

ПРОВИНЦИАЛИЗЪМ И КОСМОПОЛИТИЗЪМ

РАЗКАЗ ЗА ПРОВИНЦИЯТА: “ВОДЕНИЦАТА НА РЕКА ФЛОС“ НА ДЖОРДЖ ЕЛИЪТ

Н. Белгин Елбир

NARRATING THE PROVINCE: GEORGE ELIOT'S *THE MILL ON THE FLOSS*

N. Belgin Elbir, Atılım University, Turkey

Abstract *This article discusses George Eliot's The Mill on the Floss (1860) as an example of mid-Victorian provincial novel. The aim is to examine the significance of the presence of the author-narrator and her authorial intrusions in the novel in terms of the ethical and aesthetic concerns of the author.*

Key words *regional/provincial novel, George Eliot, mid-Victorian novel, natural history, realism.*

In his essay “The Provincial or Regional Novel” in *A Companion to the Victorian Novel* (2002), Ian Duncan describes George Eliot's contribution to the genre in the following words:

Eliot brings the provincial novel to its fullest development and beyond, to its mid-1870s point of dissolution. If the Loamshire of the early chapters of *Adam Bede* (1859) seems very close to Barssetshire, the famous defense of realism in the seventeenth chapter is itself a regionalist convention. [...] Eliot goes on to enrich the ideology of provincialism with a burden of philosophical and literary allusion: in her hands the provincial novel enlarges the project of Scott's historical fiction, drawing on the Wordsworthian discourse of a moral resource of “common life” found amid natural forms and traditional associations. Eliot's last novel, *Daniel Deronda* (1876), states the doctrine:

A human life, I think, should be well rooted in some spot of a native land, where it may get the love of tender kinship for the face of the earth, for the labours men go forth to, for the sounds and accents that haunt it, for whatever will give that early home a familiar unmistakable difference amidst the future widening of knowledge.

The narrative context gives this meditation an ironic as well as elegiac cast. The heroine's upbringing, the opposite of “well rooted”, makes her immune to the influences of a timeless provincial England (which Eliot here calls “Wessex”). The novel goes on to unfold a crisis of national representation, as it narrates the failure

of the genre associated with provincial and country-house settings, the female bildungsroman. The novel engineers a catastrophic split between its domestic plot of courtship and provincial life, and its world-historical plot directed to an alien nation, Israel. (331-332)

The passage is significant for it draws attention to both a distinctive literary genre, the provincial novel, in a particular historical era; and also to the special and unique role, in its development and dissolution, of one of its major practitioners, George Eliot. Duncan's remarks are highly pertinent to the aim of this paper, where I discuss one of her early novels, *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) in relation to the genre of the provincial novel during the mid-Victorian era. I argue that the presence of the author-narrator, and her identity as an intellectual are an inseparable part of the narrative, and as such play an essential role in enriching and complicating the "project" of the provincial mode. I would like to begin by a survey of various critical views that discuss the place and importance of the genre of regional/provincial novel within the broader context of the nineteenth century English literature.

In the "Introduction" to *The Literature of Region and Nation* (1989) R.P. Draper defines regionalism in English literature as "a response to the Industrial Revolution" (2), and describes regional consciousness as "characterized by a regretful recognition of the loss which inevitably accompanies change" (2) and also as "prompted to a fuller awareness of the complex reality of what was under threat and a desire to preserve its essentially human value" (2). He adds that in spite of the growing influence of London as the centre, Victorian novelists such as "Mrs. Gaskell, the Brontes and George Eliot resisted its pressures and helped to cultivate in the minds of their readers the notion of a regional/provincial counterbalance to its homogenising influence" (3).

Robin Gilmour in his essay "Regional and Provincial in Victorian Literature" (1989) also regards the sense of region in literature as a "product of social change" (53), coming "with the awareness of disruption and dislocation" (53) and states that the English regional novel was born in the 1840s out of a recognition of change (53). Gilmour's argument asserts that "provincial" in the novels of the Brontes, Gaskell and Eliot "is not the inevitably lesser and pejorative term it is in the novels of Stendhal and Flaubert, and this is surely a sign of strength in the English tradition" (54). What he emphasizes in the essay as a significant aspect of the work of these mid-Victorian novelists is an absence of the separation of the provincial from the national; a separation that he sees as a characteristic of the provincial in late Victorian culture (54). Ian Duncan develops Draper's and Gilmour's arguments and notes that most critics recognize "a distinction between the categories of 'regional' and 'provincial' in nineteenth-century fiction" (322), but regards the relation between the two categories as "more variable, because historically produced, than the commentary tends to allow" (322). According to Duncan, the region "is a place in itself, the source of its own terms of meaning and identity, while the province is a typical setting defined by its difference from

London” (323). However, “the hierarchy implicit in this latter difference by no means necessarily subordinates the province” (323). In mid-Victorian fiction, in the “great novels of Gaskell, Trollope and Eliot the provincial country town or parish becomes the generic and typical setting of a traditional England,” and provincial life “assumes the burden of national representation” (323). In Duncan’s opinion, the provincial setting of these novels is “responsive to the pressures of modernity (politics, debt, fashion, crime) that have overwhelmed metropolitan life, but resisting or absorbing them -if only ambiguously, if only for a time” (323). Duncan agrees with Gilmour that in the third quarter of the nineteenth century provincial life as it is portrayed in the novel becomes the dominant literary mode to represent national identity, attending to “the inter-relations between local customs, natural settings and the larger temporal and political frames of history and the nation (323). His comment that “historical change -modernization- is the condition through which the province or region becomes narratable” (323) is, in fact, significantly relevant to an understanding of George Eliot’s contribution to the English novel in general, and the provincial mode in particular.

By the time Eliot started to write works of fiction, she had spent many years “on the frontier of Victorian intellectual life” (Gilmour 1986:127). As a child she was greatly attached to her home and family, especially her brother. In the Midlands where she was born, and later in London she translated influential works from German and wrote essays and reviews for London journals, including the prestigious *Westminster Review* which she edited for some time. She became, as Simon Dentith (1986) remarks, “engaged on intellectual tasks absolutely central to the problems of mid-nineteenth-century Britain” (17). She became familiar with the ideas and arguments of major European thinkers, scientists and writers, the advanced middle-class intellectuals of her time. With her writings she participated in intellectual debates concerning the crucial problems of the period. Her intellectual development can be understood, in Dentith’s words, “as part of a general attempt to construct a middle class, anti-aristocratic culture based on a belief in science [...] embracing both the necessity for change and the necessity for that change ordered and to come from the internal dynamics of society itself” (20). Notions of development and a progressive vision of society are, indeed, present in almost all her writings, but as Robin Gilmour (1986) has stated, her faith in progress was very much “an English and Wordsworthian version: qualified by reverence for the past and a great tenderness for the human need and longing” (129).

In the essays and reviews Eliot wrote it is possible to find her thoughts about history, society, human nature, and also art that would prove to be central to her work as a writer of fiction. Of particular importance and relevance to her provincial novels is the essay on Wilhem Von Riel, “The Natural History of German Life”. This essay was published in the *Westminster Review* in July 1856. In the essay she identifies a problem she has observed in English culture: “How little the characteristics of the working classes are known to those outside them, how

little their natural history has been studied, is sufficiently disclosed by our Art as well as by our political and social theories" (108). After illustrating this statement with references and comments concerning various artistic representations, she writes, in a frequently quoted passage, the following remarks:

[...] our social novels profess to represent the people as they are, and the unreality of their representations is a grave evil. The greatest benefit we owe to the artist, whether painter, poet, or novelist, is the extension of our sympathies. Appeals founded on generalizations and statistics require a sympathy ready-made, a moral sentiment already in activity; but a picture of human life such as a great artist can give, surprises even the trivial and the selfish into that attention to what is apart from themselves, which may be called the raw material of moral sentiment. When Scott takes us into Luckie Mucklebackit's cottage, or tells the story of 'The Two Drovers', -when Wordsworth sings to us the reverie of 'Poor Susan', -when Kingsley shows us Alton Locke gazing yearningly over the gate which leads from the highway into the first wood he ever saw, -when Hornung paints a group of chimney-sweepers, -more is done towards linking the higher classes with the lower, towards obliterating the vulgarity of exclusiveness, than by hundreds of sermons and philosophical dissertations. Art is the nearest thing to life; it is a mode of amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellowmen 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. It is not so very serious that we should have ideas about evanescent fashions -about the manners and conversations of beaux and duchesses; but it *is* serious that our sympathy with the perennial joys and struggles, the toil, the tragedy, and the humour in the life of our more heavily-laden fellow-men, should be perverted, turned towards a false object instead of the true one.

This perversion is not the less fatal because the misrepresentation which gives rise to it has what the artist considers a moral end. The thing for mankind to know is, not what are the motives and influences which the moralist thinks *ought* to act on the labourer or the artisan, but what are the motives and influences which *do* act on him. We want to be taught to feel, not for the heroic artisan or the sentimental peasant, but for the peasant in all his coarse apathy, and the artisan in all his suspicious selfishness. (110-111)

The comments in the passages quoted above go a long way towards illuminating not only the realism of the portrayal of the fictional world of Eliot's novels, but also the tone, form and function of her authorial intrusions. As Dentith has remarked, the entire essay "can be read as a remarkable artistic manifesto" (30). The problem she has identified has both social and ethical implications: the absence of a study of the natural history of a certain class, namely the 'working class', the 'peasantry', the 'people' all of whom she brings together under the term 'People'. The problem is then linked with the 'task' of the artist 'whether painter, poet, or novelist'. The 'task' is stated explicitly: 'the extension of our sympathies' defined as the 'moral end' of art that can be achieved by a 'picture of human life such as a great artist can give'. Allusions to Scott, Wordsworth, Kingsley and Hornung serve to illustrate her point. The portrayal of natural history, she

argues, will enable the artist to present the 'real', as opposed to the 'false'. She also stresses that she is not concerned with 'artificial' aspects of the lives of 'beaux' and 'duchesses', but with the 'perennial joys and struggles', and also the 'tragedy' and the 'humour' of the 'People'. It is necessary that we extend our sympathy to the 'People', for this will link different classes in society by strengthening the sense of community. The 'we' of the passage excludes the objects of her observations, the 'lower' class, as well as the aristocratic class of the 'beaux' and 'duchesses', and thus appeals to a community of middle class. The artist's task, then, is to teach this community, who needs to be 'taught' to feel sympathy. It is obvious that conceived in this way, the concept of sympathy acquires an ideological significance and function. As Eliot writes in a later passage, "a wise social policy must be based not simply on abstract social science, but on the National History of social bodies" (131). Such a notion enables the writer to observe and examine society as the object of a social project.

It is not difficult to see that in *The Mill on the Floss* Eliot saw herself in a similar effort to present a closely observed natural history and to depict qualities of landscape, behaviour, habit and morality. However, this does not mean that her novels are important only as formulations of organicist views. Therefore I argue that the novel carries 'the burden' of philosophy, but transforms it into art, along with autobiographical and personal material, through the imaginative and creative powers of the artist. The intellectual, social project thus becomes an artistic project.

The Mill on the Floss is set in the period of Eliot's childhood and youth, in the 1820s and 30s. The world of the novel, in other words, is a remembered world out of the author-narrator's past. Gilmour (1986) relates this aspect of the novel to "a combination of nostalgia for the past, with a natural imaginative gravitation to the world of her childhood" (130), and also to her aim to write a natural history of English provincial life, an aim that "drove her back to the time of her own childhood and beyond, where the web of society, to use one of her favourite metaphors, could be held securely in memory" (131). The voice of the narrator in the opening chapter of the book as she describes the landscape enacts the act of remembering and establishes a long, retrospective perspective:

A wide plain, where the broadening Floss hurries on between its green banks to the sea, and the loving tide, rushing to meet it, checks its passage with an impetuous embrace. On this mighty tide the black ships –laden with the fresh-scented fir-planks, with rounded sacks of oil-bearing seed, or with the glitter of coal –are borne along to the town of St Ogg's, which shows its aged, fluted red roofs and the board gables of its wharves between the low wooded hill and the river brink, tinging the water with a soft purple hue under the transient glance of this February sun. [...] Just by the red-roofed town the tributary Ripple flows with a lively current into the Floss. How lovely the little river is with its dark, changing wavelets! It seems to me like a living companion while I wander along the bank and listen to its low placid voice, as to the voice of one who is deaf and loving. I remember those large dipping willows... I remember the stone bridge...

And this is Dorlcote Mill. [...] Even in this leafless time of departing February it is pleasant to look at –perhaps the chill damp season adds a charm to the trimly-kept, comfortable dwelling-house, as old as the elms and chesnuts that shelter it from the northern blast. The stream is brim full now, and lies high in this little withy plantation, and half drowns the grassy fringe of the croft in front of the house. As I look at the full stream, the vivid grass, the delicate bright-green powder softening the outline of the great trunks and branches that gleam from under the bare purple boughs, I am in love with moistness, and envy the white ducks that are dipping their heads far into the water here among the withes-unmindful of the awkward appearance they make in the drier world above. (53-54)

The author-narrator is describing a place that she remembers vividly and fondly as a loved memory, and her tone is personal, intimate and nostalgic. Yet all this is a dream world, for towards the end of the chapter the author-narrator wakes up and realizes that she has dozed off and dreamt that she was “standing on the bridge in front of Dorlcote Mill as it looked one February afternoon many years ago”. (55) The passages describe a world of youth that can be recaptured only in a dream. This landscape is also the setting of the novel. The rural landscape of Dorlcote Mill is, in fact, where the main characters Maggie and Tom Tulliver grow up. It is presented in the passages above, and later in the novel, in relation to the trading town of St Ogg’s whose inhabitants are the professional provincial classes that include the Dodsons, the Tullivers’ middle-class, well-off and respectable relatives. The author-narrator’s tone as it affectionately recalls the past occurs in several other passages in the early chapters that are concerned mainly with the childhood experiences of Maggie and Tom. One such passage can be found after a detailed presentation of several scenes showing Tom and Maggie as young children playing together, quarreling and becoming reconciled:

Life did change for Tom and Maggie; and yet they were not wrong in believing that the thoughts and loves of these first years would always make part of their lives. We could never have loved the earth so well if we had had no childhood in it [...] What novelty is worth that sweet monotony where everything is known and loved because it is known? The wood I walk on in this mild May day, with the young yellow-brown foliage of the oaks between me and the blue sky, the white star-flowers and the blue-eyed speedwell and the ground ivy at my feet –what grove of tropic palm, what strange ferns or splendid broad-petalled blossoms, could ever thrill such deep and delicate fibres within me as this home scene? [...] Our delight in the sunshine on the deep bladed grass today, might be no more than the faint perception of wearied souls, if it were not for the sunshine and the grass in the far-off years, which still live in us and transform our perception into love. (94)

The comment underlines the emphasis on ‘memory’ already established in the opening chapter, and creates a tone and mood in which the experience of the past and the childhood acquires a timeless and universal significance. The assertion that ‘life did change for Tom and Maggie’ is full of implications for the future, a glimpse of which has already been offered by the author-narrator in an earlier comment after Tom has treated Maggie harshly:

We learn to restrain ourselves as we get older. We keep apart when we have quarreled, express ourselves in well-bred phrases, and in this way preserve a dignified alienation, showing much firmness on one side, and swallowing much grief on the other. We no longer approximate in our behaviour to the mere impulsiveness of the lower animals, but conduct ourselves in every respect like members of a highly civilized society. (91)

The passage implies that the warmth and spontaneity of childhood will be lost in the civilized adult world. There is irony toward the restraint 'we learn' as we grow up, a universal truth, it is implied, that is valid for all humanity. In terms of the development of the plot, the references to the adult world foreshadow a time which the tensions of childhood serve to prefigure. The comment on the world of grown-ups, in this way, foreshadows future events in the story, events that will also reveal the validity of the author-narrator's remark that the past would make 'a part of their lives'. The passages quoted above invite the reader to reflect upon remembered places and feelings, and to participate in the author-narrator's remembrances. The awareness of the inevitability of change inscribed in the passages, and reinforced by 'did change', links these remarks to the dream-memory at the beginning of the novel and makes Eliot's 'teaching' an observed and felt experience. The vividly realized details and recaptured emotions of the dream-memory gain poignancy and significance in relation to the later remarks on how our past ties make us people capable of feeling love: and in Antonia Byatt's (1979) words in the "Introduction" to the Penguin edition of the novel, teach that "strong and deep roots that make good men" (9). The author-narrator's comments help put the reader in a responsive and contemplative mood, needing and willing to be taught how to cherish the familiar. It is also noteworthy that, in spite of the universalizing tone, there is conveyed a sense that this is a typically English scene, a 'home-scene', not 'tropic' or 'strange', and therefore typical in terms of geography and nation.

Particularity of setting is, indeed, a characteristic aspect of the novel. In her depiction of provincial society, the author-narrator portrays the particular town and society in historical depth and from the retrospective perspective established in the opening chapter. There is in these descriptions an analytic and ironic tone, however, which is absent in the memories associated with the childhood scenes. The description of the fictional St Ogg's, the old town by the river Floss, is a striking instance of this tone. Since it is a rather lengthy passage I will be quoting only parts of it:

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

It is one of those old, old towns which impress one as a continuation and outgrowth of nature as much as the nests of the bower birds or the winding galleries

of the white ants: the traces of its long growth and history, like a millennial tree, and has sprung up and developed in the same spot between the river and the low hills from the time when the Roman legions turned their backs on it [...] It is a town 'familiar with forgotten years'. (181)

The first paragraph refers back to the description of the opening paragraph of the novel, with its references to ships, the 'cheese' and 'fleeces'. The literary allusion to the 'best classic pastorals' draws attention to the fact that the novel belongs to a different genre, and the phrase 'my refined readers' includes an irony directed towards the inadequacy of the reader's knowledge, an inadequacy which the author-narrator is going to remedy. The description that follows is a natural history, going back to the time of the Romans in tracing the growth of the town. The description continues with the legend concerning St Ogg, and the floods that visited the town and "troubles of the civil wars when it was a continual fighting place" (183). It then focuses on the town as it appeared at the time of the story:

In Mrs. Glegg's day there was no incongruous new-fashioned smartness, no plate-glass in shop-windows, no fresh stucco facing, or other fallacious attempt to make fine old red St Ogg's wear the air of a town that sprang up yesterday [...] Ah, even Mrs. Glegg's day seems far back in the past now, separated from us by changes that widen the years. War and the rumour of war had then died out from the minds of men, and if they were ever thought of by farmers in drab greatcoats who shook the grain out of their sample-bags and buzzed over in the full market-place, it was a state of things that belonged to a past golden age when prices were high [...] The mind of St Ogg's did not look extensively before or after. It inherited a long past without thinking of it, and had no eyes for the spirits that walked the streets. (184)

There are three periods of time contrasted in these sentences: Mrs. Glegg's time that is the present of the story; the time of the actual writing and reading of the novel indicated by the 'now' contrasted with the 'then' of Mrs. Glegg's day; and the long past of the town that was troubled by war and the rumour of war, the past that made St Ogg's 'a town familiar with forgotten years', an allusion to Wordsworth that is significant as an instance of the 'burden of literary allusion', and implies a Wordsworthian attitude, a feeling of reverence and love for the past and for things familiar. The authorial descriptions and comments also evoke an informed and detailed knowledge of the history and customs of the provincial town and its inhabitants, all of which suggests the presence of an intelligence that sees everything in historical depth and complexity, and evaluates all by historical comparison. The aim of extending sympathy implies a distance between the author who will 'teach' sympathy and readers whose sympathies are to be extended, on the one hand, and characters whom the reader will learn to understand and sympathize with. This is a privileged distance on the part of the author-narrator for it invests her with the authority to teach and educate her readers. Yet, if the notion of sympathy is going to be effective, the author-narrator needs to underline the sense of sharing in a common humanity. In other words, both distance and identification are necessary to validate the moral value of this story of the Tullivers

and Dodsons, which the author-narrator describes, in Chapter 1 “A Variation of Protestantism Unknown to Bousset”, as a “sordid life” (362), and continues:

You could not live among such people; you are stifled for want of an outlet towards something beautiful, great or noble: you are irritated with these dull men and women, as a kind of population out of keeping with the earth on which they live –with this rich plain where the great river flows for ever onward and links the small pulse of the old English town with the beatings of the world’s mighty heart. [...]

I share with you this sense of oppressive narrowness; but it is necessary that we should feel it, if we care to understand how it acted on the lives of Tom and Maggie how it has acted on young natures in many generations, that in the onward tendency of human things have risen above the mental level of the generation before them, to which they have been nevertheless tied by the strongest fibres of their hearts. The suffering, whether of martyr or victim, which belongs to every historical advance of mankind is represented in this way in every town and by hundreds of obscure hearts [...]. (363)

The above remarks, and the entire chapter, in fact, are presented after the ‘narrowness’ in the Tulliver and Dodson way of life has been demonstrated by several scenes and authorial intrusions in earlier chapters. In this chapter the author-narrator explains how it came about and relates it to social structure. Her concern is, self-declaredly, the effect of this ‘narrowness’ on the young people, Tom and Maggie. It is for this reason that the emphasis is on the ‘oppressive narrowness’ that “may have weighed upon you in watching this old-fashioned family life on the banks of the Floss, which even sorrow hardly suffices to lift above the level of the tragi-comic” (362). The author-narrator also defends the Dodsons and their moral code, and states that “society owes some worthy qualities in many of her members to mothers of the Dodson class, who made their butter and fromenty well and would have felt disgraced to make it otherwise” (364). Yet, in a paradoxical way, the realistic rendering of the provincial life and its ‘narrowness’ complicates the task of the writer for it becomes difficult to sympathise with these people who repeatedly fail to understand the young people, and thus prevent them from fulfilling their potential to contribute to the growth and improvement of social and personal life. The difficulty of eliciting sympathy for the provincial society while observing the impact of the ‘narrowness’ on Maggie whose “imaginative and passionate nature” (367) has been in conflict with the habits and attitudes of this society, yet who, at the same time, is deeply attached to it, an attachment the moral force of which she feels and acts upon in her renunciation of the possibility of personal happiness with Stephen Guest. George Eliot’s own alienation from her roots by her search for personal and intellectual fulfillment is probably an element and influence in her assessment, from a privileged aesthetic distance, not only of the meaning and value of this attachment, but its restrictive and crippling power. Her authorial explanations and comments are essential to highlight the significance of small and trivial incidents of ordinary lives, so that the reader is taught how to discern their importance despite their very ordinariness and dullness, and learns to feel sympathy for them. She has already invoked a grand literary genre, tragedy,

and referred to great writers in remarks such as “Mr. Tulliver had a destiny as well as Oedipus,” (198) and later in relation to Mr. Tulliver’s difficulties due to the lawsuit concerning irrigation, that leads to his bankruptcy and finally to the loss of the mill:

And Mr. Tulliver, you perceive, though nothing more than a superior miller and maltster, was as proud and obstinate as if he had been a very lofty personage, in whom such dispositions might be a source of that conspicuous, far-echoing tragedy which sweeps the stage in regal robes, and makes the dullest chronicler sublime. The pride and obstinacy of millers and other insignificant people, whom you pass unnoticingly on the road every day, have their tragedy too, but it is of that unwept, hidden sort, that goes on from generation to generation and leaves no record – such tragedy, perhaps, as lies in the conflicts of young souls, hungry for joy, under a lot made suddenly hard to them [...]. (275)

The author-narrator alludes to tragedy to attribute significance to the sufferings of people like the Tullivers; the expression ‘millers and other insignificant people’ is both particular and general in that it describes ordinary people, who are, in terms of class, different from ‘lofty personages’. ‘Conflicts of young souls’ is a reference to the children of such people, who, like Maggie and Tom, suffer because of the troubles of their parents. The ‘tragedy’ of the Tulliver family, however does not go unrecorded; it is the task of the author-narrator to record it. On the other hand, the author-narrator admits that the claim to tragedy may not be compatible with this story of provincial society, when she uses the term ‘tragi-comic’ to refer to their sorrows. The ambivalence about the use of the terms ‘tragedy’ and ‘tragi-comic’ seems to be a sign of what Raymond Williams (1973) identifies as the “unease” (174) in *The Mill on the Floss*. Robin Gilmour’s (1986) assertion that in the novel the authorial commentary moves “sometimes fluently, sometimes uneasily between the different responses of irony, nostalgia and ‘scientific’ detachment” (131) draws attention to a similar concern on the part of the author about how to define the troubles and sufferings of these provincial people. Another source of this ‘unease’ arises out of the fact that the realism that characterizes the descriptions and comments, the realism that rests upon the conviction that only by conveying a truthful picture of the lives of people that the author-narrator can extend the sympathies of her readers, is used to reveal the basic and essential human qualities beneath social and economic differences. This is the realism that, as James Eli Adams (2009) defines it, is an “instrument of moral education” in George Eliot’s hands (189). The insistence on common humanity in spite of such differences can be seen as obscuring and simplifying important issues, both national and universal. That Eliot was aware, and also ‘uneasy’ about such implications can be detected in a passage where she connects Maggie’s sense of suffering and need after her father’s bankruptcy with the suffering in national life, a connection that does not seem to be warranted by Maggie’s particular dilemma which is the outcome of her personality and the ‘oppressive narrowness’ of the society in which she lives:

In writing the history of unfashionable families, one is apt to fall into a tone of emphasis which is very far from being the tone of good society [...] But good society, floated on gossamer wings of light irony, is of very expensive production; requiring nothing less than a wide and arduous national life condensed in unfrogrant deafening factories, cramping itself in mines, sweating in furnaces, grinding, hammering, weaving under more or less oppression of carbonic acid [...]. (385)

To conclude, in Eliot's awareness and recognition of the complexity of her task in *The Mill on the Floss*, in the ambivalence and 'unease' revealed in her authorial voice it is possible to find what Ian Duncan has distinguished as leading to the 'mid-1870s point of dissolution' of the genre of provincial novel in her last novel *Daniel Deronda*. The unique quality of her achievement in *The Mill on the Floss* lies in the way she does not allow the 'burden of philosophical and literary allusion' to cause a division in the structure of the novel.

In one of her critical essays, 'Woman in France: Madame de Sablé' (1854) Eliot writes that in France alone, "if the writings of women were swept away, a serious gap would be made in the national history" (9). The contribution she herself made to English fiction with *The Mill on the Floss* bears testimony to the validity of this claim for her own writing.

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