### Remarks on *The Mill on the Floss* (1859)

[…T]oo deep a root in a traditional way of life stunts your individuality, stifles your freedom, frustrates your legitimate ambitions and narrows your largeness of mind. All this is most obviously true of women, who must struggle for education and independence far more vigorously than men. But there is a fine line between being too deeply and too shallowly rooted – between having too much of a self and having too little of one. You can be too rigid like Adam, or too easy-going like the liberal-minded Mr Irwine. Adam can be softened up by the events of the novel with no detriment to his sturdy, oak-like nature, but the same cannot be said of Tom Tulliver, Maggie’s stiff-necked brother in *The Mill on the Floss*. What could still be just about contained within the framework of comedy and pastoral in *Adam Bede* threatens in the *Mill* to erupt into full-blown tragedy.

The pharisaical Tom is unrelenting almost to the end, and Maggie herself is no simpering Hetty Sorrel but a formidably complex figure. If Tom and the lower-middle-class Dodsons are premodern characters, living by unreflective custom, Maggie is a prototypically modern protagonist, rebellious, self-questioning, restless with restriction, and in passionate pursuit of her own fulfilment. The fact that she is a woman in a patriarchal rural community makes this emancipation all the more fraught. Tom and the Dodsons are admired rather in the way that Adam Bede is: they practise the stout petty-bourgeois virtues of thrift, honesty, loyalty, industriousness and obligations to kinsfolk. But they could never have written the novel, as one suspects Maggie could have done.

The crisis of the narrative turns on Maggie’s need to choose between her fidelity to the rural society of St Oggs and her love for Stephen Guest. This is not a choice between duty and affection, head and heart, but between two kinds of affection. To opt for Stephen would be to allow the impulse of the moment to triumph over the claims of history, kinship and community. The line between self-fulfilment and self-indulgence is perilously thin. It is a question of communal loyalty versus selfish individualism. It is also a question of ‘Nature’ – a delicious yielding to desire, which dissolves the self to a kind of dreamy nothingness – versus the claims of culture, which in this context means the claims of others. (Though an excess of culture can also lead to selfishness, as with the pampered Rosamond Vincy of *Middlemarch*.) Culture, morality and altruism are aspects of a single reality.

Sympathy with others fulfils the self, but it may also mean abandoning one’s own unique path to selfhood. This, in the view of emancipated liberals like Stephen Guest, is a profoundly unnatural act. From one viewpoint, Maggie is faced with a Hobson’s choice between natural selfishness and unnatural self-sacrifice. For the liberal Guest, self-realization is an absolute imperative; and Eliot is close enough to this ethic herself to appreciate its force. For her, however, yielding to ‘natural’ desire means giving way not only to egoism but to a kind of determinism. As Maggie drifts down the river with Stephen, she disowns her own moral agency, luxuriantly helpless to shape her own destiny. Once again, self-surrender can be a subtle form of self-pleasure. Throughout the novel, Maggie has a hunger for the seductions of oblivion – which is to say with Freud that, like the rest of us but rather more so than some, she is in the grip of the death drive. Her austere cult of self-renunciation is one instance of the perversity by which the self rejoices in its own dissolution.

It would be ironic for Maggie to make a liberal-individualist option for Stephen, since by whisking her off down the river he is depriving her of what the liberal cherishes above all: the right to choose for oneself. Maggie finally exercises that supremely individual choice – but what she chooses, ironically, is communal responsibility rather than individual happiness. If this is one irony, another is that the rural community to which she turns back to is a prejudiced, parochial backwater which gives her no credit for giving up the man she loves. In fact, it is not difficult to read Maggie’s decision and its aftermath as splendidly perverse. In the end, she opts for death with a man who does not love her (her brother Tom) rather than life with a man who does.

In doing so, she sacrifices herself for her mulish bully of a brother, as well as for a neighbourhood which is not worth her loyalty. It is not hard to see this as yet another example of what Philip Wakem scathingly calls ‘a narrow self-delusive fanaticism’. To stay faithful to the age-old sentiments of rural life is to opt for a stifling sectarianism. There may well be value in remaining faithful to one’s past; but if this means keeping faith with a man as carping and self-righteous as Tom, it scarcely seems much of a moral achievement. Is maintaining a continuity of selfhood really so precious in itself, regardless of what it involves you in? Is Maggie just the self-deluded victim of a joyless Protestant morality for which the key to life is a ‘sad patient loving strength’? Does she suspect in good puritanical fashion that if you are not in agony then you must have gone astray? The novel allows for this harsh reading, at the same time as it counters it. For the fact is that if it kills off Maggie in a surge of guilt and expiation, it kills off Tom as well. The extraordinary ending of *The Mill on the Floss* allows Maggie to be reunited with her brother, and with the way of life he symbolizes, but to obliterate him at the same time. It is as though the full force of the novel’s pent-up desire is unleashed, like the river Floss itself, threatening to sweep away the very world for which this dutiful young woman has laid down her personal happiness. And this is a sweet sort of vengeance, even if it means that Maggie herself will not be around to savour it. In the book’s apocalyptic finale, Maggie is granted her Romantic self-fulfilment, along with her submission to the local pieties – but only in a way which rounds violently upon the whole stiff-necked social order which has done her down. If she is finally granted the pleasures of self-annihilation, it is in the form of a triumphant self-affirmation.

In a sense, then, Maggie achieves what Philip Wakem has accused her of seeking: ‘a mode of renunciation that will be an escape from pain’. Like the water of the Floss itself, the event both generates and destroys. The judgement of society is both endorsed and rejected, just as Tom is both embraced and wiped out. Formally speaking, the conclusion of the novel reveals a similar blend of acceptance and refusal. If it strives to preserve realism, it also threatens to burst beyond it into a realm of fantasy and wish-fulfilment. Like Maggie, it is regressive and rebellious at the same time.

The novel is determined to grant its heroine her victory, even if it has to go to the death for it. This includes a triumph over Tom, who in his dying moments acknowledges his sister’s moral superiority. Maggie thus crushes him and wins him over at the same time, establishing an equality with her brother which is also a kind of power. Most of Eliot’s novels only just manage to fend off tragedy, and the ending of this one can be read as both tragic and anti-tragic. Or perhaps it is an example of the ambiguity of all authentic tragedy, in which the very act of submitting to your destiny reveals a courage which transcends it. There is a parallel, perhaps, with the conclusion of *Jane Eyre*, which allows Jane both deference and revenge, equality and dominion, expiation and redemption. It is as if she had died locked in an embrace with Rochester in his burning house. In this society, simple human recognition between a man and a woman seems to demand a flood, an inferno or, as with Catherine and Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights*, death and destruction. Much the same, as we shall see, can be said of Jude Fawley and Sue Bridehead in Thomas Hardy’s *Jude the Obscure*. In all of these cases, equality between men and women touches on something which presses against the confines of literary realism, and cannot really be articulated within them.

It may be that Maggie dies racked with false consciousness, immolating herself for a red-necked rural world which is worth no such renunciation. Like its heroine, *The Mill on the Floss* is homesick for a rural ideal which it recognizes scarcely exists. The true idyll is childhood, not the English countryside. The actual rural community is one of struggling tenant farmers and a bull-headed resistance to change. This is not a fable of the death of the old organic society at the hands of sharp commercial practitioners like Guest and Wakem. It is true that small-scale rural capital like old Tulliver’s mill is now thoroughly ensnared with urban banking and agricultural industry, a collusion which is helping to bring it low. But there is nothing particularly new about the Guests and the Wakems, and the rural community’s own defects play a vital role in its collapse.

If there are criticisms to be aimed at St Oggs and Dorlcote Mill, however, there is not much to be said for the world of urban capitalism either. It is not just a question of Maggie being rescued from her troglodytic relatives by town-bred liberals who respect the autonomy of the individual. Stephen’s liberalism is real and admirable; but it is also a spiritual version of the rather less admirable individualism of his capitalist father. Rootless freedom is no answer to Tulliver intransigence. Maggie’s refusal to break with her community must be set against the backdrop of a self-seeking Victorian society for which human relationships should not stand in the way of your self-advancement. Her fear of ‘natural appetite’ is not just a shyness of sexuality; it is also a repudiation of the so-called enlightened individualism which was the ruling orthodoxy of George Eliot’s England. It is just that it is hard to know where legitimate desire ends and self-seeking appetite begins. In this respect, Maggie may well have miscalculated.

In this sense, Eliot’s revisiting of her rural past is not a retreat from her contemporary world, but a way of engaging with it more deeply. […]