years ago, when I delivered an oral presentation about what I considered to be the innovative features of RML,

someone in the audience pointed out that it was inadequate to speak of GE's representation of history in such terms when Shakespeare had written his great historical dramas two hundred years before. I had not anticipated the question but it quickly occurred to me that the proponent could not have read RML because I could not see how someone who had would not notice the difference in both authors' treatment of history. I used to believe a great deal of the mistake stemmed out of a trifling understanding of the term "historical novel" as simply a kind of book which is set at a specific place and time distant from the present day. I still think this is true, but a broader look at the context in which the historical novel arose revealed to me some further complicating factors.

In his analysis of Victorian literature, Masao Miyoshi says that "the confusion, the perplexity, the deep unease of the English nineteenth century are impressed on all who study the period" (1969, p. ix). And if they are impressed on us today, how much stronger they must have been for those living, reading and writing at the time. The terms "historical novel", "romantic" and "realist" have all been defined (or redefined) in the short period that goes from the second half of the eighteenth to the first half of the nineteenth century. The period saw no less than the Industrial Revolution, the American Revolution, the French Revolution, the rise of capitalism, of individualism, of the bourgeoisie and of the English novel. It should not be surprising then that the terms "historical novel", "romantic" and "realist" tended to be used rather vaguely. In such a context, it should not be surprising either that a book which mixed all three should be misunderstood.

In consonance with the turmoil of the nineteenth century, RML is, at the same time, a Victorian realistic novel, an epic, a romance, a tragedy and a historical novel. As I mentioned in chapter one, there is a tendency along the book's critical fortune that thinks it should "be regretted that *Romola* is (...) a story of the fifteenth century" and believes that all the work employed in characterising the historical context and atmosphere of Renaissance Florence "has resulted only in an accumulation of details" (ROMOLAb, 1863, p. 27). A second anonymous critic complains that "most of the Italians introduced are mere names to us (...) names of men about whom we know nothing and care nothing"

(ROMOLAa, 1863, p. 22), thus revealing that much of the alleged difficulty in reading RML comes from a deficiency in the readers' background. To know and care nothing about the names in it means to know and care nothing about the Renaissance in general. The same critic goes on to argue that

> Stripped of their Florentine covering, and divested of those touches of variety which the genius of the writer imparts to them, several of the characters of Romola, and some of the chief events, are old – not in the sense that they are mere repetitions, or that the authoress ever shows poverty of inventions, but that they involve the same moral problems, and cause or encounter the same difficulties in life. (ibidem, p. 23)

These are common and frequent criticisms of GE's treatment of the historical element in RML. They often refrain from considering how odd it is that a writer that had already demonstrated such mastery in harmonizing fictional universe with socio-historical context, as she had done in *Scenes of Clerical Life*, *Adam Bede* and *The Mill on the Floss*, should so completely miss the mark in RML. Both anonymous critics mentioned above, as well as Walter Allen and Joan Bennett, attribute this to GE's detachment of rural Britain's socio-historical context, which she knew so well and which had provided the basis of her previous books. The detachment is a fact, but I wonder to what extent its effects are more seriously felt in RML than in any other historical novel. Walter Scott did not live in twelfth century Britain and did not witness the conflicts between Saxons and Normans to write *Ivanhoe*. Similarly, Alessandro Manzoni was never present to the Spanish occupation in Italy and wrote his *The Betrothed*, as Eliot wrote RML, through research and imagination.

The 1863 anonymous contributor to the *Saturday Review* mentioned above thinks the moral dilemmas and difficulties in RML are old and he is not alone in this opinion. It is precisely because they are old that they are able to appeal to the book's contemporaries. It would be entirely different if, instead of simply being old, they had been resolved, which does not seem to be the case. This is exactly what GE tries to tell her readers in the proem: "we still resemble the men of the past more than we differ from them" (2005, p. 1-2) because "the great river-courses which have shaped the lives of men have hardly changed" (ibidem, p. 1). And this is the reason why looking which such discerning attention

to the past is like looking in a mirror. The mirror can be defective, as Eliot recognised in *Adam Bede*, and this justifies the massive accumulation of details as an attempt to represent things as truthfully as possible. What this critic seems to be disapproving of is actually one of the features that has made GE's writing notorious in English literature: her vivid and energetic realism and socio-historical truthfulness. In this point too, we have Eliot's own words in explanation of her art.

> It is for this rare, precious quality of truthfulness that I delight in many Dutch paintings, which lofty-minded people despise. I find a source of delicious sympathy in these faithful pictures of a monotonous homely existence, which has been the fate of so many more among my fellow-mortals than a life of pomp or of absolute indigence, of tragic suffering or of world-stirring actions. I turn, without shrinking, from cloud-borne angels, from prophets, sibyls, and heroic warriors, to an old woman bending over her flower-pot, or eating her solitary dinner, while the noonday light, softened perhaps by a screen of leaves, falls on her mob-cap, and just touches the rim of her spinning-wheel, and her stone jug, and all those cheap common things which are the precious necessaries of life to her. (ELIOT, 1980, p. 223)

As I comment further on in this chapter, RML has a close relationship with visual arts and this passage shows how GE was aware of writing like the painters from the Dutch Golden Age, which she both admired and found inspiration on. Her description of the old woman reminds one of Johannes Vermeer's *The Milkmaid*, not as much for the subject of the painting as for its style. In the place of the old woman is a young one; and in place of the flower-pot, the milk pitcher. It is a picture of a monotonous homely existence, detailed to the point of showing each little stain of the wall. The style in RML is just the same: each little corner of Florence has its relevance for the totality of the picture.

The claim of critics like the anonymous one quoted above, like Walter Allen and Joan Bennett, who believe that GE made a mistake when she departed from the rural England familiar to her to the Renaissance Florence she knew only from two short visits tends to disregard the fact that GE's other novels are based as much on research and intellectual reconstruction as RML is. Eliot always studied the subjects of her books in very careful detail because she thought direct observation was essential to her main artistic goal: truthful representation. It was

her own opinion that “wide views and narrow observation will not serve [her] purpose” (ELIOT, 1990h, p. 108). The claim of such critics also tends to lightly dismiss the historical element in RML as if it were not historically coherent that GE (considering the seriousness with which she always treated socio-historical conditions in all of her writings, literary or not) should have written this historical novel.

GE began writing RML in 1861, amidst the confusion characteristic of the nineteenth century and at the zenith of Victorian literature. Realism had risen as the language of the then emerging novel and had given way to the Romantic Movement, which, in turn, had risen and fallen. Realism was the word of order in literature again, but romanticism had left artistic marks on the novel which would last, at least, up to Modernism. By 1861, the novel as a genre was already more than one hundred years old and was still changing, with different kinds of novels popping up throughout Europe. Doreen Roberts comments on one such kind.

> Among the most impressive achievements of Victorian literature is the large-scale social-anatomy novel, whose main features are a panoramic sweep, from the rich and patrician to the poor and obscure, a set of interwoven plots which connect a variety of socially diverse figures, a keen interest in the subtleties and shifting balances of class relations, a concern with social history, especially the collision between forces of change and conservatism, and an omniscient narration which combines a critically evaluative overview with intensive focus on selected individual lives. (ROBERTS, 2000, p. vii)

Roberts has written this about *Middlemarch* but it is flagrantly suited to RML. Again it is possible to isolate each one of these features and trace them out in the text. It is notable that RML actually opens with a panoramic sweep over western society, with the angel of the dawn flying “with broad slow wing from the Levant to the Pillars of Hercules, and from the summits of the Caucasus across all the snowy Alpine ridges to the dark nakedness of the western isles” (ELIOT, 2005, p. 1). It also presents a set of interwoven plots in the stories of Romola, Piero di Cosimo, Savonarola, Baldassare, Bernardo del Nero, Nello, Bratti Ferravechi and many others, which represent the class relations of Renaissance Florence. The concern with social history and the omniscient narration are obvious traits and

the collision between forces of change and conservation is the very subject of the book from the first to the last page.

This Victorian subgenre of the novel which Doreen Roberts calls "social-anatomy novel" is the direct nineteenth century sequel of what Georg Lukács calls "the great realistic social novel of the eighteenth century" (1983b, p. 19). He is referring to the writings of Defoe, Fielding and Smollet, which, according to him,

> drew the attention of writers to the concrete (i.e. historical) significance of time and place, to social conditions and so on, it created the realistic, literary means of expression for portraying this spatio-temporal (i.e. historical) character of people and circumstances. But this (...) was a product of realistic instinct and did not amount to a clear understanding of history as a process, of history as the concrete precondition of the present. (ibidem, 1983, p. 21)

This new awareness marks the early origins of the historical novel, even though novels with a historical theme can be found centuries before. The eighteenth century realist novel is thus the first step towards a deeper consciousness of artistically representing historical truth although it still does not understand history as a process. This understanding is brought to English literature by the Romantic Movement, through which "the whole range of our contemporary concerns with the past first became accessible to representation" (BANN, 1995, p. 5). And, once the past could be artistically represented, the literary interest in history was renewed and became focal to nineteenth century realists.

These considerations bring to light the coherence of the historical and artistic process which, through the gradual development of the novel as a genre, culminated in the production of RML. It is possible to draw a direct line of continuation (and change) from what Lukácks terms "the great realistic social novel of the eighteenth century" to the rise of the historical novel with Walter Scott to what Doreen Roberts names "the large-scale social-anatomy novel" and, eventually to RML. The appearance of the eighteenth century realistic social novel marks the rise of the genre as we know it today, introduces the first novels in the British Isles and establishes "formal realism" as the novel's official "narrative

method" (WATT, 1959, p. 32). The emerging realistic instinct, as Lukács puts it, results in a greater awareness of social conditions, which, in its turn, will later result in the main characteristics of what Doreen Roberts calls the Victorian social-anatomy novel. But, in between the eighteenth century and the Victorian novel, very important novelistic traits, such as will become focal points in RML, fall into their right place. The works of Defoe, Richardson, Fielding and Smolett define some of the most enduring features of the novel, namely, its "absence of formal conventions" and its "rejection of traditional plots" (ibidem, p. 13). Perhaps even more important is their definition that the novel's "primary criterion was truth to individual experience" and that the "novelist's primary task was to convey the impression of fidelity to human experience" (ibidem). Although the novel had changed much by the 1860s, these are still defining characteristics and evidence of commitment to their furtherance is still found in Eliot's writing almost a hundred fifty years later[47], most notably in the seventeenth chapter of *Adam Bede*.

However, Lukács claims, although the sense of individuality and of historical awareness was growing, the eighteenth century novel still did not understand "history as the concrete precondition of the present". It took a new transgressive artistic movement (which had been on the make for years) to achieve this understanding. The Romantic Movement fed on the rise of individuality, which found on historical perception the means of responding, at the same time artistically and politically, to the cultural turmoil of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The Movement made it increasingly felt that the individual could not exist independently from the changes in his socio-historical context. Romanticism thus unchained a series of rebellions, aesthetic, political, social and philosophical. As I have argued elsewhere[48], *Frankenstein* stands as the finest

[47] I am thinking about the publication of Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* in 1719 as the official mark of appearance of the eighteenth century novel. RML started publication in 1862, one hundred forty three years later.

[48] For more on the topic see DONADA, Jaqueline Bohn. *"Spontaneous Overflow of Powerful Feelings": Romantic Imagery in Mary Shelley's Frankenstein*. Saarbrücken: VDM Verlag Dr. Muller, 2009. The central argument of this 2009 work is to situate *Frankenstein* within the English Romantic Movement, but it is vital to mention that the book already shows clear signs of features that will form the realistic

literary instance of the romantic awareness of individuality and of the aesthetic, political and philosophical rebellions of the period. The far-reaching repercussion of this single book shows how strongly the Romantic Movement established itself as "a pervasive cultural movement involving every aspect of social, political, and intellectual life" (BANN, 1995, p. 4).

English Romanticism was thus a period of great change. The eighteenth century social novel, with its movement "from general human types to particular people (characters) in particular circumstances (scenery)" (WATT, 1959, p. 15), had rejected the romance traditions and the imaginative drive into wish fulfilment which reappeared in many Romantic works. However, the establishment of realism as the novel's narrative method which had taken place in the eighteenth century was not to be displaced by the Romantic revolt because such displacement would be incompatible with the Movement's foundation of historical consciousness. This is when both realism and romanticism begin to acquire and build on very sophisticated contradictions and ambiguities. The nineteenth century Romantic Movement is undeniably influenced by the emerging realism of the novels previously produced and will, in its own turn, influence the reappearing realism of the Victorian period, which will be deeply marked by Romanticism's historical awareness and imaginative drive. This is also when both realism and romanticism cease to be a binary opposition. Much more than contradicting one another, they become complementing literary forces representative of the turbulence of the period. It was at the intersection of realism and romanticism that the historical novel was created. I here assume Lukács's position that it was created by Walter Scott and that the year 1814, date of the publication of Scott's first novel, *Waverly*, can be taken as the historical mark of the definite appearance of the classical historical novel.

Georg Lukács maintains that "Scott's historical novel is the direct continuation of the great realistic social novel of the eighteenth century" (1983, p. 31) and he also rightly claims that "the enormous political and social

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tradition. For more on this specific point, see George Levine's 1973 essay "*Frankenstein* and the Tradition of Realism".

transformations of the preceding decades awoke in England, too, the feeling for history, the awareness of historical development" (ibidem, p. 32). However, it is essential to bear in mind that these enormous transformations entered the field of the arts through the Romantic Movement, which brought forth this feeling for history and enabled Scott to create an entirely new kind of novel, one that, for the first time, entails "derivation of the individuality of characters from the historical peculiarity of their age" (ibidem, p. 19). It is essential because it sheds light on a misunderstanding I mention in the opening of this section: the labelling of Scott as a romantic writer. When I researched about the role of *Frankenstein* in the English Romantic Movement, I was taken aback by a number of references to his novels as representative of the romantic prose in several compendiums and histories of English literature. There is much in Scott's works that refers back to the old-fashioned romance: the mysticism of a distant past, the fantastic world of magic, of knights and heroes and, perhaps most of all, the derivation of a good deal of the plots from history and myth, a central characteristic of romance, against which the novel appears. So the only sense in which Scott could be considered a romantic is in the sense of deriving aspects of his writing from the romance. It would be inadequate to refer to him as a representative of the Romantic Movement, whose aesthetic agenda does not appear in his work. It would also be seriously inadequate to fail to notice his contribution to the furtherance of nineteenth century literary realism. Whereas the Romantic Movement brought historical consciousness into the arts, Walter Scott perfected the art of truthful historical representation in the novel. He created the historical novel by perfecting its most indispensable and already mentioned trait: "derivation of the individuality of characters from the historical peculiarity of their age". (LUKÁCS, 1983, p. 19).

In his assessment of the realistic imagination, George Levine writes of *Waverly* that it displays "the essential patterns of the English nineteenth century realistic novel, although [it is] not yet free from the storytelling romance traditions that Scott inherited and modified" (1989, p. 100). By now I think it is clear that "Scott's kind of fiction is somewhere between Romance and Novel" (ibidem, p. 89) and represents quite faithfully the historical and artistic context in which he

wrote, a context not exactly of transition only, which would have hindered the writing of RML, but of convergence of traditions. Just like *Frankenstein* embodies the *zeitgeist* of the English Romantic Movement, Scott's novels embody the contemporary convergence of artistic traditions and methods and the new understanding of history as a concrete precondition to the present.

I have thus very briefly commented on the development of the novel up to Walter Scott because any study of the historical novel must consider the role of his work, but, more than that, because much of Eliot's imagination and conception of the historical novel comes from the reading of his works. It is to be remembered that GE's masterpiece, *Middlemarch*, makes direct references to Scott: Mr. Trumbull thinks *Ivanhoe* is a superior book to *Waverly* and Tertius Lydgate, although he reads no literature in the present, "used to know Scott's poems by heart" (2000, p. 224) and believes the influence will last all his life. Walter Scott is also a favourite writer of one of the most autobiographical characters Eliot created. Maggie Tulliver resorts to the adventure and fantasy of his literature to escape the occasional dullness of her ordinary life. "Sometimes Maggie thought she could have been contented with absorbing fancies; if she could have had all Scott's novels and all Byron's poems!" (2002, p. 323) exclaims a narrator that has been penetrating her thoughts.

As the direct continuation of the eighteenth century novel, Walter Scott developed and perfected a concrete manner of representing socio-historical conditions. Although he departed from the historical awareness coming out of the same events that led up to the Romantic Movement, his treatment of historical material differs from that of the Romantics in his effort to "depict this concrete interaction between man and his social environment in the broadest manner" (LUKÁCS, 1983, p. 40). In consonance with this mode of representation, he made the same frequent use of long descriptions of historical events, picturesque places, manners, clothing and people that many already mentioned critics point out to as a weakness in RML. Lukács, however, has a rather different judgment. He thinks that

> only bunglers have maintained (and continue to do so) that the historical characterization of people and events means the accumulation

> of single, historically characteristic traits. (...) For Scott (...) it means that certain crises in the personal destinies of a number of human beings coincide and interweave within the determining context of an historical crisis (1983, p. 40-41).

The action in RML opens on the day of Lorenzo de' Medici's death, a critical moment in Florentine history for it caused the city to reconfigure its political scenario. In chapter five, quite early in the story, we learn from Bardo that "Lorenzo's untimely death has raised a new difficulty. I had his promise — I should have had his bond — that my collection should always bear my name and should never be sold" (ELIOT, 2005, p. 53). At this point in the story, the reader does not yet know that this foreshadows key events in the plot. Later on, when Tito sells Bardo's library without Romola's consent and for his own profit, it becomes clear that Bardo's, Romola's and Tito's personal destinies have been directly affected by this concrete historical event. The fact that the reader takes a long time to notice the impact of Lorenzo's death on the lives of the main characters makes it all the more lifelike, for outcomes of historical events tend to take a while to reveal themselves to those affected.

This is certainly not an isolated case in the book. The lives of the protagonists cannot really be detached from the historical happenings without greatly harming the flow of the story. The chapters of almost pure historical narration of which many critics have complained help provide the cohesion of the story. At the opening of one such chapter, 21 – "Florence Expects a Guest", the narrator, perhaps in an excessively explicit comment, states that

> Since that Easter [of Romola's and Tito's wedding] a great change had come over the prospects of Florence; and as in the tree that bears a myriad of blossoms, each single bud with its fruit is dependent on the primary circulation of the sap, so the fortunes of Tito and Romola were dependent on certain grand political and social conditions which made an epoch in the history of Italy. (ibidem, p. 205)

We know from Eliot's letters that her interest with RML was historical from the beginning, but we must remember that she was writing in the 1860's, when the historical novel in the British Isles "was a denigrated narrative form (...) emphasizing historical atmosphere more than exhaustive historical research"

(BATTLES, 2009, p. 215). When she set out to write her historical novel, GE was determined not to incur in the same lack of historical research her contemporaries were accused of. This (although not this alone) accounts for the massive accumulation of detail in RML. But it is necessary to see beyond the details for they are not simply thrown here and there at hazard along the text.

GE was a connoisseur of Scott's work and she could certainly recognise in what their contemporary criticism used to call the "local colour" of his novels a distinct mode of historical representation in which time and place, for the first time, acquired concrete significance and finally established "history as the concrete precondition for the present", as Lukács would have it (1983, p. 21). Thus, to make a very clear point that her book did not lack in historical research and did not use history merely as decoration, GE finds it necessary to have her narrator tell the reader that, yes, the lives of the characters in RML are inseparable from historical events, just like our lives are in the (so called) real world. One could argue that such explicit and self-conscious comments call too much attention to the book's artistic mechanisms and impair its created reality. It is true. But it is also true that in the establishment (or, in this case, re-establishment) of a genre, distinctive traits (such as the interdependence between history and personal lives) tend to be marked by rather explicit and self-conscious constructions.

GE's statement that the fortunes of Romola and Tito mingled with historical events attests not only to a kinship in Eliot's and Scott's concrete representation of historical material but also to her conscious work of resuscitating the noble genre of the historical novel. The kinship attests that she had indeed inherited the form that Walter Scott had perfected and we can see that, not just in RML, she draws upon his modes of concrete historical representation. But the relationship between GE's and Walter Scott's works is certainly not one of simple imitation and continuation. When she set out to write RML, although it took her a few years of painful uncertainty about the exact shape and subject matter of her book, she was quite sure about where her artistic interests lay. Felicia Bonaparte tells us that

> It was, in fact, just before she began *Silas Marner* that Eliot decided to start her "Italian story" (...). Returning with Lewes from their first trip through Italy from March to June 1860, Eliot wrote to John Blackwood: "When we were in Florence, I was rather fired by the idea of writing a historical romance – scene, Florence – period, the close of the fifteenth century, which was marked by Savonarola's career and martyrdom. Mr. Lewes has encouraged me to persevere in the project, saying I should probably do something in historical romance rather different from what has been done before" (...). (1979, p. 6)

The passage informs us that GE had decided to start RML before she had started her second novel, revealing that, although RML was her fourth novel to be published, it was her first or second to be planned. Conceived in the first half of 1860 but starting serialization in 1862, RML was probably the book Eliot took the longest to write and I believe a closer look at this passage can suggest why.

It has always been intriguing to me that GE stated that she was fired with the idea of writing not simply another book, another story or another novel. She was fired with a much more specific thought: she wanted to write not a historical novel, but a historical romance. It has already been said that GE's use of terms and concepts is mathematically precise. It is, therefore, not plausible that she would have used the term "romance" in a loose sense simply meaning a story in which unrealistic things may come to pass. I look at this passage and at the possible implications of GE's use of the term "historical romance" more carefully in the next chapter. My interest here is to state my opinion that she employed the term "romance" at this point to signal her interest of moving beyond the aesthetic possibilities the realistic novel had to offer her in the 1860s. I think Felicia Bonaparte is right when she says that it was "because Eliot was moving toward the epic form, that she called *Romola* a romance" (1979, p. 14), but I trust that, more than consciously wishing to write an epic, GE was trying to join, in literary form, her views on life and on art. Her views on life were very broad and complex, and her views on art, rather sophisticated. Stating them in words, no matter how well done, is as simplifying as the realist aim of recreating human life on the printed page. Nevertheless, let us say that she conceived of life as a tragic search for balance between pleasure and duty, between freedom and obligation. Her art is

an attempt of truthfully representing her "keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life" (ELIOT, 2000, p. 162). A truthful representation of such wide views, she felt, could only be achieved by stepping on very solid historical basis. This is why she works at reconstructing the genre of the historical novel and that is why she draws on Scott's concrete mode of representation. The solid historical basis cannot be limited by pre-established forms (it was then expected that Eliot would come up with another realistic novel of English rural life) and that is why she chooses to rework on the more abstractly symbolic conventions of the romance. GE's work, RML in particular, is a convergence point for different literary traditions, but of this I treat later. My aim now is to conclude this section by commenting on how I believe GE transcends the form she inherited from Walter Scott.

In his great historical novels, Scott portrays the historical struggles that have formed the British Isles: the struggles between serfs and nobility, between Saxons and Normans, or between rival noble families at a time when social, political and gender roles are still recognizable. About half a century later, what GE does in RML is to portray the struggles that have formed (at least a great portion of) western society. She draws on Scott's experience to reach a more encompassing perspective. This she achieves by depicting the birth of modern man, represented by the resuscitated spirit of the Florentine who goes back (is born) to a world (Florence) that is familiar and yet strange to him. He speaks the language of this world and yet the dialect of his fellow countrymen "would sound like a riddle in [his] ears" because he enters a society in which social, political and sexual roles begin to have their outlines blurred.

GE's choice of a female heroine inevitably raises the issue of gender. I mentioned in chapter one that Romola is often seen, in the first book of the novel, in reclining and submissive postures before the men who dominate her world. First, she seats in a low stool by her father's knee. Next, she obeys Savonarola's command for her to kneel down. Then, in chapter 32, we learn that, in Romola's and Tito's household, "there was a low stool against Tito's chair, and that was Romola's habitual seat" (ELIOT, 2005, p. 280).

This, naturally, represents the traditional binary opposition man/high vs. woman/low. But in this particular instance, although her position is still low in relation to her male oppressor, it is now also "against" him, which makes all the difference for Tito is the man who will eventually occasion Romola's displacement of male authority.

Romola spends most of the novel trying to break free from one man's domination just to fall under another's. Tito unknowingly provides her the last straw: after the sale of the Bardi library, Romola takes the definite step towards a complete reconstruction of herself which entailed a redefinition of her historical, social and gender role. After the sale, she takes the lead of her own destiny, which arguably symbolises the destiny of her community. Thus, by displacing male authority in her life, she signals to the same possibility in her society. The turn of events in her destiny symbolically represents a redefinition of women's place and, consequently, a redefinition of several kinds of authority, including the authority of then established literary conventions, namely novel and realism.

The much criticised epilogue is a concrete representation of RML's displacement of recognized authority and establishment of a new order. Dorothea Barrett observes that "by the end of the novel, Romola is in Tito's place, and Bardo, Bernardo, Baldassare, Savonarola, and Tito are all dead" (2005, p. ix). Romola's mission is then complete. It has been pointed out as a weakness in the character that Romola is no more than an idealized and embellished version of George Eliot herself. Whereas the argument has its value, one should be able to distinguish that her idealization is no mere fancy of the author but is caused by the genres GE amalgamates into the book. Romola is not only a novel character, she is also an epic heroine, which explains her noble nature and the feelings that she is somehow superior (more beautiful, more generous, more intellectual) to most common women. She is also a tragic heroine, which can only add to her grandiosity. Finally, being also a romantic character, she is also allowed to play the several archetypal roles that she does.

By making Romola the female heroine of her (inter)national epic-tragedy-novel-romance, GE signals a coming change. Her historical insight and keen observation of the present enables her to foresee and to foreshadow in her

book a world in which a woman does not have to be a mother and a husband does not have to be a master. She foresees and foreshadows a world in which sacredness may be in disobeying and loyalty may be in running away. Most of all, to the purposes of this work, RML foreshadows a literary context in which a text does not have to be either a novel or an epic or a tragedy or a romance; it foreshadows, and demonstrated concretely, that a book can be all of this.

2.4 Visual arts

> George Eliot's mind is like the National Gallery; for every canvas on display there are two stored away in the basement.
> W. J. Harvey

The close relationship between literature and visual arts, especially painting, has been acknowledged by artists and critics since antiquity. However, it is interesting to note that the founding stone of literary theory and criticism, Aristotle's *Poetics*, although it refers to dance and music as art forms, does not lay any emphasis on the bond between literature, which it is mostly about, and visual arts. This might strike us as curios but is probably because the latter (differently from poetry) were not dominant art forms at the period. Following Aristotle's time, came the Hellenistic period of Greek culture, which brought a rehabilitation of painting and sculpture (WEISSTEIN, 1982, p. 252) so that a close association between visual arts and literature came to be acknowledged a few centuries later by Horace in his *Ars Poetica*. Indeed, his famous pronouncement *ut pictura poesis* (such as painting is poetry) originated a long and by now established tradition of understanding literature and painting as sister arts.

The idea thrived among artists and scholars and another few centuries later, Plutarch wrote in his *Morals*[49] "that poetry is vocal painting and

[49] The first-century Greek scholar Plutarch of Chaeronea (c. 46 – 120) occupied the final twenty years of his life writing the *Moralia*. It is a collection of seventy eight essays and speeches which he transcribed on various issues. In 1878, a translation into English was published under the title *Plutarch's Morals Translated from the Greek by Several Hands*. It was published with an introduction by Ralph Waldo Emerson. It is not clear whether George Eliot had read Plutarch's *Morals* prior to writing *Romola*, but it is certainly probable given GE's knowledge of the classic philosophers and historians and her fluency in Greek.

painting is silent poetry" (1878, p. 50). Both art forms now shared the same status. In his account of the relationship between literature and visual arts, Ulrich Weisstein stated that

> The aesthetic emancipation of the visual arts, coupled with the social emancipation of the painters and sculptors (whose exodus from the artisan guilds culminated in the foundation of academies of what then became known as the fine arts), occurs in the Italian Renaissance, where *ut pictura poesis* is literally taken to imply the equality of the two arts, if not, as subsequently, the superiority of painting over poetry. The reversal is effected in Leonardo da Vinci's comparison of the arts. According to the scale of values presented in Leonardo's so called *Paragone*, painting excels over both music (because it "does not fade away as soon as it is born") and literature. (WEISSTEIN, 1982, p. 253)

And here we find another coherent reason for George Eliot's choice of setting and historical background. In order to imprint a strong visual impact to her book, GE chose a setting (Florence) and a period (the Renaissance) that were consistent with her aesthetic proposal. The potential of Renaissance art and culture for pictorial representation is acted out in RML, its imagery being that of the Renaissance, which can still be seen almost everywhere in Florence today, with angels, Madonnas and Christs.

Indeed, in writing RML, GE relies strongly on the power of images. Much of her concept of realism, we know from her essays, comes from the Dutch realistic painters, but her knowledge of visual arts was massive. Her interest in painting came from childhood and when she met George H. Lewes, visits to all kinds of expositions and art galleries became almost daily activities for them. This did not change when she married John W. Cross. Within her circle of friends were some of the Pre-Raphaelite painters. She and Lewes were also friends with Frederic William Burton, who was director of the National Gallery for twenty years, from 1874 to 1894. Moreover, the Leweses visited the main art galleries of Europe, not only in the UK but also in places such as Paris, Geneva, Rome, Florence, Venice, and Vienna.

It is apparent that the influence of painting on her grew to such an extent that she began incorporating to her writing the idea of capturing meaning in an image. In this sense, the technique she employed in writing RML creates the

effect of ink on canvas. The novel itself can be understood as a succession of visual prophecies painted on the page. Because the process of capturing meaning in an image is symbolic, GE chose to use images in which she saw great symbolic potential and that is why the reader will find in *Romola*, much more than in any other of her novels, direct references to mythological characters: the Muses, Satyrs, Mars, Hermes, Bacchus, Ariadne, Alcestis, Antigone and Oedipus are all mentioned in the text. Bacchus and Ariadne, key images in the story, appear in a succession of verbal images.

In the English nineteenth century, "no writer supplied the demand for word-painting more successfully than George Eliot" (WITEMEYER, 1979) and none of her novels supplied this demand more intensively than *Romola* did. So much so that it was the only one of her works to be illustrated in its first edition[50]. In his essay about literature and visual arts, Ulrich Weisstein lists sixteen "kinds of cohabitation and interpretation" (1982, p. 259) between literature and visual arts. RML fits about ten of these. In an era that preceded the cinema, when no visual adaptation of novels other than illustrations was available, the reading public relied more strongly than nowadays on the novelist's ability to enable them to actually see what was on the printed page.

RML is visual throughout the text; the descriptions are vivid and plastic and many of them reach poetic beauty, such as those in the proem, for instance. Because a complete analysis would be impossible to manage, I choose here to focus on three items that put Romola's strong relation with painting in evidence. I also comment on their inherent symbolism and on how their complexity helps create an impression of conflict, partly responsible for some critics' idea that RML is a generic puzzle, as mentioned in chapter one. The three items are the triptych painted by Piero di Cosimo and given by Tito to Romola, the sketch of the three masks found in Nello's shop and Piero's painting of a frightened Tito. One does not need to be an expert in hermeneutics to observe that

[50] *Romola* was first published by the *Cornhill Magazine*, differently from her previous novels, which had been published by *Blackwood's Magazine*. It was issued in fourteen parts, from July 1862 to August 1863 and contained thirty nine illustrations by Frederic Leighton, engraved by William Linton. The illustrations can be seen at the Database of Mid-Victorian wood-engraved Illustration at http://www.dmvi.cf.ac.uk/searchResults.asp?Keywords=romola&order=ShortTitle&offset=0

GE uses these images to reflect movements of the plot, having them to function sometimes as a prolepsis, in the case of the three masks, sometimes contributing to characterization, as in the case of Piero's painting of the frightened Tito. The passage which describes this painting reads:

> Piero turned the sketch, and held it towards Tito's eyes. He saw himself with his right-hand uplifted, holding a wine-cup, in the attitude of triumphant joy, but with his face turned away from the cup with an expression of such intense fear in the dilated eyes and pallid lips, that he felt a cold stream through his veins, as if he were being thrown into sympathy with his imaged self. "You are beginning to look like it already," said Piero, with a short laugh, moving the picture away again. "He's seeing a ghost--that fine young man. I shall finish it some day, when I've settled what sort of ghost is the most terrible--whether it should look solid, like a dead man come to life, or half transparent, like a mist" (ELIOT, 2005, p. 186).

The painting functions as a revelation for both Tito and the reader: initially he appears with the wine-cup and an expression of triumph: this clearly alludes to the triumph of Bacchus. However, he is looking away from the cup, in an allusion to what will come to pass in his future. A dead man come to life is exactly the kind of ghost that Tito's foster father is to him at the moment, a shadow of the past that he had supposed annihilated. A few chapters later, when Piero accidently discloses the painting to Romola, we learn that he decided to portray Baldassare's desperate look when taking hold of Tito's arm in the steps of the cathedral as the ghost of his painting.

One characteristic of RML that contributes to create the impression that it is a mere generic puzzle is that many of the images and symbols in it are contradictory and point to opposing directions. Let us take the example of the triptych, commissioned by Tito from Piero di Cosimo with the express purpose of containing, or rather hiding, a crucifix given Romola by her dying brother.

> 'I want a very delicate miniature device taken from certain fables of the poets, which you will know how to combine for me. It must be painted on a wooden case — I will show you the size — in the form of a triptych. The inside may be simple gilding: it is on the outside I want the device. It is a favourite subject with you Florentines — the triumph of Bacchus and Ariadne; but I want it treated in a new way. A story in Ovid will give you the necessary hints. The young Bacchus must be seated in a ship, his head bound with clusters of grapes, and a spear entwined with vine-leaves in his hand: dark-berried ivy must wind about the masts and

> sails, the oars must be thyrsi, and flowers must wreathe themselves about the poop; leopards and tigers must be crouching before him, and dolphins must be sporting round. But I want to have the fair-haired Ariadne with him, made immortal with her golden crown — that is not in Ovid's story, but no matter, you will conceive it all — and above there must be young Loves, such as you know how to paint, shooting with roses at the points of their arrows —' (ELIOT, 2005, p. 183-184).

As the reader goes through the passage, the image of the triptych gradually forms itself in his/her mind. The crucifix had been given to Romola when her brother revealed to her a vision he had had. Although symbolic, the vision is a very clear warning: "I believe it is a revelation made for thee:", says Dino, "to warn thee against marriage as a temptation of the enemy." (ELIOT, 2005, p. 158). He gives her the cross as if trying to keep Tito, the enemy, or "The Great Tempter" (ibidem, p. 157), as Dino says in his vision, away from Romola, much in the way Christians would use the cross to save them from evil or sin. Although the symbolism of the cross is very complex and dates back to centuries before the Christian era, it is safe to say that here it represents the Christian idea of salvation: the cross on which Christ died in order to save humanity represents salvation for those who embrace the Christian faith. This Dino invites Romola to do: "To renounce the vain philosophy and corrupt thought of the heathens: for in the hour of sorrow and death their pride will turn to mockery" (ibidem, p. 158). So, if at a first level of understanding, the crucifix represents a warning against Tito, at a deeper level it represents a warning against life outside the Christian faith. Romola's troubled acceptance of it foreshadows her later attitude towards Savonarola and further developments in the novel. There is a good deal of implicit authorial comment in GE's painting of the triptych and cross. With it, she invests a single scene with layers of symbolic meaning which would take perhaps a dozen pages to express.

Because of what it explicitly represents, if kept at the couple's household the crucifix would always be, to Romola, a symbol of what divided her from her husband. For Tito it would always be a threat. His idea for the triptych is a very clever device to annul the effect of the presence of the cross by hiding it in images and symbols that have meaning contrary to it. So, to counter-attack the Christian symbol, he chooses Greek myth, or paganism, from the Christian point

of view, to adorn the triptych and he has a secular artist[51] paint it. The analogy is quite simple: Tito is the triumphant Bacchus, the god of joy, a force of nature. Romola is the hitherto miserable Ariadne, made glorious and immortal by the appearance of Bacchus in her life. That is, Tito appears as the joy giver who delivers Romola from a life of seclusion in her father's library and domination, Romola's personal island of Naxos. This illustrates the story as it happens up to this point in the novel and, as we realize later, is Tito's version of their story.

The triptych is presented to Romola on the day of their betrothal and it marks an important transition in her life: from now on she ceases to be Bardo's dutiful daughter and becomes Tito's crowned Ariadne. But as the symbols foreshadow, she will be delivered from one man's domination only to fall under another's. It is not to be forgotten that the triptych, although adorned with images of happiness that lead away from the Christian ideal of suffering as penitence, contains at its heart a crucifix, ultimate symbol of this very ideal.

> 'Do you know what this is for, my Romola?' added Tito, taking her by the hand, and leading her towards the cabinet. 'It is a little shrine, which is to hide away from you for ever that remembrancer of sadness. You have done with sadness now; and we will *bury all images of it* — bury them in *a tomb of joy*. See!' A slight quiver passed across Romola's face as Tito took hold of the crucifix. But she had no wish to prevent his purpose; on the contrary, she herself wished to subdue certain importunate memories and questionings which still flitted like unexplained shadows across her happier thought. He opened the triptych and placed the crucifix within the central space; then closing it again, taking out the key, and setting the little tabernacle in the spot where the crucifix had stood, said — 'Now, Romola, look and see if you are satisfied with the portraits old Piero has made of us. Is it not a dainty *device*? and the credit of choosing it is mine.' Ah! it is you — it is perfect!' said Romola, looking with moist joyful eyes at the miniature Bacchus, with his purple clusters. 'And I am Ariadne, and you are crowning me! Yes, it is true, Tito; you have crowned my poor life.' (ELIOT, 2005, p. 197-198, *italics mine*)

The triptych with the crucifix at its heart is the central symbol in Romola and it alludes to a multiplicity of things in and outside the novel. Its most obvious and direct allusion is to the forthcoming marriage of Tito and Romola and

[51] Piero di Cosimo (1462-1521), like most Renaissance artists, authored innumerous works of religious themes for which he is recognized as a great artist. However, the exquisite insight that makes Piero a unique artist appears in his secular works. Dennis Geronimus (2006, p. 26) explains that Piero's original style is "best exemplified by his sophisticated pagan subjects for learned, well-to-do lay patrons".

to what their relationship has been so far. However, it also points to even further developments in the plot. Firstly, it ironically represents Tito's betrayal of Romola: the triptych, as presented to her, has nothing inside, it is empty. Everything that matters is superficially carved on the outside and is called by Tito himself "a device". And it is designed to hide away from Romola some of her own memories, memories, one must notice, which advise her against him[52]. Not by chance, the oblivion of these memories leads to the fulfilment of Dino's vision, which is to say, of Tito's betrayal. Tito's use of the expression "a tomb of joy" to refer to the triptych acquires bitter ironic connotations when we see this burial of the cross as the moment that immortalizes the crucifix in Romola's heart. The triptych may "bury all images" of her memories but is does not bury her awareness and knowledge of their existence. "But it is still there – it is only hidden" (ibidem, p. 201), says Romola when Tito argues that he has locked all sadness from her. "A tomb of joy" comes to mean not that the reasons for sadness have been buried, as Tito intended, but, inversely, that joy itself is dead and buried.

That the triptych, representing the triumph of Bacchus/Tito and Ariadne/Romola and, in a wider sense, representing paganism, should enter the story through Tito is quite comprehensible, since, by this point in the novel, the reader has already identified him with Bacchus. It is far more complex (and only possible much later) to understand why the crucifix should enter through Romola. It is true that it had belonged to Dino, but it is only when it passes into Romola's hands that it acquires importance in the text. Just as Tito had so far been identified with Bacchus, Romola had been identified with Ariadne. What happens after Tito's treacherous sale of Bardo's library is that he goes on to follow the bacchic course of corruption and degradation whereas Romola treads on the opposite way. It is possible to see the change taking place just by looking at the titles of chapters thirty-six, "Ariadne Discrowns Herself", and thirty-seven, "The Tabernacle Unlocked".

When Romola decides to leave Tito and Florence, she gathers around her the symbols of a disposition that had been latent in her and hidden in the

[52] It is interesting to remember that memories, for Eliot, are the roots of affection. The betrayal of memories is the most destructive for entailing a betrayal of affections.

triptych and leaves behind those that link her to Tito and his bacchic nature. In chapter thirty-six, she dresses herself in "the grey serge dress of a sister belonging to the third order of Saint Francis" (ibidem, p. 318) and, as she opens the triptych in the following chapter, she "took out the crucifix, without looking at it; then, with trembling fingers, (…) she hung the crucifix round her neck, and hid it in the bosom of her mantle" (ibidem, p. 327). As she dresses herself as a Franciscan, she is startled to notice that "she looked strangely like her brother Dino" and cannot help asking herself: "Was she getting more like him in anything else?" (ibidem, p. 319). At the same time, she leaves behind the tokens of "that past on which she was going to turn her back for ever" (ibidem, p. 319): her bridal dress and veil and her betrothal ring. Thus is Ariadne ready to break free from Bacchus, who has proved to be the god of sorrow, not of joy for her, and move on to her next role: that of converted Christian and, ultimately, of Virgin Mary.

This leads the interpretation of the triptych and the cross to a more symbolic level in which they clearly represent the issue of Christianity and paganism and its intricacies. Whereas the form of the triptych became popular in early Christian art, this one is fully decorated with pagan motifs to make it clear that it is the province of Bacchus and of what he represents[53]. In the same way Tito and Romola are also understood on a more symbolic level of interpretation not only as characters representing individuals in society (as characters often do in GE's novels) but as representatives of the two strongest streams that make up modern western society: the pagan Greco-Roman tradition and Christianity.

In her *The Triptych and the Cross*, Felicia Bonaparte observes that

[53] It is interesting to observe the irony behind Tito's conception of the bacchic theme. He had meant to portray himself as the god of joy and Romola as his chosen, and therefore triumphant, Ariadne. This is what he has Piero di Cosimo paint on the surface of the triptych. As the story unfolds and the reader gets to know both Tito and Romola better, we start to notice that Tito represents all the facets of the god which do not appear in the image he has commissioned. Chevalier and Gheerbrant observe that "deep down, he [Dionysos] symbolizes the life force which tends to break free of all bonds and restraint" (1996, p. 294). This would lead to "the destruction of the personality, his 'orgies' promoting regression to life-forms reflecting primordial chaos and the drowning of the conscious in the lava of the unconscious. His appearance in dreams denotes very severe psychic tension and the imminence of breakdown" (ibidem, p. 293). This is the direction into which Tito develops. As one would expect, Romola develops into the opposite direction, growing into a more self-consciously mature person and acquiring a very strong sense of moral responsibility.

> In burying the crucifix, Tito recalls Christ's burial, and it is Christ's tomb rather than Tito's that will prove to be "a tomb of joy", for through it mankind symbolically passes to salvation.
> Just as the hollow triptych is a visual translation of Bernardo del Nero's description of Tito, so the juxtaposition of the two images – of the crucifix locked inside the triptych – is a visual translation of one of the chief moral metaphors in the book (BONAPARTE, 1979, p. 94).

Romola is indeed filled with visual translations. As well as authorial comment and symbolic depth, there is also much implicit narration in GE's verbal paintings. What this passage puts in evidence is the existence of another antithetical and apparently confusing image in the novel, one that is a correlate to the image of the triptych with the cross: the clash of Bacchus and Christ. After the commission of the triptych, it becomes very clear that Tito is identified as Bacchus, not only in the painting suggested by himself but in several other instances in the novel. To begin with

> The identification is indeed one of the many implications of the title of the opening chapter, "The Shipwrecked Stranger," for "the stranger," as Eliot often calls Tito in the book is one of the traditional, and one of the most important epithets of Bacchus. "Shipwrecked" too suggests Bacchus, as well as Odysseus; it reminds us that Tito, like Bacchus, arrives by the sea, and arrives appropriately enough, on April 9, in the spring, the season of the vegetation god. (BONAPARTE, 1979, p. 63)

Bacchus, because, in one version of his story, he was generated in his mother Semele's womb but finished gestation in his father Jupiter's thigh, is often called the 'twice-born' god.[54] This sheds light on the fact that Tito is described as coming from

> a Greek stock planted in Italian soil much longer than the mulberry-trees which have taken so kindly to it. I was born at Bari, and my — I mean, I was brought up by an Italian — and, in fact, I am a Greek, very much as your peaches are Persian. The Greek dye was subdued in me, I suppose, till I had been dipped over again by long abode and much travel in the land of gods and heroes. (ELIOT, 2005, p. 30)

This is how he introduces himself in the book, indirectly stating that he also has two origins, one Greek and one Italian. Tito also has two fathers: his

[54] Jean Chevalier (1996) and Thomas Bulfinch (2001) are two of a number of authoritative sources that refer to this version of the story of Bacchus.

biological father, who is not referred to in the book, and Baldassare, his foster father, who, just like Tessa, is important in the book more as a symbol in relation to Tito than as a character.

It is clear by the description of his origins that Tito is identified with the Greco-Roman tradition. We could say the same about Bardo, but whereas Bardo is marked by his stoicism, Tito is defined by his bacchic nature. So much so that among all fruits or plants with which he could have identified his lineage, he chooses the mulberry, which, "like all varieties of fig, is a symbol of fertility and therefore a symbol of Bacchus" (BONAPARTE, 1979, p. 64).

Tito often appears dressed in purple, the colour of grapes and wine and therefore, the colour of Bacchus. A scene of their betrothal provides a very rich symbolic image: "They held each other's hands while she spoke, and both looked at their imaged selves [on the triptych]. But the reality was far more beautiful: she all lily-white and golden, and he with his dark glowing beauty above the purple red-bordered tunic" (ELIOT, 2005, p. 198). Here is a visual translation that interprets the conflict and tension between these two characters through colour symbolism. These two sentences are the perfect example of the complex way in which GE uses imagery and symbols to foreshadow character relationships, plot movements, and moral dilemmas and to reach epic proportions. When she characterizes Romola as "all lily-white and golden" and Tito in terms of "his dark glowing beauty above the purple red-bordered tunic" she captures the whole story of the novel and the main questions it puts forth in a single, simply worded antithesis: Romola's light brightness contrasts with Tito's deep darkness. Purple, as the colour of grapes and wine, is undoubtedly, the colour of Bacchus and contrasts sharply with Romola's 'lily-whiteness', representing, as white does in weddings and betrothals, virginal purity. If we think of the plot up to this point, this alludes to Romola's quiet and chaste life in her dominating family circle in contrast to the more colourful shades of Tito's life. Again Tito is identified with the joy-bringing Bacchus and Romola, with the ideals of virginal purity. This, however consistent with the novel, is a superficial interpretation, for the colours with which GE paints her visual translation are ambiguous. The colour white, Chevalier tells us,

> is the colour of 'passage' in the sense in which the word is used in 'rites of passage' and it is rightly the preferred colour for those rites through which changes in existence take place on the classic pattern of all initiation, through death and rebirth" (CHEVALIER, 1996, p. 1105).

That Romola's betrothal and wedding to Tito are rites of passage that will bring forth significant changes in her life and mind is plain obvious. What is noteworthy is that many of these changes are foreshadowed in the betrothal scene. The other colour with which Romola is adorned is gold, whose most obvious association is with the sun. Together with this comes the idea of Apollo, the sun god to which Bacchus is an opposite[55]. This reinforces the idea of conflict between Romola and Tito. However, more significant than that is the fact that, "still in accordance with the identification of gold with sunlight, gold is one of the symbols of Jesus, the Light, the Sun and the Dayspring" (CHEVALIER; GHEERBRANT, 1996, p. 442). With this is mind, the betrothal becomes the symbolic union either of the opposing ideals of Apollo and Bacchus (Romola's apollonian civilized humanity vs. Tito's dionysian selfish primitivism) or of the opposing ideals of Christ and Bacchus (Romola's sense of moral duty vs. Tito's love for easy pleasure). The seed of the failure of their marriage and of Romola's later separation from Bacchus/Tito and union with Christ/Savonarola are planted, or rather painted in the betrothal scene.

In this scene, Tito is identified with Bacchus through the symbolism of the colour purple. However, this very colour also bears an interesting ambiguity: it represents Christ too. As well as Bacchus, Christ is often depicted as wearing a purple tunic, especially during his passion[56]. On Good Friday the choirs and the crosses in churches are covered in purple cloths because behind the colour purple, "the invisible mystery of reincarnation or at least of transformation takes place" (CHEVALIER; GHEERBRANT, 1996, p. 1069). We easily assume Bacchus as the god of wine and therefore we see the grape as one of his symbols,

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[55] There are more similarities between Bacchus and Apollo than what is often acknowledged but here I think of these gods in the sense in which the expressions "Apollonian" and "Dionysian" are used by Nietzsche in his *The Birth of Tragedy*, sometimes even before but especially since.

[56] For more on this, see CHEVALIER; GHEERBRANT, 1996, p. 1069.

but we cannot forget that one of Jesus's most famous sayings is "I am the vine, you are the branches" (John 15:5) (BIBLE, 2008, p. 1096). Indeed, the Catholics join in communion with Christ by drinking his blood, which is represented, in the Christian mass and ceremonials, by the wine. So, the colour purple, the wine, the grapes and the vine, are as much symbols of Bacchus as they are of Christ[57]. We cannot fail to notice that Tito's purple tunic is bordered with the same red that represents Christ's blood.

From this point of view, in which Tito stands for both Bacchus and Christ, the betrothal scene acquires an even deeper connotation: if, on the one hand, she is not the proper bride for Bacchus, on the other hand, she is not the proper bride for Christ either. In a certain way, Romola's later union fails too. She comes to be disappointed in Savonarola and his sternness and has to look for the balance between Bacchus and Christ, that is to say, between paganism and Christianity, on her own. The conflict here is between strict adherence to a strict doctrine, be it paganism or Christianity and the achievement of a humanistic and morally responsible balance. The white and gold Romola wears also stand for peace and happiness respectively, but to find a balance, they must be tinged with the sadness and intensity represented by purple and red respectively. This is the level in which Romola assumes epic proportions: she struggles within the same currents western society struggles too. And it is through techniques of the visual arts that GE leads the reader to see these proportions. By doing this, Eliot was actually redefining her notions on realism and had already acknowledged her admiration for the treatment of realism developed by contemporary Dutch painting in her first novel, *Adam Bede*, in which she praises "this rare, precious quality of truthfulness that I delight in many Dutch paintings" (1985, p. 223).

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[57] The images of Bacchus and Christ are often seen as opposites, representing sexual pleasure and corruption as opposed to physical endurance and purification respectively. They also often stand for the opposition of pagan and Christian. However, there are striking similarities between them. They are both represented by wine, grapes and by the colour purple. Bacchus is "the god of liberation", who frees man from his "inhibitions and taboos" (CHEVALIER and GHEERBRANT, 1996:292). Christ, similarly, is the saviour of the world, who frees man from eternal death. Bacchus, who started gestation in his mother Semele's womb and finished it in his father Jupiter's thigh, is the twice-born god. Christ was born once from his mother Mary and again when he resurrected three days after his death. Both are born from mortal mothers and immortal fathers.

Another very important, and rather obscure, visual translation in RML is the sketch of the three masks in Nello's shop, "a fancy of Piero di Cosimo's".

> The sketch Nello pointed to represented three masks – one a drunken laughing Satyr, another a sorrowing Magdalen, and the third, which lay between them, the rigid cold face of a Stoic: the masks rested obliquely on the lap of a little child, whose cherub features rose above them with something of a supernal promise in the gaze which painters had by that time learned to give to the Divine Infant (ELIOT, 2005, p. 34)

The sketch appears in chapter three, at the beginning of the story. We get acquainted with it even before we get acquainted with Romola and Bardo. This sketch, as well as the triptych and cross, functions as a "pictorial prophecy" (BONAPARTE, 1979, p. 34) of the novel's later developments. At this early stage of the reading though, it is quite difficult to understand it in such terms. This probably did not escape GE's understanding. Why then did she place it at this point?

Readers and critics often feel disappointed or confused when reading RML because in it GE put in practice her complex thoughts on the nature and form of the novel. So much symbolic material, so many contradictory allusions and so much imagetic appeal may seem out of place but they are part of a neatly thought-through plan. At points in which Eliot thought conventional realism could not reach deep enough tones, she appealed to the more piercing, although more subjective, power of images. This explains the strength of visual symbols, metaphors and prophecies in RML, "much of the narrative itself is pictorial" (ibidem, p. 35). Piero's sketch of the masks, professor Bonaparte claims, "is also a clue to Eliot's method in *Romola* in that it asks us from the beginning to think in images" (ibidem, p. 34). That is why it is appropriate that it appears right at the beginning: it is a clue for the reader to abandon the most traditional ways of reading a novel in terms of its plot. It is an invitation for the reader to break any strict boundaries existing between different art forms. In RML, more than in any of her other novels, GE weakens the barriers between forms and conventions that were then thought incompatible. The line between prose and poetry and history in

RML, for instance, is much thinner than it was conceivable in the nineteenth-century. Also, GE's heavy reliance on visual effects, which establishes such a close relationship between the sister arts, probably had not been seen so intensely in British literature ever since William Blake. However, this proposal was quite new, and, as such, difficult to grasp. GE knew that "it is easier and pleasanter to recognise the old than to account for the new" (ELIOT, 2005, p. 3). She knew therefore that, when published, Romola would reach a more limited audience than her other novels.

To return to the sketch. The Satyr, a bacchic figure par excellence, is identified with Tito. The cold rigid face of a Stoic, with Bardo. The sorrowing Magdalen, since she is a woman, could be identified with Romola, but since she is a Christian image, could be identified with Savonarola. If we look at the sketch as representing Tito, Bardo and Savonarola, we have a picture of the main streams that run through the novel, of the "great river-courses which have shaped the lives of man" (ibidem, p.1), at least of western man. But it is very important to recognise, as Felicia Bonaparte does, that the sketches do not represent "single characters in the book; rather, they represent different visions of life" (1979, p. 36).

There is no solid evidence that Piero di Cosimo ever painted or sketched anything quite like the three masks. I have said that RML is full of 'visual prophecies'. In the same sense, it can be said that GE picked Piero di Cosimo and fictionalised him so as to play the role of visual prophet in her novel. It is he who sketches the three masks that represent the forces between which Romola struggles to find a balance throughout her life. It is he who paints the picture of the frightened Tito that reveals hitherto unsuspected weaknesses of his character. It is he who makes the triptych. Although the idea is actually conceived by Tito, the credit of the craft goes to Piero. It is he who designs the predictive carnival float that Romola sees when leaving the church after her betrothal to Tito and that reminds her of her brother's vision. The float consists of

> a huge and ghastly image of Winged Time with his scythe and hour-glass, surrounded by his winged children, the Hours. He was mounted on a high car completely covered with black, and the bullocks that drew

> the car were also covered with black, their horns alone standing out white above the gloom; so that in the sombre shadow of the houses it seemed to those at a distance as if Time and his children were apparitions floating through the air. And behind them came what looked like a troop of the sheeted dead gliding above blackness. And as they glided slowly, they chanted in a wailing strain.' (ELIOT, 2005, p. 200)

In his "Chronology of Secure Dates for Piero di Cosimo", Dennis Geronimus mentions the float as having been designed either in 1511 or in 1512. Therefore the dates do not match, for Romola would have been engaged to Tito several years before that, since the story closes in 1509. But it is no less symbolic because of this and GE, despite her rigorous care with dates and chronology, probably thought it was too good an image to be left behind only because of an anachronism. Geronimus explains that "Directly before the restoration of the Medici to Florence, Piero and his pupil Andrea del Sarto and Andrea di Cosimo Feltrini design the *carro della Morte* for the final night of the Carnival" (2006, p. 281). This image, appearing to Romola seconds after she got engaged to Tito rekindles all the doubts cast in her heart by Dino's vision. Although the *carro della Morte* is not a painting by Piero, GE's description of it immortalizes it in an image, so that, in the novel, it appears as one more of his paintings.

If, on the one hand, we can think that Piero helped deceive Romola by painting Tito's treacherous version of their story on the triptych, on the other hand, the *carro della Morte* has the contrary function: it serves as a symbolic warning against Tito. It has the same purpose of Dino's vision. Piero's painting of the frightened Tito has the same effect, since it fill Romola's mind with doubts about it meanings when she accidentally sees it in Piero's workshop. This contradiction returns in the epilogue, when Piero is mentioned for the last time in the book. "'How queer old Piero is!' said Lillo, as they stood at the corner of the loggia, watching the advancing figures. 'He abuses you for dressing the altar, and thinking so much of Fra Girolamo, and yet he brings you the flowers.'" (ELIOT, 2005, p. 583). Piero di Cosimo, the artist inside the work of art that RML is, is a double of George Eliot. He paints his visions on the canvas, she writes hers on the pages. *Romola* is a painting written with ink on paper canvas.

Indeed the feeling of contradiction and conflict sets the tone of the novel and can arguably be responsible for the contemporary disappointment and the current neglect of Romola in the body of GE's novels. However, far from being an accident or a misconception, this is a calculated effect. Reality is not always probable, not always logical and coherent. Neither should fiction be, thought Eliot when redefining her notions of realism and the novel and working them out in *Romola*. Much of this feeling of conflict is introduced in the novel through its pictorial character. The close relationship of RML with visual arts invests it with deep symbolic connotations, but, more than this, it is GE's way of transcending dry realism without ceasing to be a realist writer. Her vision of art and of the world grew more and more complex and she felt the boundaries of realism did not allow her to express this complexity anymore. At the same time, she never abandoned her artistic commitment to "give no more than a faithful account of men and things as they have mirrored themselves in my mind" (ELIOT, 1980, p. 221). She solved the problem by resorting to the symbolic and synthetic power of painting.

2.5 Poetry

> Poetry and art and knowledge are sacred and pure.
> George Eliot

Few people will remember or even know that George Eliot actually wrote a good deal of poetry. Her first poem, *The Spanish Gypsy*, was published in 1868 and is still one of her most famous, along with the Brother and Sister Sonnets and with *The Legend of Jubal* (1874). The dates tell us that it was not until quite late in her writing career that GE started to write poems and I believe this is for the same reasons why she took so long to write RML, although she conceived of it early in her career. Similarly, the critical appraisal of her poems has been as negative as that of RML, if not even worse.

Felicia Bonaparte thinks that

> Eliot's verse, as everyone knows, is poor stuff at best. Who has read *The Spanish Gypsy* without embarrassment? Clumsy and ponderous, its only merit seems to lie in the power of mind that conceived the argument, a power that does not always survive the poem's lame and halting lines. Yet in writing about *The Spanish Gypsy* to a friend, Eliot remarked that in it she seemed "to have gained a new organ, a new medium that my nature had languished for" *(Letters,* IV, 465). If Eliot was wrong about the poem's success, she was not wrong about the need she confesses, the need she had long felt for a new, a poetic voice (1979, p. 3).

Again we see here a discrepancy between GE's appraisal of her poem (a new organ, a new medium) and the critic's opinion (poor stuff a best). Again we see a conflict between intellect (the power of mind that conceived the argument) and poetic imagination (clumsy and ponderous). But more interesting than that is to observe that this is not the first time GE confessed her need for innovation. When writing to her friend Sara Hennell precisely about RML, she acknowledged her awareness of the book's unpopularity and stated that

> (…) I myself have never expected – I might rather say *intended* – that the book should be as 'popular' in the same sense as the others. If one is to have freedom to write out one's own varying unfolding self, and not be a machine always grinding out the same material or spinning the same sort of web, one cannot always write for the same public (ELIOT *apud* HAIGHT, 1985, p. 360).

The need for innovation is one more recurring characteristic in GE's work. Just as she felt the need to subvert accepted conventions in RML, she later felt the need for a new medium, as she says, which led her to start to write poetry. As Bonaparte states in the quote above, her verse is poor stuff and it is important to make a clear difference here between GE's poetry and GE's verse. Bonaparte is careful to use the word 'verse' because she is aware of the difference. GE's verse consists of all the poems, long or short, that she wrote. Her poetry is far more complex: it consists of all the images and instances of language spread throughout her novels and short stories that allow flights of imagination and acquire lyric beauty. One of the most perfect examples of her poetry can be found in the proem to RML, which is full of poetic images and language. If, on the one hand, her verse is weak, her poetry is, in my assessment, immensely successful and probably one of the characteristics responsible for the contemporary

estrangement towards RML. That is why I concern myself here primarily with GE's poetry. I do not treat of Eliot's verse here because it is her poetry that grants her novels, RML more than the others, lyric beauty.

Not only was Eliot aware of the difference but she also theorised about it in 1868, just when she was writing *The Spanish Gypsy*. In her essay "Notes in form in Art", GE distinguishes, rather vaguely although also poetically, between "poetry" and "poetic form".

> *Poetry* begins when passion weds thought by finding expression in an image; but *Poetic Form* begins with a choice of elements, however meagre, as the accordant expression of emotional states. The most monotonous burthen chanted by an Arab boatman on the Nile is still a beginning of poetic form (ELIOT, 1990c, p. 234-235, Eliot's italics).

It is quite clear that she conceives of poetry as something wider and further-reaching than poetic form so, when we look at the definition of the former with RML in mind, we begin to understand why it can be called a poem, or even a heroic prose poem, as Robert Browning would have it. It is not coincidence that Eliot thinks poetry is the expression of passion and thought in an image and that RML is her most imagetic book. As I argue in the previous section of this chapter, RML is constructed, much more than any other novel by Eliot, as a sequence of images. Clues are sent the reader through images. Plot movements, prolepsis, character analysis, contextualization and characterisation are all made through images.

One cannot but wonder whether the origin for early twenty-century Imagism is found here. Regardless of direct influence, there is an undeniable affinity between GE's definition of poetry, her practise of it in the novels and the procedures and statements of the Imagists. In an early essay about the movement, Ezra Pound states that "An "Image" is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time" (POUND, 1913). Although Eliot and Pound are describing different things, it is clear that they are here stating the same idea in different words. If we think of Pound's famous haiku-like poem, "In a Station of the Metro", we can very easily close our eyes and "see" the poem. RML is a novel and, as such, it is hardly comparable to a poem,

especially to such a short one. However, its general effect resembles that of Pound's poem. If we close our eyes, rather than one single image, we can "see" the novel in a sequence of images. We can see Florence from San Miniato Hill, the streets, buildings and monuments; we can see the paintings that say so much throughout the novel, the triptych and the cross, Romola as the Virgin Mary, Baldasare clutching Tito Melema to death, Savonarola burning in the Piazza della Signoria and young Lillo growing suspiciously like his father.

What all this reveals, besides what has been exposed in the previous section, is that in writing her book, Eliot was also thinking in terms of poetry. For one thing, GE knew that, in the new dialectic between literary genres that she outlines in RML, the world's most primordial genre simply could not be left out. But more than that, she is thus announcing an essentially modernist attitude: she extends to poetry the effacement of genre barriers that she promotes in RML. Just as her novel can no longer be separated from her epic or from her romance, her prose can no longer be separated from her poetry.

Although GE claims that, with poetry, she gained a new organ, her verse does not seem alive and breathing as her novels do. The reason for this is, I believe, that the freedom to write and the poetic voice she longs to find is achieved, not so much in her poems, but more fully and more truthfully in her novels. It is in them that GE proves to be a great poetess.

It is well-known that the poetry of Wordsworth is an important influence and indeed a source of inspiration for GE's novels, specially the early ones, with their focus on the English rural country side. This influence can be more clearly perceived in *Silas Marner*, which was directly inspired by Wordsworth's poem "Michael". The novel is set on the same scenery portrayed in the poem; there is a similar treatment of the interaction between man and natural scenery in both and both explore the same topics of solitude and emotional rebirth brought by a child to the lives of simple, old people. The same pastoral atmosphere of Wordsworth's "Michael" and other poems is also recreated in *Adam Bede* and, to a smaller extent, in *The Mill on the Floss.*

Indeed, the revolution that Wordsworth's and Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads* introduce to poetic language during the Romantic Movement is practised

by Eliot in her rural novels. In the preface to the *Ballads* Wordsworth and Coleridge famously state their poetical theory thus:

> The principal object, then, proposed in these Poems was to choose incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or describe them, throughout, as far as was possible in a selection of language really used by men, and, at the same time, to throw over them a certain colouring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual aspect; and, further, and above all, to make these incidents and situations interesting by tracing in them, truly though not ostentatiously, the primary laws of our nature: chiefly, as far as regards the manner in which we associate ideas in a state of excitement. Humble and rustic life was generally chosen, because, in that condition, the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language; because in that condition of life our elementary feelings coexist in a state of greater simplicity, and, consequently, may be more accurately contemplated, and more forcibly communicated; because the manners of rural life germinate from those elementary feelings, and, from the necessary character of rural occupations, are more easily comprehended, and are more durable; and, lastly, because in that condition the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature.
> (WORDSWORTH; COLERIDGE, 2001)

GE did not write her poetical theory in one text as Wordsworth and Coleridge did in this preface. Her poetical theory is spread throughout her novels, letters and essays, but we can see that what the romantic poets propose is in striking resemblance to what GE famously proposed to do in the already quoted seventeenth chapter of *Adam Bede*. Both propose to write with attention to everyday, simple activities, to simple people and to the language they really use – language which GE recreates minutely in her novels.

Wordsworth's considerations about humble and rustic life are basically the same made by GE about the peasantry in her essay "The Natural History of German Life", of which I treat in the next chapter. So we see that GE's choice of rural scenery for her early writings was neither accidental nor based only on the fact that this was a context she knew from experience. There is a theoretical basis and a poetical intention behind the choice. She felt the rural atmosphere could enable her to express her poetic vision in prose, as she does in her first three novels, especially and more evidently in *Silas Marner*.

In the same essay I mention above, Ezra Pound writes that "the scientist does not expect to be acclaimed as a great scientist until he has *discovered* something. He begins by learning what has been discovered already. He goes from that point onward". (POUND, 1913). GE, I develop later, applied a scientific method to many aspects of her work, especially to her realism. The adjective "great" has very often been granted to her, but not to RML, although it has discovered so much, as I hope to be evident from what is on these pages. One more thing that it has discovered is a more modern way of making poetry: in its outward form, what RML produced is poetic prose, but in its general aesthetic effect, it is prose poetry expressed in images.

Despite its innovative treatment of poetry, the language in RML has received much criticism, as stated in chapter one. Even if its representation of dialogue is weak, even artificial at times, its achievement in poetry and imagery is something which had only been accomplished, in the history of the English novel, by Emily Brontë in *Wuthering Heights*, a book which, not by mere chance, had also been rejected at the time of its publication, most probably for the same reasons as RML: for failing to correspond to established notions of novel writing. The bulk of RML's critics seem never to have thought strange that it was exactly in the least perfect of her books, with the least perfect language, that GE discovered how to work with poetry and how to express her poetic imagination. Felicia Bonaparte goes to the point of saying that

> It was not until *Romola* that she discovered the full scope and power of her poetic voice. Perhaps it was the exuberance of this discovery that inspired Eliot to her repeated use of the word "image", and sometimes "symbol", in *Romola*, words that are themselves a clue to her poetic intentions. (1979, p. 5)

As Ezra Pound says of the scientist, Eliot began by learning what had been already discovered both in novel and in poetry writing. She acknowledged her debt to great writers before her, Walter Scott and William Wordsworth, just to name the most obvious, and went from that point onwards. Not only did she discover how to combine already-known elements differently, she discovered how to alter the formula and produce something altogether new. The innovations

introduced in RML are so deep and yet so subtle that much has still to be learned about them. Felicia Bonaparte thinks "we do not yet have an adequate understanding of the poetic element in George Eliot's imagination" (1975, p. viii), with which I completely agree. It is only now, after years of research, that I can finally but simply glance at the poetic element in RML. Although I clearly see it shaping itself from novel to novel, since *Adam Bede* and culminating in an exuberant explosion in RML, I still cannot account for the complexity of its conception. I am still not able to account for the ways in which GE articulates her influences from Dante, Shakespeare, Milton and Wordsworth in her writing. I am certain they are there, in RML more than anywhere else, but I see much room for future research at this point. The present section is itself a tentative reflection on GE's complex concept of poetry and on the modern (one might even say modernist) treatment she gives to it in RML.

In 1862, literary criticism probably did not have the right tools to investigate or the necessary disposition of mind to acknowledge the validity of the poetic element in RML. We are now in a different position, from which we can observe it under a new perspective. If, on the one hand, many have pointed out to the modern traits in GE's novels, on the other hand, few critics have taken time to describe at any length what these traits are and how they work in her novels. Among the things we still do not understand about GE's work is precisely the way in which she deals with literary genres. We have spent too long being certain that she wrote realist novels and did not explore their subtleties and deviations.

The few studies that do exist about GE's poetry are actually about her verse, about her poems, but not about the poetry she composes in her novels, which is probably because the idea of writing poetry in prose was too new at her time. Perhaps, it was even too new for Eliot herself who choose to write verse that has never been acknowledged as having any value without realizing that she was already writing great poetry, just not in poetic form. It was only decades later that the barrier between prose and poetry was understood as much thinner than it had previously been thought.

As a consequence, very little, if almost nothing at all, has been said about GE's contribution to the passage of poetry from the Victorian era to

Modernism. Now, as we gain more and more knowledge about Eliot's dealing with literary genres (and that is the main reason why the silence about RML needs to be broken), we can look back at her work not only for a revaluation of the dialectic between prose genres, but also for a deeper understanding of modern poetry and its relation to prose literature.

3 THE CONTEXT OF THE ENGLISH NOVEL: "NO COHERENT SOCIAL FAITH AND ORDER"

The epigraph to this dissertation bears GE's statement that she wrote RML "with the most ardent care for veracity". The letter was addressed to John Blackwood and was written about ten years after the publication of the novel. The complete sentence reads:

> I think it must be nearly ten years since I read the book before, but there is no book of mine about which I more thoroughly feel that I could swear by every sentence as having been written with my best blood, such as it is, and with the most ardent care for veracity of which my nature is capable (HAIGHT, 1985, p. 321).

The declaration is quite compelling and indicates the lengths GE went to when working on RML. In it she states not only that *Romola* is her favourite among her own books but also that it is the novel in which she was most concerned with veracity, or, in literary terms, with realism. However, as I hope to have made clear in the introduction and first chapter of this dissertation, for the bulk of GE's critical fortune, *Romola* is actually the least favourite of her novels. Moreover, it has been criticised precisely for failing to achieve such artistic realism as her other books (LEVINE and TURNER, 1998), for failing to represent fifteenth-century Florence truthfully when departing from the English society she knew so well (ALLEN, 1975; BENNETT, 1966), for conceiving a less real and idealized version of herself in the protagonist (LEAVIS, 1980) and for being an intellectual exercise instead of a work of poetic or literary imagination (BENNETT, 1966).

All of these arguments have been considered here: I comment on Levine's and Turner's position in the first section of chapter one and on Allen's in the fourth section. I comment on the idealization of Romola in chapter two, when I discuss the uses GE makes of the conventions of the novel, the romance and the epic. I understand the author is no perfect judge of his/her work but I still find it intriguing that there should be such a rift between the author's own appraisal of her novel and that of some of her best-known critics. I find it very intriguing that the book in which GE was most dedicated to representing reality faithfully is

precisely the one in which it has already been thought that she had lost her grip on realism.

Representing reality is a controversial issue in itself and a topic of much relevance in my discussion of RML. The importance of GE's works for the English novel is too well documented for me to study it here, but it is essential for my purposes here to keep in mind that "her work marks a change in the nature of the English novel, a change so significant as almost to amount to a mutation of the form" (ALLEN, 1975, p. 128). It feels to me as if Allen needed his "almost" because he did not dare acknowledge that Eliot's work implements a change in the form of the novel. This mutation is what I claim to be the source of the rift between author's and critics opinions and of the controversial reception *Romola* has had. I started to account for the nature of this mutation in chapter two and hope to be able to demonstrate it coherently by the end of this chapter. The present section dwells on one particular consequence of the mutation: the change in the concept of realism that is implicit in the body of GE's novels and manifests itself more clearly in RML.

In order to account for such a change, I start with a very brief panorama of the historical and literary context in which GE's novels were written and of the status of realism at the time as I understand them. Then I move to a discussion of the changing concept of realism and of the main difficulties and controversies of representing reality. Finally, I present my own interpretation of how GE conceived of realism and of what she tried to do in RML that sometimes looked like a deviation of the very technique she was using.

3.1 The Context of George Eliot's Novels

I start with the already mentioned quotation from Felicia Bonaparte's *The Triptych and the Cross*, which remains, after more than thirty years of its publication, one of the few and most comprehensive studies of RML. "It is not surprising", she says, "that most of our arguments with *Romola* have been that it does not fit our notions of what a novel ought to be" (1979, p. 13). The comment alludes to the fact that, more often than not, the impression given out by essays

and reviews on *Romola* is that GE took it out of the blue. But I believe that, in order to understand the coherence behind its composition and to be fair to it, we need to pay special attention to the moment in which it was written for it does keep a constant dialogue with much that had been produced in the genre in the British Isles and with much that came to be produced soon later. There could not have been a George Eliot without a Walter Scott in the same way that there could not have been a Henry James without a George Eliot.

There are two reasons why I dwell so much on the theme of romance-novel-epic. First, I see RML as GE's experiment with these forms and their combination and believe much of the obscurity around the book can be cleared by paying attention to how these genres shape it, as has been developed in chapter two. Second, these genres do not shape GE's fourth novel only; the history of their development and eventual combination is parallel to the history of the English novel from early eighteenth to early twentieth century. I maintain that RML should be given a place of evidence in nineteenth-century English literature precisely because it functions as a convergence point, as I observed in the previous chapter, at which the most important threads in the web of this history meet.

In chapter two, I called attention to the curious fact that GE's early definition of RML was that of a "historical romance". The term is ambiguous. On the one hand, the two terms may seem to contradict each other, since it is characteristic of the romance that most of its plots are ahistorical, many being derived from mythology. On the other hand, romance plots very often come from history too, as is the case of Shakespeare's historical dramas. The Arthurian legends, part myth and part history, are the perfect example of the term's ambiguity and contradictoriness.

But again: GE uses terms with mathematical precision. She would not have referred to her plan as a "historical romance" if she did not have something specific in mind. GE's artistic interests led her to commit herself strongly to realism, which, as we have seen, made of concrete historical representation its *modus operandi*. For Eliot, truthful representation was dependent on the close observation of how people lived through the historical

process their societies underwent. With RML, she wanted to expand the plastic and representational possibilities of her writing and she felt one way to do so was to bring back old conventions and stich them to the new ones as in a patchwork. Her visit to Florence inspired her with such grand and universal ideas that she thought a novel could not encompass all. Romance would allow her to slip more easily into the epic, for both are ancient forms, whereas the novel is modern. These old genres and traditions she would treat under the modern lights of realism and historical representation.

It is, however, important to make it clear that, even though it is difficult to establish precisely the exact differences between novel and romance, there was, at the time of RML, an awareness of the opposition. More than that, there was an awareness of the incompatibility of both forms, as the preface to *Joseph Andrews*, quoted in the previous chapter, attests to. So, when Eliot described her idea for RML, she did not mean

> a romance, in the loose sense, which merely happens to have a particular setting. The words "historical" and "romance" seem to me, in fact, to point to the convergence of two traditions which together shaped the realistic novel in England (BONAPARTE, 1979, p. 14).

With this argument, professor Felicia Bonaparte exposes the great importance of RML as a microcosm of the history of the English novel, but I would add that it is more than a historical romance and that a third major tradition also converges to it. Let us look at what some of the most celebrated narrators of this history have pointed out. Georg Lukács's famous idea is that the novel comes to replace the epic in a world that has lost the "immanence of meaning in life" (1983, p. 56). Ian Watt says that the novel originated as a reaction against "the old fashioned romances" (1959:9) and that its "distinctive feature according to historians is realism" (ibidem, p. 10). Its narrative method, therefore, cannot be other than "formal realism" (ibidem, p. 32). Walter Allen's position is similar. *Don Quixote*, he says, is the single work that most influenced the English novel, its direct influence being Henry Fielding's 1742 *Joseph Andrews* (ibidem, p. 22). Arguably, Cervantes's mockery of the medieval romance of chivalry shows that the

form had weakened, that it no longer responded to the artistic demand of its time and that something new would eventually arise to replace it. This is very much in accordance with Ian Watt's argument that the novel emerged out of the decline of the ancient romances and this would explain, at least in part, why realism is its defining characteristic. However, two factors seem to complicate this apparently well-knitted proposition. First of all, 'realism' is a term over which literary criticism has not yet reached consensus, the ideas on what realism is having changed considerably through time. Besides this, also according to Walter Allen, the English novel suffered one major influence other than that of Cervantes, namely, that of Elizabethan drama, especially through Shakespeare. The world of Shakespeare, we know, is the world of romance. Hence the profusion of magical creatures, of kings, queens, warriors and witches in his work. Shakespeare, he says "is the ultimate standard for imaginative writing in English" (ALLEN, 1975, p. 24). And thus the novel has, at its very birth, a dual nature: it is realistic in that it stems out of an attempt to make real life issues the core of literature and at the same time, imaginative or romantic, in the sense of deriving from romance. Its epic origins, as Lukács puts it, provides the novel with yet a third facet. "The epic had to disappear", he claimed, "and yield its place to an entirely new form: the novel" (LUKÁCS, 1983, p. 41). To make it clear: the English novel is the product of the development of three distinct but related traditions: the epic, the romance and realism/history.

Indeed if we look at the English novel from its beginning with Defoe, Richardson and Fielding up to the middle of the nineteenth-century, we see that the traditions of realism and of the romance coexist and take turns in the favour of both reading public and novelists. So, for example, Walter Scott can be said to be a predominantly romantic novelist because he incorporated to his novels so many features of the romance, although he had little in common with the Romantic poets[58]. Jane Austen could hardly be called a romantic, not in the sense

[58] The overall tone of Scott's work can be called romantic, but his influence on realism is undeniable. For more on Scott's role in shaping nineteenth-century realism see chapters 4 and 5 of George Levine's *The Realistic Imagination. English Fiction from Frankenstein to Lady Chatterley*.

of relating to the old fashioned romances[59], and much less in the sense of conforming to the values of the Romantic Movement. Her work is what Ian Watt would have called realistic, meaning concerned with "convey[ing] the impression of fidelity to human experience" (WATT, 1959, p. 13). In the same way, the Brontë sisters could be said to be romantic, since their novels share such conventions of the romance as their intense subjectivity, their mythical accents, their emphasis on extreme feelings like passion and fury and their tragic view of love and death. Thackeray, on the other hand, would be considered distinctly realistic for his highly sarcastic and detailed pictures of society. Epic traits are less evident in the English nineteenth-century novel, although a good deal of the Romantic poetry, produced in the first half of the century, reaches epic contours, especially for its historical awareness and impulse towards social revolution. The epic, in an age with such lack of the feeling of totality as the nineteenth century, does not tend to find fertile soil. The "essential difference between 'inside' and 'outside' (...) the incongruence of soul and deed" (LUKÁCS, 1983, p. 29) that are characteristic of the English nineteenth century diminish the strength of the influence of the epic on the novel of this period.

More than one critic or historian of English literature has remarked that the British Isles never produced such great epic historical novels such as Russia, for instance. Andrew Gibson thinks that

> Scott remains our only historical novelist of importance, and other major writers who have ventured into the field have rarely produced work approaching the quality of *I Promessi Sposi,* let alone *War and Peace.* A study of the English historical novel seems in large measure fated to be concerned with minor figures, or minor works by major figures, or both (1979, p. 266).

RML has always been secluded to the category of minor works by major figures, which is one more reason why it should be revaluated, so that it could rise to the status of an English epic historical novel. It is indeed remarkable that none of the historians and theoreticians of the novel mentioned in this work

[59] Northrop Frye does call attention to the romantic character of the ending of Jane Austen's novels, in that they tend much more to wish fulfillment (province of the romance) than to reality (province of the novel). For more on this see: FRYE, 1975, p.39-40, 76-77, 138 and 147.

(except Walter Allen, who thinks RML is a mistake) has had anything to say about GE's historical novel. Only Frederic Jameson, in a 2004 lecture, has given us a word about RML. His lecture was about the historical novel and, although he focuses on Leon Tolstoy, he does recognizes RML as a worthy English representative of the genre.

Let us return to the nineteenth-century novel in the British Isles. It is certainly true that pure instances of a single genre cannot be said to exist. Simply labelling writers and their works does not lead to any great understanding of their art, but we need classification for purposes of organized research. Whereas just pointing out novels and saying which is romantic and which is realistic is not useful, what is indeed useful is to observe that conventions of either form usually pervade and determine the tone of a given work. However, along the nineteenth century, more than coexisting, the traditions of the epic, the romance and of realism start to mix. Interesting cases can be found in the works of Walter Scott, which join a distinct concern with representing reality with traditional plots derived from history and myth and the national reach of the epic. In the works of Jane Austen too, a truthful rendition of social conditions and a critical analysis of characters' psychology mixes with unexpected plot movements which tend towards wish fulfilment. Her happy endings, for example, are a typical feature of the romance genre.

> (...) if we concentrate on the shape of her [Jane Austen's] stories, we are studying something that brings her much closer to her romantic colleagues, even to the writers of the horrid mysteries she parodied. Her characters are believable, yet every so often we become aware of the tension between them and the outlines of the story into which they are obliged to fit. This is particularly true of the endings, where the right men get married to the right women, although the inherent unlikelihood of these unions has been the main theme of the story. All the adjustments are made with great skill, but the very skill shows that form and content are two things that have to be unified (FRYE, 1975, pp. 39-40).

Charles Dickens is another typical example: sometimes called the father of the social novel, it is undeniable that most of his work is concerned with causing the impression of fidelity to reality that is characteristic of realism. The depiction of poor neighbourhoods, miserable working and sanitary conditions,

beggars, orphans and robbers certainly had a direct correspondence in the lives of his contemporaries (sometimes even in his own), who, if they did not live in these conditions, were certainly witnesses of their existence. However, as with the novels of Jane Austen, there seems to be a magic atmosphere in the works of Dickens that leads them to a happy ending. So plot movements characteristic of the old romances are natural in his novels. The main characters are often saved from disgrace by last minute discoveries or revelations of long kept secrets or identities. In a sense, Dickens seems to make use of a *deus ex machina* in some of his novels. His work is, I believe, one of the finest examples of this dual nature of the English novel.

There is, of course, nothing so very remarkable in that. No novelist, or at least no great novelist, writes in strict accordance to the conventions of one genre, for the simple fact that genres do not precede literature and are not perfectly rigid structures without room for creation. It is also accepted, I believe, that it is not surprising that a given genre may take characteristics of previous genres, even if they supposedly represent opposing tendencies.

What is of particular interest to me in this work is that, in the nineteenth century, the English novel seems to come to a point in which previously distinct traditions, emerged of distinct socio-historical conditions, instead of simply existing in juxtaposition or taking turns, actually start to fuse in a way that we do not identify contradicting features as much as we witness the issue forth of an essentially new kind of novel. The motivation of this work is that I believe that in RML, more conspicuously than in most novels of the period, the old forms of epic, poetry and romance wed the new forms of realism and the novel and give birth to a new genus, that could perhaps be called the modern novel[60].

Because RML is the point in which previously identifiable traditions evolve into something new, it stands out as a great contribution to the history of the novel. For that very same reason, I believe, it has been neglected by criticism.

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[60] There are several disputes about how and when the novel became modern. It is not my intention to join this discussion or to propose yet another landmark for this transformation. I use the term "modern novel" here to make it clear that I firmly believe that *Romola* is a sure sign of the changes the nature of the novel as a genre suffered in the middle of the nineteenth century. Because the change was in the sense of making barriers more fluid and conventions more flexible, I find it appropriate to call it modern.

New creations out of long established criteria hardly ever have a warm welcome. Today, about one hundred fifty years after the publication of RML, we watch in amazement a profusion of new literary genres, many of them out of technology or parody: we have literary mash-ups, graphic novels, blogs, snapshot short stories and the like and we still tend to initially give them the cold shoulder, especially in academic circles.

It is upon this kind of suspicion that a good deal of *Romola*'s critical fortune is founded. This, together with the definition of realism as a standard of artistic value, is at the root of the obscurity to which RML and other novels of the period[61] have been relegated. *Romola* was such a break with our expectations because, although we do not know what our notions of the novel exactly are, we seem to know what to expect from one. Or, at least, we seem to know what not to expect and RML fails to meet our expectations by presenting us visions that come true, mad and blind men speaking as if in a trance, cryptic images and allegories, ghostlike monks and plague stricken villagers with a vision of the Virgin Mary. A mixture of historical and fictional characters, pirate raids, escaped prisoners, carnival floats and a family founded by a woman certainly "do not fit our notions of what a novel ought to be".

In less than a century, the English novel went from being a new, disreputable literary genre to being a prestigious, dominant one. It would never have risen when and how it did if there had not been a socio-historical demand for it. By the first decades of the eighteenth-century, it started to be felt that the old conventions of the romance did not meet the artistic needs of the emerging reading public. Its tendency towards wish fulfilment and away from reality became seen as obsolete, immature as political attitude and hence inadequate as an art form. It follows that the rise of the novel as major genre coincides with the rise of realism as a major mode. That the novel is essentially realistic is undisputable, but what George Eliot comes to demonstrate in RML is that, one

[61] Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* and most of the Gothic novels of Horace Walpole, Ann Radcliffe and Matthew Lewis are examples of novels that were labeled as bad literature at the time of their publication whereas novels with a strong realist impulse such as those of Jane Austen, Thomas Hardy or the early novels of George Eliot received almost immediate praise.

century later, realism, as it had been conceived by the first English novelists, had become, just like the romance before it, limited.

Consequently, the major nineteenth-century writers reinvented realism, and the novel with it, whenever they grew aware of the limitations. Thus, Walter Scott invested the novel and realism with a romantic and heroic view of the past and Jane Austen, with deeper irony and psychological depth. The Romantics reinvented them yet again; so did the Victorians after them, in many ways, and so have novelists been doing ever since. The greatness of GE is that she is one great reinventor of the novel and of realism. The greatness of RML is that much of the reinvention is in it. It is often felt, as mentioned above, that, in writing RML, Eliot turned away from her original interests as a novelist and stretched her powers of imagination beyond their reaching point and ended up producing a highly flawed work. It is actually noteworthy that the bulk of GE criticism makes a clear point to highlight how flawed her novels always are at the same time that it sees them as some of the most important texts in the history of the English novel. Flaws are to be found anywhere, if only one searches for them. I do not argue against their existence, instead I have come to believe and hope to demonstrate how coherent it is that she should have written RML just how and when she did it. It is historically and aesthetically coherent mainly because it is the result of a process GE started from the beginning of her career. It initially gave out an impression of not confirming to the conventions of the novel and of realism precisely because it leads these to a change. At points in which Eliot thought dry realism could not go deep enough, she appealed to the more abstract, although more subjective, power of images, symbols and even visions. This is the reason why visual metaphors and prophecies play such an important part in RML. With that in mind, it becomes so much more evident why she chose Florence in 1492 to set the story: because of the great imagetic appeal, even the awe that the instances of visual art crafts spread around the city cause on people.

Some years ago, when I presented an early version of the project that originated this thesis focusing on romance versus novel traits in GE's work, I was told that my whole idea was misconceived because the romance was not a genre in its own right and therefore it could not be studied in comparison or opposition

to the novel because they were simply different things. Today I understand that my idea was indeed misconceived as well as I understand that romance and novel can indeed be studied as a pair, both opposing and complementing each other. More than this, I understand the study of these two terms has much to say about RML and, therefore, about the English nineteenth century novel. We only need to look at what many writers have declared about their own works to notice that there was a clear awareness of the literary genre dispute between novel and romance. In his famous preface to *The House of Seven Gables*, Hawthorne wrote that "when a writer calls his work a romance, it need hardly be observed that he wishes to claim a certain latitude, both as to its fashion and material, which he would not have felt himself entitled to assume, had he professed to be writing a novel (2004, p. 7).

But the nineteenth-century writer who theorised more consistently about the duality was probably Walter Scott, who explored the interrelatedness of the terms both in his art and in his theoretical writings. His "Essay on the Romance" leaves no doubt that novel and romance have indeed been understood as two competing genres. Scott writes that

> We would be rather inclined to describe the *Romance* as "a fictitious narrative in prose or verse, the interest of which turns upon marvellous and uncommon incidents;" being thus opposed to the kindred term *Novel*, which (...) we would rather define as "a fictitious narrative, differing from the Romance, because the events are accommodated to the ordinary train of human events, and the modern state of society (1840, p. 129).

Walter Scott wrote this in 1824, when George Eliot was barely five years old. When she began to plan RML, about thirty years later, she had a firm and stable tradition of the opposition between novel and romance to rely on. Much of the greatness of RML is in that it feeds on this tradition and transcends it by unifying both genres in a reconfiguration of the novel form into something more flexible, more plastic and, therefore, more modern. To that form, she adds the effects of the epic form too and takes the novel form to a level of formal experimentation it had not until then reached.

Today, we know that "epic and novel should not be thought of as two fixed, immutable entities but rather as two bundles of transcultural constants that can be more or less active from period to period and work to work, or even transformed altogether" (MORETTI, 2006, p.39). The very same can be said about romance and novel, although the romance has not enjoyed such prestigious status as the epic. Western thought is systematically based on dichotomic polarities and this is probably why the critics I have so far mentioned have tended to understand the novel as a reaction against or as a development either of the romance or of the epic, but not of both. RML inaugurates a kind of novel that can do without these oppositions because it is aware of its history and makes free use of whatever artistic devices it finds available.

Walter Allen says that "every major novel that appears alters our interpretation of the novel" (1975, p. 14). This is precisely what I want to demonstrate here, that *Romola* is a very significant, although unacknowledged, contribution to the novel, one that is able to alter our whole interpretation of the genre, of its history and of its possible developments.

3.2 Naming the Unnameable: A Word on Realism

> The theorization of realism is a contradictory project, doomed, if not to failure, then at least to the constant branching off of paths that lead nowhere, all the while leaving a rich undergrowth of local detail in their wake. (...) It is a contradiction which can, however, be reformulated in a productive way, as a tension to be solved and resolved over and over again, in a series of fresh innovations (JAMESON, 2010, p. 279).

Realism, a difficult but unavoidable term, is indeed a central issue to be considered in my discussion of RML. My initial intent of producing a thorough analysis of its functioning was baffled by the realization that it cannot be done, not at least, in the physical and temporal space this research allows me. In this chapter, therefore, I try to avoid these paths that lead nowhere and to concentrate on the richness of local detail that I believe GE reformulates in a productive and innovative way, which is responsible for much of the tension readers tend to experience from reading RML.

One such path that would lead nowhere here is the attempt of finding or producing an all-encompassing definition of realism. This is mainly because there are more realisms than one: the realism of Jane Austen is different from Charles Dickens's, which is different from George Eliot's and so on. Neither is realism a set of neatly defined rules, procedures or techniques. Representing reality, as Erich Auerbach's monumental *Mimesis* reveals, is a dauntingly complex process that has been shaping itself throughout the history of the western world since antiquity. Let it be understood that I deal with realism as it has manifested itself within the realm of the English novel, from its beginning in the eighteenth-century up to a few decades after George Eliot's death, with Virginia Woolf and James Joyce. My focus is, naturally, on the nineteenth-century, upon which this section dwells.

One problem that imposes itself at the outset of a discussion about representing reality is the complicated understanding of the very words "real" and "reality". They went from meaning that which existed primarily in the world of ideas to the very contrary: that which can be empirically demonstrated. "Reality", in a more general definition, can even mean every single thing that exists or has ever existed. This is already a daunting conception, but, with the increasing awareness of human subjectivity that the nineteenth-century developed, it became harder and harder to tell for certain what was real or true. The nineteenth-century also witnessed the undermining of ideas that had hitherto been taken as the truth. Charles Darwin, for instance, challenged the truth of religious doctrine about the origin of man. That was a sure sign that truth, or what we had hitherto imagined to be the truth, was not fixed or stable. Any discussion of realism must, therefore, acknowledge the impossibility of defining either truth or reality. Thus, it is only realism as a literary practice that can be debated here, not as a philosophical category or as a theoretical abstraction. Some degree of theoretical abstraction, however, is inescapable. It is rather desirable.

One such abstraction is that realism posits a close relationship between ideas and things. So it was at the time of platonic philosophy and so it was at the time of Victorian realism. Nineteenth-century realism was concerned, among other things, with providing an experience of direct access to reality, which

can hardly be done: the written page can only contain words, not reality itself. Language, therefore, is the inescapable and only mediator between ideas and things. Everything that can be achieved is the illusion of access to reality. Hence the preoccupation of realist novelists with details and fidelity in language. GE's novels, for example, are recognizable for the great accuracy in depiction of character speech at which they aim. One of the main reasons why RML seemed so odd to its contemporaries is exactly that the language of the characters is unfamiliar to English ears, differently from her other novels, out of whose pages one could almost hear them speak.

A corollary of the difficulty of representing reality and a sure sign of the contradictoriness of the realist project is that realism is an effort against misrepresentation while all that realistic literature has to represent reality with is language and language can only misrepresent it because it is always the idea and never the thing proper.

> Language, as a mediator, can be about only itself, for each predicate, modifies not the thing, but another predicate, obeys the rule not of the idea but of its own ordering principles. (...) And hence, of all literary movements, realism is most threatened by the contemporary severing of text from referent. Realism, after all, was initiated out of and against that severance. (LEVINE, 1989, p. 9)

George Levine shows that the problem gets even more complicated in the twentieth-century, when poststructuralist and deconstructionist theories put the possibility of realism into check by claiming that texts of whatever kind, instead of meaningful discourse, are rhetorical constructs which refer only to themselves. The undermining of logocentrism was a blow to realism, which can never pass away, but which lost some of the prestige with the reading public that it enjoyed during the Victorian period. Not by chance, we hear Northrop Frye state that "in the twentieth-century romance got a new lease of fashion after the mid-fifties" (1975, p. 4).

To return to the nineteenth-century. Heated discussions in prefaces, reviews and letters, as well as in the literature produced, reveal that, although they preceded poststructuralism and deconstruction, the realists were conscious of the difficulties. The great Victorian novelists were not naïve to the point of

believing that their novels did provide the reader unmediated access to reality. Indeed their texts show that their extreme care with detail and verisimilitude could only be the work of a self-conscious mind. Although the major Victorian realists were part of a somewhat unified realistic literary movement, each one of them found their own ways of dealing with the contradictions of their artistic mode. GE is "perhaps the most self-consciously realistic of all the great Victorians" (LEVINE, 1989, p. 183). I comment on her dealings with realism on the next section.

The mainspring of nineteenth-century realism, it has often been said, was the exhaustion of the old-fashioned romances and of the Romantic Movement that preceded it[62]. By the middle of the century, it was increasingly felt that the excesses of these kinds of literature were to be avoided altogether. We usually think of the Romantic Movement as a revolutionary reaction to neo-classicism, and indeed so it was. But, to better understand the work of George Eliot, it is indispensable to understand that there is a high degree of rebellion in the realist thrust for representing reality accurately and in the realist feeling that unrealistic representations were untruthful, even immoral.

> The energizing principle of George Eliot's art was realism. And realism is a mode that depends heavily on reaction against what the writer takes to have been misrepresentation. Thus, even for those "realists" whose politics might have turned out to be "conservative," it is a rebellious mode. It is rarely, and certainly was not for George Eliot, simply accuracy in representation of things as they are, although it is always that, too. (LEVINE, 2001, p. 7)

Nineteenth-century English realism entails a rebellious and philosophical political attitude in that it refuses to accept artistic conventions and in breaking them it challenges social and moral conventions as well. "Do not impose on us any aesthetic rules", says GE in the famous seventeenth chapter of *Adam Bede* (1980, p. 224). Aiming for truth and accurate representation in art meant for most of the Victorian realists to reject what for them was the antispeculative character of what can be called unrealistic literature. This kind of

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[62] For more about this see ALLEN, 1975; LEVINE, 1989 and WATT, 1959.

literature, it was then felt, tended towards wish fulfilment and therefore away from the realists' moral and political commitment to thinking responsibly about society. Wish fulfilment implied entertainment and preservation of the *status quo* whereas realism was concerned with denouncing exactly that and with engaging in social change through art[63]. It is, therefore, deep-rooted in history and its mechanisms. Thus, "truth telling was raised to the level of doctrine. Such commitment to speaking the truth suggest difficulties where before none had been perceived" (LEVINE, 1989, p. 13). Difficulties in representing reality were greater now because the awareness that reality is multifarious and impossible to understand in its totality was greater now. We used to know, apparently, what reality is. Presently, we have come to such a state of affairs in which everything is relative that the idea of reality has become changeable, or, as Zygmunt Bauman would put it, liquid. It has ceased to be fixed and definable. Together with our traditional concept of reality, away goes our traditional concept of realism.

Because the task of apprehending truth and reality is so difficult to achieve, the realists found theoretical support in two philosophical views widely influential at the time: empiricism and determinism. These helped them to better determine what their fictional societies would be like and how their characters were supposed to live and behave in them.

"The epistemology that lay behind realism was empiricist" (LEVINE, 1989, p. 18), and so we see all major productions of the mode creating fictional universes with an array of detail designed to produce the impression of a direct experience of reality. This is not, of course, an invention of the nineteenth-century. Since the appearance of the first novels we see devices of credibility put to use, such as the letters in Richardson's books. An old manuscript found by the narrator or the use of a first person narrator who tells his story under an oath of truth or inspired by the gods are even older devices which can be found as early as in ancient Greek literature. But after the rise of the English novel, and more notoriously in the nineteenth-century, the empiricist reliance on verifiable

[63] The literature of Wordsworth, Byron and Shelley, to name a few of the most prominent Romantics, shows that the Romantic Movement was also engaged in social change, but whereas the Romantics tried to do it through metaphor and symbolism, the realists tried to do it through verisimilitude and a sometimes crude representation of reality.

experience and evidence of sensory perception dominates realist literature. Empiricism became the scientific methodology of realism. So we see a gradual evasion of those traces of romance that could not be verified by the senses in reality. Thus ghosts, apparitions and monsters either disappear altogether from literature or are somehow empirically demonstrated or discredited. Signs of the empiricist thrust could be felt as early as in Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, first published in 1818, but written at the beginning of Austen's career, probably around 1798 and 1799. An empiricist system of thought is also on the basis of GE's impressively precise rendition of the city of Florence as a floor plan to *Romola*. The minute representation of existing squares, streets and buildings provides a truly convincing impression of reality itself.

This reveals that, much more than a historically isolated literary movement, realism was a widespread international phenomenon in art that impressed its mark in practically everything that was being produced at the time. Its impact was immense and inescapable. Even the so called unrealistic novels of the period, like *Jane Eyre* or *Frankenstein*, for instance, subscribed to the empiricist epistemology. Both are novels with elements that appear to be fantastic, the apparitions of Bertha Mason and Frankenstein's monster, respectively, but are eventually empirically explained away. In *Frankenstein*, the chapters that describe the creature's first days in the world by himself are almost a treatise on empiricism in literary form.

> One day, when I was oppressed by cold, I found a fire which had been left by some wandering beggars, and was overcome with delight at the warmth *I experienced* from it. In my joy I thrust my hand into the live embers, but quickly drew it out again with a cry of pain. How strange, *I thought*, that the same cause should produce such opposite effects. *I examined the materials* of the fire, and to my joy *found* it to be composed of wood. I quickly collected some branches, but they were wet and would not burn. I was pained at this and sat still *watching the operation* of the fire. The wet wood which I had placed near the heat dried and itself became inflamed. *I reflected on this*, and by touching the various branches, *discovered the cause* ... (Italics mine) (SHELLEY, 1994, p. 100).

The passage clearly describes the creature apprehending the world around him through an empirical scientific method. This is an early instance of

the role of empiricism in literature. Later, with the growing hegemony of realism, it became much more subtle, much more complex. Instead of appearing explicitly in the texts, it became the foundation of realist thought, the *modus operandi* of realist writers.

Nineteenth-century realism is also strongly rooted in history and society and the view it developed regarding these is mainly deterministic: "there is no private life which has not been determined by a wider public life" (ELIOT, 1995, p. 50), says GE in *Felix Holt, the Radical*. Most of the protagonists of GE's novels struggle with the values of an unfair social environment and they do so precisely because they are determined by this environment to the point of not being able to dismiss its values, however unreasonable they may be. Most of Maggie Tulliver's anxiety stems from the fact that her social environment determines that she ought not to feel what she feels for Stephen Guest, that she ought not to behave as she does to her brother, that she ought not to like reading what and as much as she does. The influence of determinism is even more apparent with Romola, who has her life changed according to political and historical changes. The rise of Savonarola marks the beginning of a new phase in her life, as well as his downfall marks the beginning of yet another. The same is true of Tito Melema, whose social emergence comes with political changes in Florentine politics. Similarly, further changes also bring his decline. However, the clearest instance of the deterministic foundation of Eliot's works is perhaps *Middlemarch*. It is the only one of her novels to be titled after the place where the story is set, as a sign that narrating the history of those people is equivalent with narrating the history of that society.

GE, however, was certainly not a blind determinist. She was aware of the human desires and feelings that do not accommodate themselves to social standards of behaviour. Determinism is thus responsible for one of the constants of GE's fiction: the tension between mind and world, wish fulfilment and reality, that is characteristic of the tragedy. Most of GE's characters move through the plot by facing inescapable moral dilemmas, which tend to be impossible to solve without much pain. This is Romola's struggle throughout her life. First, she has to join her husband without abandoning her father. Next, she needs to gather the strength to leave him based on her moral integrity instead of on her wish for

simple happiness. Then, she needs to find it in her heart to question Savonarola's dogma without betraying the honest values he advocates. This represents, in a symbolic level, her exertion to remain free from the meaningless Christian dogma without discarding the essentially human values of Christianity in which she truly believes.

Another socio-political philosophy emerging at the time to influence nineteenth-century realism is Marxism. If, on the one hand, the novel emerged out of the rising bourgeoisie, on the other hand, class struggle is an issue that permeates nineteenth-century literature. It may lay quietly on the background and give an (often false) impression of being a secondary, less important theme, as in the works of Jane Austen; it may be evident, as in the novels of Charles Dickens, or it may provide the backbone of the story as it often does in GE's works. In this sense, realism is revolutionary in comparison to the romance. Whereas romance often depicted the wonders of queens, kings, heroes and semi-gods or goddesses without necessarily denouncing their domination of other classes, realism came as a political attitude which aimed at checking these romantic representations which started to be seen as apolitical and misleading. I do not mean to imply that nineteenth-century realism was Marxist in the sense of advocating socialism or communism, for this, I believe is the province of political or social theory and not necessarily of literature. The effect of Marxism in realism leads to the awareness of class struggle as an essential force in world history and a vital, if not the only way, to foster social change. For a deterministic literary mode, Marxism provided the most suitable interpretation of social history.

The following passage in George Levine's *The Realistic Imagination* is particularly relevant for discussing the network of connections among realism, Marxist ideas and GE's oeuvre.

> Realism, as a literary method, can in these terms be defined as a self-conscious effort, usually in the name of some moral enterprise of truth telling and extending the limits of human sympathy, to make literature appear to be describing directly not some other language but reality itself (whatever that may be taken to be) (LEVINE, 1989, p. 9).

Indeed much of this account of realism can be said to have been drawn from GE's works. The very term 'human sympathy' is often used by her. One of the most famous passages of her work is the seventeenth chapter of *Adam Bede*, entitled "In Which the Story Pauses a Little", in which GE outlines her theory of realism in literary form. It is in this chapter that she publicly states her main concerns as an artist and explains the utmost aim of her works in the famous sentence: "I aspire to give no more than a faithful account of men and things as they have mirrored themselves in my mind. (...) as if I were in the witness box narrating my experience on oath" (ELIOT, 1980, p. 221). Here, in her first novel, she affirms the moral enterprise of truth telling she would keep to her last one. Further on in the same chapter, she exclaims:

> All honour and reverence to the divine beauty of form! Let us cultivate it to the utmost in men, women, and children — in our gardens and in our houses. But let us love that other beauty too, which lies in no secret of proportion, but in the secret of deep human sympathy (ELIOT, 1980, p. 224).

The beauty of human sympathy, too, she kept up to her last novel. There is not much in GE's literary work which is not, at least to some extent, about extending the limits of human sympathy. From Levine's account, it is possible to isolate five essential features of realism. This is certainly an oversimplification, but it is useful for purposes of organized academic study. The five features are: a self-conscious effort, a moral enterprise, truth telling, human sympathy and an attempted direct representation of reality. It does not take an expert in the work of GE to notice that these characteristics permeate all of her literary texts and RML no less than any other. In the already mentioned letter to John Blackwood, GE affirms that RML is the novel she wrote with the most attention to verisimilitude. The amount of detail regarding dates, historical people, events and real places speaks for the novel's strong commitment to truth telling. One of the main criticisms against *Romola* is actually that it is too self-conscious, with so much display of erudition, such neatly reconstructed medieval Italian, so much attention to describing background context (as in the chapters that deal almost exclusively with Florence's political life) and so many literary references

that the parts fail to fit together. These, whether they form a successful whole or not, are part of GE's effort to provide the reader with as strong an impression of reality as possible.

As for the importance of a moral enterprise in RML, much has already been said in chapter one. Suffice it to say that the story in *Romola* is the story of how to accommodate one's moral values to an essentially tragic world. Human sympathy is precisely the way out of Romola's unsolvable dilemmas. The famous sentence engraved in GE's memorial plaque in the Poet's Corner at Westminster Abbey, "The first condition to human goodness is something to love; the second, something to reverence", (ELIOT, 2007, p. 242) says much about the importance of the theme of human sympathy in her novels. So does the ending of RML. There is not one of her books which keeps from dealing with the theme, but *Silas Marner* is positively GE's own treatise on the causes and, mainly, on the effects of human sympathy.

So we see RML, not less than any of GE's other novels, display all the major features of nineteenth-century realistic fiction. The plot has nothing which cannot be empirically explained away and even the most dream-like passages, such as Romola's sojourn in the plague-stricken village where she is mistaken for the Virgin Mary, are only symbolically fantastic. Yet, despite its accordance with the conventions of the realistic novel, it struck its contemporaries for not corresponding to their expectations. Why was that? The greatest part of the answer to this question is the way in which GE works with different genres in RML and is given in the previous chapter. Another part relates to the establishment of realism as a literary mode.

Anne Williams, when trying to account for the Gothic novel of the nineteenth-century, remarks that, in conservative nineteenth and early twentieth century literary criticism, great fiction had come to mean realistic fiction. According to her, "realism has provided an explicit definition and an implicit standard of value" (1995, p. 2). Indeed, if we look at some major works of literary criticism about the novel, we verify the accuracy of Williams's argument. Both Ian Watt's *The Rise of the Novel* and F. R. Leavis's *The Great Tradition* are dedicated to what has become known as realistic novels. So many compendiums and histories

of English literature are also dedicated to the same kind of novels. These books are examples of what Anne Williams calls "realism-centred criticism", referring to the kind of literary criticism practiced by Ian Watt, Wayne Booth and F. R. Leavis, for example. According to her, these writers have helped establish the criterion of realism as a standard of value in English literary criticism to the detriment of the gothic and of other kinds of non-realistic fiction. When we look at the negative reception that novels like *Frankenstein*, *Wuthering Heights*, *Dracula*, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Romola* had in the nineteenth century and compare it to the enthusiastic response to Jane Austen and most of George Eliot's novels, for instance, the strength of her argument becomes evident. One particular book provides an insight into the argument: the famous *Literature and Life in England*, by Dudley Miles and Robert Pooley in its chapters about prose in the nineteenth-century, fails to mention Mary Shelley, all of the Brontë sisters, Bram Stoker and Oscar Wilde. On the other hand, the authors make sure to include comments on Charles Lamb, Thomas De Quincey and Thomas Huxley, who are not, we could say, less important but who are, quite certainly, less influential.

Forms of realism have, of course, always existed in literature but its institution as a dominant literary mode in the nineteenth-century is the result of a complex historical process. It is not my aim, nor would it be possible, to describe this process. It is important, however, to observe that this institution of realism as a standard of value coincides with the development of the novel and with the exhaustion of the conventions of unrealistic prose fiction, which I here call romance.

The point I wish to make and that relates directly to RML, is that the result of this so called realism centred criticism and of the establishment of realism as the dominant mode is that a great many works and authors are sometimes relegated to relative obscurity and condemned as low quality art. This is the case with RML. And this is the main motivation behind this dissertation. Since the publication of the main works of criticism mentioned by Anne Williams, in the 1950s and 1960s, a good deal of our assessment of realism has undergone considerable change. It is certainly not the case of saying that it is now about to decline, but I wish to argue that we can now look at realism and understand it as

a widespread phenomenon in art with an inescapable influence. The so many works that have been relegated to a discredited place in academic circles can now be looked at with new light, because we can now see that they have never been written against or outside the realistic project. Indeed, I believe they can teach us much about realism. This is one of the goals I wish to accomplish with this study of RML. The next and final section in the present chapter explores the nature and character of GE's ideas on realism.

3.3 "The keenest eye will not serve": George Eliot's Theory of Realism

Realism was, for GE, a moral, political and artistic commitment. She was, naturally, not the only writer of the period to make such commitment, but her works are probably more evident and more self-conscious instances of it than most of what was produced at the time. As I mention in the second section of this chapter, George Levine's rendition of realism seems to have been formed out of the reading of her novels. Because they are so consistently self-conscious and also because they reflect much of what she wrote as a journalist and literary critic, it is possible to know much about her ideas on art and society. There is much authorial comment inside her books, such as the renowned seventeenth chapter of *Adam Bede*. Twice, while writing fiction, she actually paused the story to comment on her aesthetic project. *Adam Bede* is the most celebrated instance, but she had already done that earlier in writing "The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton", later to be published in her *Scenes of Clerical Life*.

The work of GE, novels, essays, reviews and even letters included, is impressively consistent in the exploration and development of her views on her perennial concerns. Much as RML has been attacked for swerving from these, a systematized look at the unchanging elements of her realism reveals that it is finely tuned to her *oeuvre*. I now proceed to analyse five characteristics that define GE's realism and set the tone of her writings. I rely strongly here on my experience of having read her novels and on what is probably her best-known article: "The Natural History of German Life". It was written in 1856 partly as an assertion of her ideas on art, society, history and their interplay and partly as a

comment on two books by Whilhelm Heinrich von Riehl[64]. For this reason it is also sometimes called "the Riehl essay". It states the concerns that have shaped her literary works more fully than any other single text she wrote. Other articles of major importance from which much insight into her artistic project can be gained are "Notes on Form in Art", "The Morality of *Wilhelm Meister*" and "The *Antigone* and its Moral".

The first element of GE's realism I point out is its emphasis on tragic moral dilemmas. The English novel has been marked, from its beginnings, by a strong moral impulse. So we have Samuel Richardson's heroines, who are rewarded by virtuous, socially accepted behaviour. So we have Victor Frankenstein, who advises Walton to "seek happiness in tranquillity and avoid ambition" (SHELLEY, 2004, p. 210) so that his story serves as a moral fable to potential overreachers. We even have Oscar Wilde, who, as a novelist, speaks of the dangers of hedonism and early critics who dismissed the work of James Joyce on the grounds that it was immoral.

"We all begin life by associating our passions with our moral prepossessions", says GE in "The Morality of Wilhelm Meister" (ELIOT, 1990g, p. 309). Indeed, much of the strife of her characters is how to achieve a compromise between their passions and moral duties. Seth and Adam Bede's mother, Lisbeth, struggles to fulfil her duties as the wife of a drunken man. Seth sees his moral duty as a brother challenged by Adam's marriage to his beloved Dinah Morris. Maggie Tulliver's life is a succession of clashes of her passions with her moral disposition: her love of Philip Waken offends her family, her attraction for Stephen Guest offends her own sense of morally correct behaviour and her love of reading offends pre-established assumptions about her role as a woman. The same could be said of Romola and Dorothea Brooke – these three female characters, alter-egos of Eliot, dramatise her dilemmas and are artistic renditions of her moral concerns.

But GE's morality has often been misunderstood and I wish to clear it of a common misinterpretation.

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[64] Whilhelm Heinrich von Riehl (1823 – 1897) was a German cultural historian admired by Eliot for his truthful representation of the German peasantry and working classes. The two of his books which inspired her to write "The Natural History" were *Die bürgerliche Gesellschaft* (1851) and *Land und Leute* (1853).

> George Eliot – half refusing that kind of spectacular popularity [of Charles Dickens], hoping that it might be achieved without compromising her strenuous moral and aesthetic standards – became for almost half a century something of a monument to an era whose name, Victorian, is almost synonymous with prudishness and humorless solemnity (LEVINE, 2001, p. 01).

From the beginning of the twentieth-century onwards, her work began to fall into disfavour with the reading public, who started to feel that her novels were too serious, too much concerned with respectability, too hard to follow and certainly too long. For a long while, it was felt that GE would top the list of the most boring fiction writers in the world because, besides the great amount of erudition in her novels, their readers had, at least at some level, to face the characters' moral dilemmas. Reading GE demands a good deal of self-reflection and sometimes a twist of pain. It can be really tedious for the reader in search of easy pleasure to have to deal with a self-reflexive, philosophical minded and politically committed narrator and tormented characters. GE's unpopularity is better understood if contrasted to the current enthusiasm about Jane Austen. Austen's novels have very sophisticated tones and implications, but they can be read and enjoyed at a very superficial level. The lightness of tea parties and ball rooms, the excitement of the love stories, the brilliance of her humour survive when no attention is paid to her social criticism, her witty ironies, the implicit psychological depth of her character analyses or the refinement of her language. In this resides much of Jane Austen's genius. GE's novels do not have the same lightness. It is not as interesting to read them superficially. No one would go merrily through the seven hundred pages of *Middlemarch* only to rejoice at the insipid marriage of Dorothea Brooke to Will Ladislaw. For a society in which quickness and superficiality are words of order, it is comprehensible that GE should remain unpopular. In the academic circles, however, she has regained much of her contemporary prestige.

> The distance of time and enormous social changes have made it possible for readers in the last half of the twentieth century to rediscover the pleasures of George Eliot's fiction and the Oedipal inevitability – and inadequacy – of modernism's rejection of her. Since the end of the Second World War, critics (...) have been discovering that her modern

> reputation belies the formal brilliance and intellectual depth of her fiction (LEVINE, 2001, p. 01).

The opinion that her novels are prudish and humorless is, therefore, much more a result of superficial readings than of close observations of her texts. The seriousness of her work is far from being a superficial interest in respectability *per se*. It is rather the expression of an intensely humanistic and intellectual mind and of a heart for which sincere affections are sacred.

Moral dilemmas, for Eliot, however part of a strategy to keep reader's interest, are embodiments of her views on society. To think of her novels as mere moral fables full of didactic intent is to give proof of having misunderstood a great deal of them. Her morality should not be confused with dry, ill-humoured conservatism. Moral dilemmas are treated with such depth that, more often than not, they assume tragic overtones. When Maggie Tulliver sees her tender female affections threaten the proud male dignity of her father and brother, she is not faced with a simple choice. She is at a crossroads out of which she cannot pass without much suffering. It is for her, as the ending of the novel proves to be the case, a crossroads out of which she cannot pass at all.

As stated in the previous chapter, the whole conception of GE's fictional universes is tragic. Many of her characters pay a high price for their errors of judgement or moral weaknesses. Hetty Sorrel is emotionally annihilated and Tito Melema pays with his life. Godfrey Cass is condemned to unhappiness and Gwendolen Harleth's desperate hope of becoming a better person is never really seen achieved. One of GE's best known articles is precisely about the intrinsic relationship between morality and tragedy. In "*Antigone* and its Moral", she states the contemporaneity of Antigone's tragical moral dilemma and its essence and, not by chance, in RML, GE gives us the picture of an Italian medieval Antigone.

It is sometimes said that many of Eliot's characters are more like puppets than like real people, that they serve more to illustrate her moral concerns than to act like human beings[65]. Joan Bennett (1966, p. 146) thinks this

[65] For critics who subscribe to this view see HAIGHT, 1965.

is particularly true of RML and can be exemplified by GE's treatment of Tito Melema, in whose bad nature the reader is led to believe by explicit comment instead of through observation. His death would then be the obvious punishment of an evil person. I do not entirely disagree with this notion, but I would add that there is more psychological depth and artistic labour in Tito, as well as in other important characters, than this judgement implies.

The second distinguishing characteristic is the moral character of GE's realism and her concern with human sympathy. GE's concerns in life are also her concerns in art. Her strong sense of moral responsibility was transposed to her writings and realism was the formal mode she thought most appropriate to represent it as faithfully as possible. Her aesthetic project is, therefore, intrinsically connected to her moral project and the result is what became known as "moral realism"[66]. When GE professed, in *Adam Bede*, her intent of representing men and things faithfully and her rejection of the misrepresentation of more conventional art, she did not only mean it as an artistic manifesto, but also as a moral and political compromise.

It is clear from her essay on Riehl that, for Eliot, representing reality accurately implicated representing its very ordinariness instead of its more beautiful but more idealised elements. So she condemns the contemporary practice of some artists, either novelists or painters, of treating "their subjects under the influence of traditions and prepossessions rather than of direct observation" (ELIOT, 1990h, p.108). That is why, once interested in writing a historical novel set in Florence, she could not settle down to write it without travelling to the very place her characters would inhabit. Even if much of her knowledge of Renaissance Florence is reconstructed out of a laborious intellectual process, she goes as close as she can to direct observation. GE echoes the contemporary theoretical dislike of the romance traditions on the grounds of its apolitical bias by stating that the artistic mind should not look "for its subjects into literature instead of life". "The painter", she continues, "is still under the

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[66] For more on the subject see LEVINE, 2001, pp. 1-19.

influence of idyllic literature, which has always expressed the imagination of the cultivated town-bred, rather than the truth of rustic life" (ibidem, p 109). Ironically, as I demonstrate in the previous chapter, the very conventions she rejects here (namely the use of mythology and history as an inspiration for plot and characterisation) are responsible for much of the symbolic complexity of *Romola*.

In order to be true to her moral and artistic commitment to truthful literary representation, she sets many of her novels within rural contexts and carefully turns the focus of their attention to the ordinary things in life. Most of her stories are about simple people living simple lives and performing simple actions. She voices this aspect of her realism more vehemently at the conclusion to *Middlemarch* by having the narrator state that "the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts" (ELIOT, 2000, p. 688). Close observation of ordinary lives, more than just one more recurrent practice of GE, constituted the very method of her realism. An empiric observation of these lives and a commitment to a truthful representation of them could only be achieved, GE felt, through humble study. It is on these grounds that she criticises the tendency of some artists to attribute their own feelings and thoughts to characters from the peasantry. Humble study of the people would lead not only to a better understanding of their ways and mind but also to respecting them as equals instead of pitying them for being such uncomplicated creatures. Out of this process comes what is perhaps the most enduring and recognizable characteristic of GE's work: human sympathy. "The greatest benefit we owe to the artist, whether painter, poet, or novelist, is the extension of our sympathies" (ELIOT, 1990h, p.110), thought Eliot. And this extension the artist might be able to promote if s/he represented human beings as truthfully as he could.

From her first to her last literary text to be published, human sympathy is a central issue. Her very first book, *Scenes of Clerical Life*, brings three stories about it and when she gets to *Daniel Deronda*, her last, we still see the theme being treated, especially in the relationship of Daniel to Gwendolen, Mirah and Mordecai. Human sympathy is also dramatized in Dina Morris, and so many other characters, often minor ones. GE's most compelling study of human

sympathy, however, is given in *Silas Marner*. His life is first destroyed by lack of it and then happiness is restored as a consequence of it. Eppie, his adoptive daughter, is the most beautiful fruit of the extension of his sympathies. It is also human sympathy that grants Romola's life a sense of moral order when everything else has failed her.

Still in her essay about Riehl, GE comments on what she understands to be the role of art and the artist's responsibility by saying that

> Art is the nearest thing to life; it is a mode of amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellow-men beyond the bounds of our personal lot. All the more sacred is the task of the artist when he undertakes to paint the life of the People. Falsification here is far more pernicious than in the more artificial aspects of life. (ELIOT, 1990h, p.110)

This serves as a unifying principle for her realism: art is both an aesthetical and moral undertaking, the artist being an agent for truthful representation. Realism, thus, unfolds itself to her as the way to make art both meaningful and relevant to human experience. In GE's novels, human sympathy, morality and realism are inseparable.

The third distinctive mark of GE's realism, so important because it cuts across all of her work is her strong reliance on history. GE concluded her best acclaimed novel, *Middlemarch*, by saying that

> The growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs (ELIOT, 2000, p. 688).

This is a statement of the historical importance of unhistorical acts, the human relevance of the ordinary aspects of simple people's lives that she often sought to represent in her novels. In "The Natural History of German Life", GE gives us an enthusiastic account of the historic importance she attaches to people and things that seem to go unnoticed in the stream of time. Her eager admiration of Riehl's depiction of the German peasantry rests on the grounds of his truly faithful representation of their manners, thoughts and feelings as opposed to the idealised representation she often criticised in contemporary writers and painters.

Such faithful representation, she implies, is so praiseworthy because it enables what she considered the sacred task of the artist: the extension of our "contact with our fellow-men beyond the bounds of our personal lot", as I mention above.

Besides extending human sympathy, a trustworthy representation of the peasantry entails a trustworthy representation of history because it is in the peasantry, GE argues with Riehl, that the distinctive characteristics of European people are preserved. "In the towns", she explains, "this type [the national *physique*] has become so modified as to express the personality of the individual" (ELIOT, 1990h, p.114). The peasant, on the other hand, expresses the personality and identity of his community. That is why GE contends that "it is among the peasantry that we must look for the historical type of the national *physique*" (ibidem). A historical perspective would thus be gained through the observation of unhistoric acts. The assumption behind this is the same one behind the idea that the ordinary aspects of life are worthy of artistic treatment. In the same way that unhistoric deeds leave a historic mark, so does the ordinary provide our lives with meaningful experience. Both are, therefore, objects of GE's realism.

Romola is often referred to, even by GE herself, as a 'historical romance', but, in a way, all of her novels could be called historical, although not romances. *Romola* and *Middlemarch* are only more evidently so than the others. Because GE believed that our understanding of the world depends "on the completeness of the elements we can bring from our own susceptibility and our own experience" (ELIOT, 2007, p. 245) she tried to amalgamate as many of these elements as possible into her fictional universes. History, she felt, was the ordering principle that would bind all of these together and make sense out of them. Her novels are never instances of history dealt with merely as background, but always instances of history as the set of forces and events that makes that world and those characters possible.

Her essay on the two books by Riehl also provides us with a clear statement of her views on history and its importance.

> He [Riehl] sees in European society *incarnate history*, and any attempt to disintegrate it from its historical elements must, he believes, be simply destructive of social vitality. What has grown up historically can only die

> out historically, by the gradual operation of necessary laws. The external conditions which society has inherited from the past are but the manifestation of inherited internal conditions in the human beings who compose it; the internal conditions and the external are related to each other as the organism and its medium, and development can take place only by the gradual consentaneous development of both. (ELIOT, 1990h, p. 127, author's italics.)

This says much about GE's *oeuvre* and perhaps even more about RML. The proem to the novel actually offers a translation into poetical language of this critical assessment. GE has the narrator state in the proem that "we still resemble the men of the past more than we differ from them" (idem, 2005, pp. 01-02) as if to poetically and philosophically justify her flight into fifteenth-century Florence. Here she justifies the need or possibility of such flight by stating her interest in "the external conditions which society has inherited from the past". It is at this distant past, the Renaissance, a landmark in the development of European society that GE looks for better understanding of the present, for better understanding of what has grown up historically. The common criticism that her choice of setting and historical background for RML are awkward seem to overlook the fact that she was writing in accordance to an aesthetic project within which Florence and the fifteenth-century acquire special importance.

The "gradual operation of necessary laws", which she sees as the spinning wheel of historical development is equivalent with "the flux of human things" (ibidem, p. 01) of the proem. The long comments on historical events that we find in *Romola* (in which they actually grow into chapters), *Middlemarch* and *Felix Holt, the Radical* are GE's means of preventing the disintegration of her fictional societies from the historical elements that form them and preserving their social vitality. Also with the same objective she takes great care in conceiving the human beings who compose them. GE's characters, some of which are great artistic feats, are the topic of the next part of this section.

GE's realism is also greatly marked by the mixed nature of her characters, who have the arduous task of making sense out of her complex fictional societies. We see them act as individuals, as members of their communities, as political agents, as professionals, as fathers and mothers, wives and husbands, sons and daughters and so on. The story of most of her characters

is the story of how to find a balance between duty and desire, between right and wrong in a world that offers them less and less areas of certainty. This, of course, was one GE's main concerns in life and art and from it stem these five characteristics I outline of her realism. Because of her strong reliance on history, her characters are often seen under the direct influence of historical events. Felix Holt, for instance, has much of his outlook on life inspired by the Reform movements of the early 1830s. So does Dorothea Brooke. Tito Melema sees his good fortune rise and fall according to political change in Florence and Romola, at some level of symbolism, actually enacts historical development in her own life. Their search for balance in the flow of history entails the great moral dilemmas I mention above and human sympathy is the only meaningful way out of tragedy that Eliot envisions for them. The next part of this section says something about how the characters' own personal histories evolve.

By reading GE's *oeuvre*, one soon starts to observe that characters from different stories share several characteristics of personality, intellect and feelings. The clearest example is the number of affinities between Maggie Tulliver, Romola de' Bardi and Dorothea Brooke, as I mention in the first section of chapter one. The same elective affinities bind Arthur Donnithorne, Godfrey Cass and Tito Melema as types. The Poysers in *Adam Bede* are similar to the Dodsons in *The Mill on the Floss*. As George Levine puts it, "George Eliot needs types; she depends on typology to create the moral territory of her realism" (2001, p. 149).

An essential element of her realist project, GE's characters represent and enact different types of human beings and, as a corollary, different aspects of the complex world in which she puts them. It is the clash of their desires and weaknesses with their world's limitations and indifference that produces the moral-philosophical lines of thought of each story and the images and metaphors through which these are made manifest. In the celebrated seventeenth chapter of *Adam Bede*, GE stated not only her views on realism, but also how she conceived character design. The narrator hears one of the readers complain about the weaknesses of a particular character to make room for the argument that her characters are not entirely of her own choice because she is "obliged to creep servilely after nature and fact" (ELIOT, 1980, p. 221). If she were not bound by a

strong artistic commitment, she says, then she could "select the most exceptionable type of clergyman, and put my own admirable opinions into his mouth on all occasions" (ibidem). It follows that her design of realistically compatible characters tends to avoid either pure heroism or pure villainy. Her characters are neither angels nor demons, but essentially human beings trying to accommodate their virtues and flaws to a tragic universe.

In "The Morality of Wilhelm Meister", GE draws a comparison between Balzac's and Goethe's character conception to illustrate what she considers a truthful way of representing personality.

> He [Balzac] drags us by his magic force through scene after scene of unmitigated vice, till the effect of walking among this human carrion is a moral nausea. But no one can say that Goethe has sinned in this way. Everywhere he brings us into the presence of living, generous humanity -mixed and erring, and self-deluding, but saved from utter corruption by the salt of some noble impulse, some disinterested effort, some beam of good nature, even though grotesque or homely (ELIOT, 1990g, p. 309).

Balzac's conception of his characters, she implies, is somewhat biased. It seems to be a reverse idealization, in a way that his characters would represent only a very limited sample of reality, only "unmitigated vice". Goethe, on the contrary, encompasses a wider range of life with a variety of characters who, however grotesque or corrupted, are not utterly bad. Similarly, however good, they are never utterly perfect people. This GE tried to do in her own work. Her villains, more than any other kind of personage, attest to her success. It is true that a degree of idealization exists in many of her characters. In RML, for instance, the use of literary conventions other than those of the nineteenth-century realistic novel, as well as GE's intended effect, determine many of the idealized features of the protagonist, as I have commented in chapter three.

Her first novel, *Adam Bede*, provides us with two typical instances of the mixed nature of her characters: Hetty Sorrel and Arthur Donithorne. Hetty's monstrous act of abandoning her new-born baby to die by itself at the end of the novel is not the result of fearless wickedness but of vanity and pride, vices which GE chose to portray for their particularly dangerous outcomes when mixed with despair. Arthur, the initiator of Hetty's misfortune, did nothing but indulge

himself in an irresponsible flirtation which he never meant to see transformed into a serious relationship. His initial attraction to Hetty was apparently sincere. By flirting with her, he provoked her vanity, which lead her to despise the love of simple Adam and grant Arthur intimacies she knew could be disgraceful for her. Pride blinded her to the improbability that a man of Arthur's rank should ever really marry her. Deeply desperate, she ends up committing a crime. She was vain and proud; he was reckless and selfish but none were particularly evil people. Esther Lyon initially reminds one of Hetty's vanity and pride, but is eventually saved by Felix Holt's (in some ways Romola's male counterpart) idealized goodness.

Tom Tulliver is another such example. He spends his life hurting and humiliating his sister because he is prejudiced and narrow-minded. Despite his love for his family, Tom is the product of his hypocritical, patriarchal society and unable to see beyond mere patterns of behaviour. Short-sightedness and ignorance, not evil, are his vices. Something very similar could be said about Edward Casaubon.

However, the finest example of mixed nature is, I believe, to be found in Tito Melema. GE's most interesting villain, he is warm, attractive, affectionate, intelligent and morally very weak. The man who destroyed Romola's dreams of romantic happiness came to Florence without a penny to his name or a bad feeling in his heart. Once rescued from his mendicant condition, Tito developed his strongest love of all: the love for power, comfort and easy pleasure. He did not become a tyrant to see Romola's suffering, but to make sure his wishes would not be disturbed. Tito committed wrong after wrong because he consistently refused to accept any less than the fulfilment of all his desires and the exemption from responsibility for any of his acts. He hides Tessa from the world and denies his adoptive father not because he wished them any evil, but because he was keen on keeping his plans from any disturbance. Henleigh Grandcourt is probably GE's only pure villain. He delights in the suffering and humiliation that he causes. Not surprisingly, his death is the first step for Gwendolen to be able to think of happiness. He is, though, an exception.

The mixed nature of GE's characters is a rendition of her views on humanity. Many of these views would be impossible to express through different characters. It is because of their mixed nature that moral issues are so relevant and human sympathy so necessary for survival in a world which is quintessentially tragic.

The last element of GE's realism I look at is the tendency towards disenchantment. "George Eliot's voice is often the voice of disenchantment", says George Levine (1989, p. 310). And so is the story of her protagonists often a story of disenchantment. The naïve enchantment Adam Bede felt for the beautiful Hetty Sorrel results in his prosaic marriage to the pious Dinah Morris. Maggie Tulliver is, literally, disenchanted to death. Dorothea Brooke's first great experience of disenchantment is the consciousness, although not acknowledged, that her idealized husband Edward Casaubon is a narrow-minded prig instead of the intellectual humanist she had supposed him to be. Her insipid marriage to Will Ladislaw is a common image of disenchantment that often appears at the end of GE's novels: the idealized and idealistic hero or heroine ends up enacting a much more realistic and much less glamorous fulfilment of their initial dreams. For Adam Bede and Dorothea, this comes with a marriage, which is, at best, only acceptable. And although Daniel Deronda himself would probably argue that he is happily married to Mirah Lapidoth, it is often felt that she is not his equal in intellectual vision, not to mention the emotional tension between him and Gwendolen. But Romola de' Bardi and Gwendolen Harleth are probably the characters with the most disenchanting marriages of all.

Only *Silas Marner* and *Felix Holt*, the only novels of GE's to have truly happy endings, do not move towards disenchantment. Silas is saved from it when he is given Eppie in exchange for his lost money and Felix finds in Esther a loving worthy wife. Romola lives through so many crises of disenchantment that they cause the plot to move forward and her to redefine herself after every change. She is first disenchanted in the emotional blindness of her father and tries to move out of it into marriage with Tito Melema. This proves to be an even greater disenchantment out of which she tries to escape by accepting Girolamo Savonarola's spiritual and moral guidance. When his enchantment of her is also

broken, she enacts the common ending of GE's heroines: she lets go of her dreams of intense happiness to form an unusual family with her late husband's lover and children. It is not an insipid marriage as it is for Adam and Dorothea, but an image of one. It is but mimicry of her idealistic, morally-charged dreams of passion and human fellowship that she accepts at the end of the novel.

Barbara Hardy says that "the crisis [of disenchantment] is one of the oblique demonstrations of George Eliot's precept, enunciated as the positivist's challenge to Christianity: The "highest calling and election is to *do without opium*" (HARDY, 1954, p. 261, author's italics). I see this precept so much as a challenge to Christianity as I see it as a reinstatement of her realist views. The lenses of realism, it has already been said, were turned towards what is common and ordinary in life. GE herself professed, since the beginning of her literary career, her wish to depict not great heroes and great deeds but simple people and their simple lives. This, rather than surprising, is almost a standard procedure with nineteenth-century novelists.

> Most of the great novelists, from Scott and Jane Austen to Thackeray and George Eliot, tend to concern themselves with heroes and heroines whose major problems are not to affect the course of history or even to make a significant public difference, but to achieve, within the limits imposed by an extremely complicated and restrictive bourgeois society, a satisfactory *modus vivendi* (LEVINE, 1973, p. 14).

A satisfactory *modus vivendi*, George Eliot felt, could not be achieved otherwise than by renouncing the opiate of romance and idealistic dreams, although RML demonstrates she never dismissed its symbolic possibilities. And so her heroes, but especially her heroines, often have these dreams crushed by a restrictive bourgeois society. Maggie Tulliver is, perhaps, the clearest example. She sees her desires of adventure, learning and passion thwarted by social restrictions. So does Romola. Social restrictions imply her intellect is not fit for the task of aiding her father in his scholarship. They dictate she must be loyal to a corrupt, treacherous husband and faithful to a dogmatic religious belief. The difference between Romola and Maggie is that the former reconciles to a life without opium whereas the latter, so intensely passionate, symbolically rejects the social limits imposed on her in a flood. She pays for this rebellion with her life.

The drive towards disenchantment is thus an important part of GE's aesthetic project of realism, especially because it translates an important part of her views on society. In a fictional universe that is essentially tragic, disenchantment is the only possibility of a reasonably happy ending. However, it is also a significant narrative device, since, more often than not, moments of disenchantment bring changes in the plot and in the characters' understanding of their world and of themselves. It marks characters' lives with pain but it also provides them with opportunities for the unfolding of personality and development of a moral consciousness. For all this, I believe the theme of disenchantment also sheds some light over the allegedly strange epilogue of *Romola*. The epilogue is, as I hope to have demonstrated in the third section of the chapter one, more than a positivist allegory, an artistic rendition of GE's views on life and society.

A passage in *Scenes of Clerical Life*, from the story called "Janet's Repentance", poetically illustrates what I understand to be the nature of GE's theory of realism.

> … it is easy to understand that our discernment of men's motives must depend on the completeness of the elements we can bring from our own susceptibility and our own experience. See to it, friend, before you pronounce a too hasty judgment, that your own moral sensibilities are not of a hoofed or clawed character. The keenest eye will not serve, unless you have the delicate fingers, with their subtle nerve filaments, which elude scientific lenses, and lose themselves in the invisible world of human sensations (ELIOT, 2007, p. 245).

GE was aware of the daunting task she had ahead of her when she set out to work her aesthetic project out. She knew her own susceptibility and experience could not bring forth all the elements of life. So she was careful to try and represent things as they mirrored themselves in her mind, as she explained in her first novel. The amount of details she gathers together in RML is no accident. It is part of her realistic method to represent concretely the completeness of the elements of life, so essential for sound judgement. Although an admirer of science and a scholar of contemporary theories such as phrenology, determinism and empiricism and although she did rely on them for her writing, she knew that the keenest eye would not serve without the subtleties that elude

scientific lenses. Her work is full of such subtleties. It is these very subtleties which make her work more realistic than scientific lenses would be able to.

Because reality itself is practically impossible to grasp in its entirety and often confusing and contradictory, she creates in RML an impression of confusion and contradiction. It is not the novel that is confusing, it is the reality it represents that is so. The relationships among the characters send forth an impression of conflict as do the opposing images of Bacchus and Christ or Ariadne and the Virgin Mary, for example. After all, life is not always probable and therefore a truthful representation of it does not always have to be so. By reading RML with an open mind, without the influence of the kind of criticism that has dismissed it as inadequate, one can lose him/herself in the invisible and usually contradictory world of human sensations. In RML, GE has her readers experience the same feelings and impressions she wants to represent. She joins poetry and prose to create images which translate these complex human sensations aesthetically. This, I safely say, is GE's real realism.

CONCLUSION

When I decided to write about RML I was enchanted by its beauty and intrigued by the lack of information about it. In the years I have been writing this, I revisited the works of writers as diverse as Homer, Dante and James Joyce. Within my studies, I travelled from ancient Greece to modern England and, in real life, I left the south of Brazil to the north of Italy in search of Romola and fifteenth-century Florence. I walked up and down the Via de' Bardi with a copy of RML in my hands so that I could see with my very eyes the places where Romola and Tito lived and loved. I compared the descriptions of the convent of San Marco with the actual place and was amazed to notice the perfection of the representation. I stood in the Piazza della Signoria so that I could picture Savonarola being burnt to death and try to feel the commotion it would have caused.

I do not even get close to examining all the interconnections posed by RML, but I certainly have learned much about English literature and I believe this research can contribute to fill a still largely open space on the critical fortune of RML and GE, especially in Brazil, where little has been written about Eliot and practically nothing, about *Romola*. Along the process of writing this dissertation, I have come to realize that my reflection on RML turned out to be a reflection on the history of western literature, with a specific focus on the development of the English novel and its myriad connections. Likewise, the revaluation of RML I proposed myself to do turned out to be a revaluation of the methods and presuppositions of English literary criticism, which remained, for more than a century, unable to deal with GE's fourth novel. I have often noticed, in academic circles, a tendency to value literary criticism and theory as higher than the literary text itself, as if theory and criticism somehow preceded literature, which should adapt to pre-established rules. The bulk of GE's work is proof of the inadequacy of this position and RML, proof of the independence and precedence of the literary text over any kind of critique or theorisation. It is certainly not the case of undervaluing criticism and theory, much on the contrary. Without them, this research would have been as impracticable as it would have been without RML.

But it positively is the case of deconstructing a strange, unnatural hierarchy in which an excessively rationalist discourse took precedence over the object it means to analyse. RML, to use GE's words, eludes scientific lenses. And it does so precisely because the lenses only acknowledge a rationalist and scientific epistemology which tends to organize the world in binary oppositions. According to such an epistemology, a text is either prose or poetry, it is either a novel or an epic. When RML, or any artwork, challenges that, the rules that have to be questioned are those of the epistemological system, not of the artwork.

When writing about the essential role of the epic form in RML, professor Felicia Bonaparte, in her monumental *The Tryptich and the Cross*, says that she does not "mean to suggest that *Romola* is not also a novel. But the novel in *Romola* is only one facet of the epic and is entirely dependent on the epic for its meaning" (1979, p. 14). Although I agree with the argument, I think in terms of a little inversion. Along this study, I came to think the epic is one facet of the novel and is dependent on the novel not only for its meaning but for its survival. What Bonaparte suggests is probably what Eliot thought she was doing. While she was doing this, however, the consequence was that she was taking one of the first evident steps into transforming the novel into an all-encompassing master genre. This is probably why she preferred to use the term "romance": because thus she could claim a certain latitude, as Hawthorne put it, a latitude not available to the novel as it was in the 1860s. The epic is one facet of the new kind of novel that RML inaugurates. Tragedy, romance, poetry, history and philosophy are some of its other facets.

Born in modern times (BAKHTIN, 2004), the novel shares all the potential flexibility and unpredictability of the modern world. We cannot predict all the possibilities of development of the novel, says Bakhtin (2004), just as we cannot pin down its precise origins, despite the enormous effort that has been employed in so doing. The present research has been teaching me that the novel did not only emerge to replace the epic, as Hegel and Lukács would have it. It did not only emerge to replace the romance, as Allen and Watt claim. The novel is such an intriguing and complex aesthetic object because it originated out of a deep change in western man's understanding of himself and of his world. As a

result of a very long historical process, the novel came into existence to contain the forms, themes, aesthetic effects and the collective consciousness that were once thought to belong separately to specific genres. And by containing all of them, the novel has become a master genre, a tree that bears a million of blossoms. *Romola*, one of its delicious, colourful blossoms, bears within it the very seed from which the tree grows ever and ever again.

A revaluation of *Romola*, one hundred fifty years after its first appearance, with specific attention to how it deals with literary forms, provides an outline of "a general dialectic of literary *genres*" (LUKÁCS, 1983, p. 16) throughout the English nineteenth century and its apotheosis in the birth of the modernist novel. *Romola*'s imperfections have been dwelt on for too long and it is now time to appreciate its remarkable transformation of random forms and themes into a coherent, all inclusive, fictional universe. This transformation comes to affect one of the dearest concerns of western art and philosophy: the representation of reality. *Romola* did not correspond to contemporary notions of novel writing and realism because, in it, George Eliot was practicing a new manner of writing and representing reality. She contributed to the development of the novel by familiarizing it with forms until then believed to be contrary to it. The same she did with realism. Her vision grew too complex to be satisfied with shrewd but objective observation. So she used symbols, metaphors and images, until then thought to provide only indirect access to reality, to reach a deeper, more meaningful view of reality itself.

By doing this, George Eliot creates in *Romola* a subtle but clear harbinger of the modernist novel. She is able to do so because, in 1860, when she was preparing to write RML, she was already sensing another period of change, which was the coming of the twentieth-century. That is why RML prefigures the fragmentation and fluidity which became characteristic of it. It has not often been pointed out that RML has many things in common with either *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and with *Ulysses*. Just like *A Portrait of the Artist*, RML is a bildungsroman in which the hero/heroine grows out to be a revolutionary and to question the very pillars of western society: home, fatherland and church, in Stephen Dedalus's words. What Romola comes to learn by the end of the book is

what Stephen's mother prays that he will learn by the end of *A Portrait of the Artist*: "what the heart is and what it feels". But, in my opinion, what binds Dedalus and Romola so close together is the character of their epic journey: both of them set out to "forge in the smithy of [their] soul the uncreated conscience of [their] race" (JOYCE, 1995, p. 196). Each one of them does this in their historical moment, but, whereas *A Portrait of the Artist* ends when Dedalus is about to start his journey, RML follows most of the way with the heroine. Also, whereas *The Portrait* is more revolutionary in form, RML is more revolutionary in theme, for not even Joyce dared (or wished) to paint the portrait of his epic hero as a young woman.

It should be said, however, that the innovations introduced by Eliot, despite being deep, are very subtle. What happens in RML, although similar in character, is very different in appearance from what happens in James Joyce's *Ulysses*, for example, in which aesthetic changes are evident. We can see a new aesthetic in practise just by browsing the pages of Joyce's book. If we take *Ulysses* as the modernist model *par excellence*, we notice that Eliot whispered in *Romola* what Joyce shouted in *Ulysses*. Many of the features for which it became renowned are conceptually outlined in RML. The epic, mythological and religious dimension, the concrete rendition of time and place[67] and the reliance on history perfected by Joyce are made familiar to the English novel by Eliot. The formal liberty and fragmentation that can be evidenced simply by browsing the pages of Joyce's book is present in RML, but only yield itself to comprehension through in-depth analyses. The unrealistic ways of producing an impression of reality, the disorientation of the characters before the world that mirrors itself in the disorientation of the reader before the pages thus causing the reader to experience a reality of disorientation was used by GE in RML twenty years before James

[67] Leopold Bloom wanders through the streets of early twentieth-century Dublin just like Romola wanders through the streets of late fifteenth-century Florence. Places, buildings and monuments are described as carefully in both novels. The outlines of history and fiction are equally blurred in both books by the interweaving of personal and public destinies. Historical and fictional characters interact in both novels. Finally, the reader who gets both books in hand and sets out to visit the places will be equally impressed by the truthfulness of characterization of both authors.

Joyce was even born. The sensorial appeal which is so characteristic of *Ulysses*[68] is present in RML in its strong visual effect. Even the issue of language, central to Joyce's work, is subtly announced in RML by the fragments of Italian which cut across the text and by the use of English, which, within the fictional universe of the book, is only a surrogate language. Finally, Joyce's updating of the epic to his own times was also anticipated in RML. Both Joyce and Eliot came to understand that, as the expression of a world gone out of joint, a world who lost its sense of totality, the novel would have to recreate the epic quest in the only forms of heroism possible in such a world: intellectual and artistic revolution, courage to search for one's identity and the ability to develop both these things in everyday, ordinary lives, as Romola, Stephen Dedalus, Leopold and Molly Bloom do.

Felicia Bonaparte comments on the outcomes of the subtlety of GE's innovations and states that

> In 1859, when Eliot's first novel was published, it was generally speculated that the author of *Adam Bede* was a country parson whose sweet portrait of rustic life was designed to confirm Christians in their faith. And for many readers, although the factual error was quickly corrected, George Eliot remained the author of essentially sentimental – and Christian – novels. It is easy to understand this phenomenon. Most readers found exactly what they looked for: more novels of the kind they had been reading, more novels that reflected their own vision. Had Eliot made radical changes in the form of the novel, had she violated more superficial conventions (as Hardy did later), her readers might have been jarred into recognizing a distinction, and some perhaps would not have continued to be her readers. But Eliot was quiet and subtle and what in fact was something of a revolution in fiction passed largely unnoticed by the reading public (1975, p. ix).

This accounts for much of George Eliot's genius and for much of the ambiguity in *Romola*. If, on the one hand, a great part of the reading public never noticed the revolutionary aspect of her work, on the other hand, she managed to make herself a favourite with this same reading public so that they still read her books today. In a sense, she did something quite like what Jane Austen had done

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[68] The appeal to all the senses is strong throughout *Ulysses*. Probably the most celebrated is the sense of hearing, appealed to by Joyce's unique use of language. Annual readings of the book on Bloomsday throughout the world attest to this. The other senses however, are not less important. In chapter two, when Leopold Bloom's taste for eating "inner organs of beasts and fowls" (JOYCE, 2010, p. 48) is described, a sense of nausea is sometimes perceived. The taste and smell of his breakfast are not hard to feel. The reader can even hear Bloom's cat purring. "Mrkgnao! the cat cried" (ibidem.).

a few decades earlier: she pointed a critical finger at her readers' face so subtly that she got them to accept it. How was that possible? Since the beginning of this work, I have been focusing on the innovations of RML but it is not to be forgotten that, in its outward form, RML is quite the conventional Victorian novel. In the section about the historical novel in chapter two, I commented on how RML fits the pattern of the "large-scale social-anatomy novel" (ROBERTS, 2000, p. vii), which Roberts describes as the greatest achievement of Victorian literature. Only by disguising the deep changes in the structure of the novel was Eliot able to practice them undisturbed in her book.

Bonaparte's comments on GE's subtleties also say something about RML's critical fortune and about the relevance of its reassessment. They say that we still do not have full understanding of what happens in her work, especially in RML, and account for its negative reception. The literary evolution GE begins in RML did not pass largely unnoticed by the reading public only. The criticism which dismissed it as inadequate and has since kept relative silence about it did so because it did not allow it to be more than a realist Victorian novel. As it tends to be the case with revolutionary ideas, RML got the cold shoulder mainly because readers and critics were not ready or willing to reconfigure their notions on literary writing. As I comment in the section about visual arts in chapter two, GE knew that. We know from her letters that she knew RML could not possibly be as popular as her other books and she told us that in the proem by admitting that "it is easier and pleasanter to recognise the old than to account for the new" (ELIOT, 2005, p. 3).

In an introductory reflection about the body of GE's novels, Felicia Bonaparte has the following to say:

> We have found nothing yet that Eliot did not deliberately put in her novels; (...). Indeed, the fact is we have not yet read in these novels all that Eliot wrote. We have not yet, for example, looked carefully at what Eliot had to say about women in society. Eliot was a great feminist, and her novels, although they never stoop to mere propaganda, urge a relentless war against the conditions by which women's lives have been restrained and wasted. We do not have an adequate understanding of the poetic element in Eliot's imagination, nor of the rich symbolic structure which informs her works. We have not yet probed the mythic imagery that echoes throughout her novels. There can be no doubts that

> we will have to revise many of our conclusions and judgements, especially of her achievement in *Romola*, when we have further examined these aspects of her works. Similarly, we have (...) not yet explored the most thoroughly contemporary aspect of Eliot's novels, namely the existential, absurd universe Eliot perceived, a tragic universe in which man is born and dies for no purpose (1975, p. viii).

Although she wrote this in 1975, much is still true. Of all the unexplored aspects of GE's works mentioned above, only the topic of women in society has since been systematically explored and promoted deeper understanding of her *oeuvre*. When I started the present work in 2007, I naïvely thought I would be able to account for all the others. Now I realise each one of them would require a separate doctoral dissertation, which is probably why it took me so much time and effort to finish this one. There were times (and not a few) when I thought I would better give the work up entirely for I felt what I had proposed myself to do was too daunting. I am glad I made it to the end and I know I took so long to finish this for the same reason why GE took so long to conclude RML: "her project in Romola was so difficult because it required formal definition (BONAPARTE, 1979, p.8). Just like Eliot, I knew what I wanted to do, but I did not know how to do it. For me, and I imagine for Eliot as well, the observation and study of the rough material, although pleasant, was dense and heavy, but it was the study of the best form in which to display the material that was most challenging.

The poetic element GE's imagination remains mysterious to me. The symbolic structure and mythic imagery in her work are best observed in RML and I hope this work is able to throw a little light on the obscurity in which these topics have been left. There is no point in wishing to exhaust their discussion. They are so complex and weaved into the texts with so much subtlety that to begin the examination is already gratifying. I hope I also say something comprehensive about the tragic universe, which is probably one of the most modern, and also most consistent and recurrent features of GE's novels.

As I write these very lines, RML celebrates its 150th publication anniversary. After so long, we are still discovering it, still learning to see its potential and beauty, which proves the mind that conceived it is nothing short of

a genius. We will still have to revise many of our conclusions and judgments about such a mind and its production – this is for sure – before we can see *Romola* recognised as a landmark in the nineteenth-century English novel, as the work which began the unification of hitherto separate traditions and which launched the basis of the novel as master genre, able to contain everything in literature. The awareness of this necessity to revise conclusions and judgements makes it all the more difficult to me to know where to place the full stop.

It has been intriguing to me that GE's critics and readers have remained so long in silence about RML because I feel they should have trusted her more than they did. It has been intriguing to me that, having read her previous books, they did not suspect that RML could not have been a mistake because GE was always so strict, so mathematical as I said before, about her art. In the preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth expresses a similar concern by claiming that

> If an Author by any single composition has impressed us with respect for his talents, it is useful to consider this as affording a presumption, that, on other occasions where we have been displeased, he nevertheless may not have written ill or absurdly; and, further, to give him so much credit for this one composition as may induce us to review what has displeased us with more care than we should otherwise have bestowed upon it (WORDSWORTH, 2001).

With one century and a half having passed us by, we have acquired several new critical tools, several new scientific lenses through which we can now look differently at RML and afford Eliot a presumption that there was neither ill nor absurd in her fourth novel and review it more carefully than ever. In these one hundred and fifty years, despite GE's recognition as a literary genius, the academic relevance of the study of *Romola* has not been insisted on despite its potentiality to illustrate the genesis of fascinating literary phenomena such as the novel as a master genre and the outburst of the modernist novel. There is still much we do not know about Eliot and RML – this is true – but we have a starting point. If we want to master GE's genre theory, her poetic imagination, her use of imagery, myth and symbolism – and I believe we do want that – then we absolutely have to break the silence about RML, which holds the key to the

comprehension of her work as a whole. RML brings together all of Eliot's thoughts and concerns about life and art, all of her theories, philosophies and insights are carefully represented in it. That is why I see it as a tree that bears a million of blossoms. Just as Eliot looked back to the Renaissance to make sense of her world, students of literature can now look back at *Romola* for an understanding of her *oeuvre* and of what has been happening in English literature.

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Hoje eu quero que os poetas dancem pela rua
pra escrever a música sem pretensão
eu quero que as buzinas toquem flauta-doce
e que triunfe a força da imaginação

Oswaldo Montenegro