

Modern Critical

INTERPRETATIONS

Edited and with an Introduction by HAROLD BLOOM

George Eliot's
The Mill on the Floss



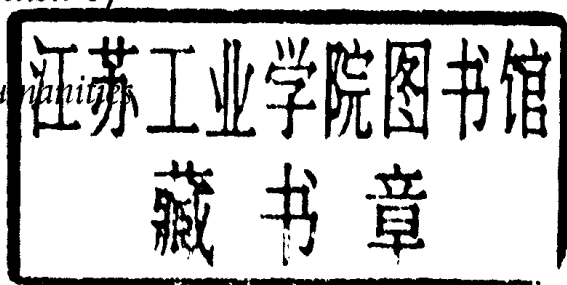
Modern Critical Interpretations

George Eliot's
The Mill on the Floss

Edited and with an introduction by

Harold Bloom

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Modern Critical Interpretations

George Eliot's

The Mill on the Floss

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 The Portrait of a Lady
 Billy Budd, Benito Cer-
 eno, Bartleby the Scriv-
 ener, and Other Tales
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 The Rainbow
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 1984
 Major Barbara

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 St. Joan
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Editor's Note

This book brings together a representative selection of the best modern critical interpretations of George Eliot's novel *The Mill on the Floss*. The critical essays are reprinted here in the chronological order of their original publication. I am grateful to Kevin Pask for his assistance in editing this volume.

My introduction centers upon Eliot's moral stance of renunciation, and speculates upon its relation to Maggie's shocking death. George Levine begins the chronological sequence of criticism with his meditations upon what he terms Eliot's "complex mode of self-deceit" in the novel.

In U. C. Knoepfelmacher's reading, *The Mill on the Floss* is judged to be less than a tragedy primarily because Maggie's drowning makes her a figure of pathos, a victim of capricious and accidental forces. Nina Auerbach, questing for the demonic, uncovers it in Maggie's uncanny powers of sight and vision, emblematic of a hunger for love fused with the death drive.

Subtly arguing that feminist criticism illuminates by its utopianism, Mary Jacobus nevertheless admits the absence in *The Mill on the Floss* of "a specifically feminine linguistic practice." Dianne F. Sadoff finds in Mr. Tulliver the figure of the failed father, and in Maggie the image of the daughter who subsequently undergoes a cycle of desire and punishment.

Wordsworth's strong influence upon George Eliot is analyzed as Eliot's revisionary agon of ambivalence by Margaret Homans, who darkly suggests "that the inevitability of women's variance from the Wordsworthian model brings, not only power, but also pain." In this volume's final essay, Gillian Beer raises the even darker problem: is the

representation of female heroism in literature to be confined to martyrdom? Her tentative answer, at least with regard to George Eliot, is that heroines after Maggie may renounce, but essentially survive, and find other significant forms of heroic activity.

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Introduction

Even taken in its derivative meaning of outline, what is form but the limit of that difference by which we discriminate one object from another?—a limit determined partly by the intrinsic relations or composition of the object, & partly by the extrinsic action of other bodies upon it. This is true whether the object is a rock or a man . . .

GEORGE ELIOT, "Notes on Forms in Art"

It was Freud, in our time, who taught us again what the pre-Socratics taught: *ethos* is the *daimon*, character is fate. A generation before Freud, George Eliot taught the same unhappy truth to her contemporaries. If character is fate, then in a harsh sense there can be no accidents. Character presumably is less volatile than personality, and we tend to disdain anyone who would say: personality is fate. Personalities suffer accidents; characters endure fate. If we seek major personalities among the great novelists, we find many competitors: Balzac, Tolstoy, Dickens, Henry James, even the enigmatic Conrad. By general agreement, the grand instance of a moral character would be George Eliot. She has a nearly unique spiritual authority, best characterized by the English critic Walter Allen about twenty years ago:

George Eliot is the first novelist in the world in some things, and they are the things that come within the scope of her moral interpretation of life. Circumscribed though it was, it was certainly not narrow; nor did she ever forget the difficulty attendant upon the moral life and the complexity that goes to its making.

Her peculiar gift, almost unique despite her place in a tradition of displaced Protestantism that includes Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa* and Wordsworth's poetry, is to dramatize her interpretations in such a way as to abolish the demarcations between aesthetic pleasure and moral renunciation. Richardson's heroine, *Clarissa Harlowe*, and Wordsworth in

his best poems share in a compensatory formula: experiential loss can be transformed into imaginative gain. Eliot's imagination, despite its Wordsworthian antecedents, and despite the ways in which Clarissa Harlowe is the authentic precursor of Dorothea Brooke in *Middlemarch*, is too severe to accept the formula of compensation. The beauty of renunciation in Eliot's fiction does not result from a transformation of loss, but rather from a strength that is in no way dependent upon exchange or gain. Eliot presents us with the puzzle of what might be called the Moral Sublime. To her contemporaries, this was no puzzle. F. W. H. Myers, remembered now as a "psychic researcher" (a marvelous metaphor that we oddly use as a title for those who quest after spooks) and as the father of L. H. Myers, author of the novel *The Near and the Far*, wrote a famous description of Eliot's 1873 visit to Cambridge:

I remember how at Cambridge I walked with her once in the Fellows' Garden of Trinity, on an evening of rainy May; and she, stirred somewhat beyond her wont, and taking as her text the three words which had been used so often as the inspiring trumpet-call of men—the words God, Immortality, Duty—pronounced with terrible earnestness how inconceivable was the first, how unbelievable was the second, and yet how peremptory and absolute the third. Never, perhaps, have sterner accents confirmed the sovereignty of impersonal and unrecompensing Law. I listened, and night fell; her grave, majestic countenance turned towards me like a sybil's in the gloom; it was as though she withdrew from my grasp, one by one, the two scrolls of promise and left me the third scroll only, awful with inevitable fates. And when we stood at length and parted, amid that columnar circuit of forest trees, beneath the last twilight of starless skies, I seemed to be gazing, like Titus at Jerusalem, on vacant seats and empty halls—on a sanctuary with no Presence to hallow it, and heaven left empty of God.

However this may sound now, Myers intended no ironies. As the sybil of "unrecompensing Law," Eliot joined the austere company of nineteenth-century prose prophets: Carlyle, Ruskin, Newman, and Arnold in England; Emerson in America; Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, and finally Freud on the Continent. But this ninefold, though storytellers of a sort, wrote no novels. Eliot's deepest affinities were scarcely with Dickens, Thackeray, and Trollope, and yet her formal achievement requires us to read her as we read them. This causes diffi-

culties, since Eliot was not a great stylist, and was far more immersed in philosophical than in narrative tradition. Yet her frequent clumsiness in authorial asides and her hesitations in storytelling matter not at all. We do not even regret her absolute lack of any sense of the comic, which never dares take revenge upon her anyway. Wordsworth at his strongest, as in "Resolution and Independence," still can be unintentionally funny (which inspired the splendid parodies of the poem's leech-gatherer and its solipsistic bard in Lewis Carroll's "White Knight's Ballad," and Edward Lear's "Incidents in the Life of my uncle Arly"). But I have seen no effective parodies of George Eliot, and doubt their possibility. It is usually unwise to be witty concerning our desperate need, not only to decide upon right action, but also to will such action, against pleasure and against what we take to be self-interest. Like Freud, Eliot ultimately is an inescapable moralist, precisely delineating our discomfort with culture, and remorselessly weighing the economics of the psyche's civil wars.

II

George Eliot is not one of the great letter writers. Her letters matter because they are hers, and in some sense do tell part of her own story, but they do not yield to a continuous reading. On a scale of nineteenth-century letter-writing by important literary figures, in which Keats would rank first, and Walter Pater last (the Paterian prose style is never present in his letters), Eliot would find a place about dead center. She is always herself in her letters, too much herself perhaps, but that self is rugged, honest, and formidably inspiring. Our contemporary feminist critics seem to me a touch uncomfortable with Eliot. Here she is on extending the franchise to women, in a letter to John Morley (May 14, 1867):

Thanks for your kind practical remembrance. Your attitude in relation to Female Enfranchisement seems to be very nearly mine. If I were called on to act in the matter, I would certainly not oppose any plan which held out a reasonable promise of tending to establish as far as possible an equivalence of advantages for the two sexes, as to education and the possibilities of free development. I fear you may have misunderstood something I said the other evening about nature. I never meant to urge the "intention of Nature" argument, which is to me a

pitiable fallacy. I mean that as a fact of mere zoological evolution, woman seems to me to have the worst share in existence. But for that very reason I would the more contend that in the moral evolution we have "an art which does mend nature"—an art which "itself is nature." It is the function of love in the largest sense, to mitigate the harshness of all fatalities. And in the thorough recognition of that worse share, I think there is a basis for a sublimer resignation in woman and a more regenerating tenderness in man.

However, I repeat that I do not trust very confidently to my own impressions on this subject. The peculiarities of my own lot may have caused me to have idiosyncrasies rather than an average judgment. The one conviction on the matter which I hold with some tenacity is, that through all transitions the goal towards which we are proceeding is a more clearly discerned distinctness of function (allowing always for exceptional cases of individual organization) with as near an approach to equivalence of good for woman and for man as can be secured by the effort of growing moral force to lighten the pressure of hard non-moral outward conditions. It is rather superfluous, perhaps injudicious, to plunge into such deeps as these in a hasty note, but it is difficult to resist the desire to botch imperfect talk with a little imperfect writing.

This is a strong insistence upon form in life as in art, upon the limit of that difference by which we discriminate one object from another. I have heard feminist critics decry it as defeatism, though Eliot speaks of "mere zoological evolution" as bringing about every woman's "worse share in existence." "A sublimer resignation in woman" is not exactly a popular goal these days, but Eliot never speaks of the sublime without profundity and an awareness of human loss. When she praises Ruskin as a teacher "with the inspiration of a Hebrew prophet," she also judges him to be "strongly akin to the sublimest part of Wordsworth," a judgment clearly based upon the Wordsworthian source of Ruskin's tropes for the sense of loss that dominates the sublime experience. The harshness of being a woman, however mitigated by societal reform, will remain, Eliot reminds us, since we cannot mend nature and its unfairness. Her allusion to the Shakespearean "art which does mend nature," and which "itself is nature" (*Winter's Tale*, 4.4.88–96) subtly emends Shakespeare in the deliberately wistful hope for a moral evolution of love between the

sexes. What dominates this letter to Morley is a harsh plangency, yet it is anything but defeatism. Perhaps Eliot should have spoken of a "re-signed sublimity" rather than a "sublime resignation," but her art, and life, give the lie to any contemporary feminist demeaning of the author of *Middlemarch*, who shares with Jane Austen and Emily Dickinson the eminence of being the strongest women writers in the English language.

III

The Mill on the Floss (1860) is George Eliot's strongest achievement before *Middlemarch* (1871-72) and remains a vital novel by any standards. Rereading it confirms my earlier annoyance at its inadequate conclusion, the drowning of the heroine Maggie Tulliver, and her beloved brother Tom, by the Floss river in full flood. But this seems the only substantial blemish in one of the major autobiographical novels in the language, comparable to Dickens's *David Copperfield* and prophetic of Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*. The splendor of *The Mill on the Floss* is almost entirely in Eliot's portrayal of her own earlier phases in the intensely sympathetic Maggie, whose death most readers fiercely resent. There is no tragic necessity in Maggie's drowning, and I do not believe that literary criticism is capable of explaining why Eliot made so serious a blunder, though recently feminist critics have ventured upon correcting some of Eliot's perspectives. Moral criticism of George Eliot, in my judgment, does not work very well, since the critic, of whatever gender or ideological persuasion, presumes to enter upon a contest with the most formidable and imaginative moralist in the history of the British novel.

I myself can only speculate upon why Eliot decided to destroy her earlier self by drowning the humane and luminous Maggie. Certainly it was not because the novelist could not imagine a form of life for her surrogate self. Maggie moves us most because her yearning demand is for more life, for a sublime relationship to herself, to other selves and to the world. Dr. F. R. Leavis, who made of an ill-defined "maturity" a critical shibboleth, decided that Maggie was immature and lacked self-knowledge, and so must have reflected a phase in Eliot's development when she was not yet worthy of Leavisite endorsement. Rereading *The Mill on the Floss* is likelier to show the reader that Maggie has a healthy sexual nature and does the best she can for herself in a harsh society, while ultimately restrained by the considerable moral perplexities of her own passionately divided psyche. The center of Maggie's dilemma is her erotic attachment to Stephen Guest, a whipping-boy for critics from

Eliot's contemporaries on to ours. Readers of *The Mill on the Floss* need to ask why George Eliot has Maggie renounce Stephen, before they can ask why the author concludes by Maggie's gratuitous death.

"Renunciation," as Emily Dickinson wrote with wit grand and grim, "is a piercing virtue," and perhaps it killed Maggie Tulliver, which is a curious paradox at best, since George Eliot consciously cannot have intended some causal connection between her heroine's abandonment of sexual happiness and subsequent drowning in her brother's embrace. Yet there is an authentic link between the almost unmotivated renunciation and the arbitrarily imposed conclusion. We sense that if Maggie had married Stephen, the Floss would not have flooded. That is an outrageous sentence, I suppose, but not nearly so outrageous as the renunciation, which is a self-violation rather than a self-sacrifice on Maggie's part. And the renunciation, though senseless, is far short of the sentimental outrageousness of the conclusion, with its veiled metaphor of incestuous passion:

Nothing else was said; a new danger was being carried towards them by the river. Some wooden machinery had just given way on one of the wharves, and huge fragments were being floated along. The sun was rising now, and the wide area of watery desolation was spread out in dreadful clearness around them—in dreadful clearness floated onwards the hurrying, threatening masses. A large company in a boat that was working its way along under the Tofton houses, observed their danger, and shouted, "Get out of the current!"

But that could not be done at once, and Tom, looking before him, saw Death rushing on them. Huge fragments, clinging together in fatal fellowship, made one wide mass across the stream.

"It is coming, Maggie!" Tom said, in a deep hoarse voice, loosing the oars, and clasping her.

The next instant the boat was no longer seen upon the water—and the huge mass was hurrying on in hideous triumph.

But soon the keel of the boat reappeared, a black speck on the golden water.

The boat reappeared—but brother and sister had gone down in an embrace never to be parted—living through again in one supreme moment, the days when they had clasped their little hands in love, and roamed the daisied fields together.

"Clinging together in fatal fellowship" is the darkly revelatory emphasis of this ending, which compels the reader to surmise that the repressed motive for the renunciation of Stephen was the attachment between sister and brother.

"One supreme moment," since sexual union is barred, has to be mutual immolation. This may seem more like the Shelley of *The Revolt of Islam* than the Wordsworth of *The Excursion*, and certainly would have been rejected as an interpretation by George Eliot herself. But it may help explain so wayward and inadequate a culmination to a novel otherwise worthy of the intense and varied existence, tragically brief, of Maggie Tulliver.

