Narrative is the Essence of History

Narrative is the Essence of History: Essays on the Historical Novel

Edited by

John Cameron

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To my wife and to all who helped contribute
to this volume.
Thank you.

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PREFACE

> There is a famous interview between Napoleon and Balasov on the eve of the Russian campaign which is more correctly described by Tolstoy, an avowed romancer working on a few fragments of knowledge, than by historians working on the amplest records. (Harold Temperley, *Research and Modern History* 19)

> Narrative is the essence of history. To tell a story properly calls for speed and variety. Those virtues are inherent in the style of Tacitus. He never allows the action to flag or stagnate. Narrative records and explains what happened — imagination compels it to be seen and shared. An artist has free scope with description — he can choose, add, and invent. (Ronald Syme, *Tacitus* 193)

> The second point is the more familiar one of the historian's need of imaginative understanding for the minds of the people with whom he is dealing, for the thought behind their acts . . . . (E. H. Carr, *What is History?* 24)

> It is sometimes said that . . . the differences between "history" and "fiction" resides in the fact that the historian "finds" his stories, whereas the fiction writer "invents" his. This Conception of the historian's task, however, obscures the extent to which "invention" also plays a part in the historian's operations. (Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* 6-7)

> Clio, as the English historian G. M. Trevelyan pointed out long ago, is, after all, a muse. (Isaiah Berlin, "Giambattista Vico and Cultural History" 64-65)

As the words of these historians all suggest, history and literature often go hand in hand, so much so that it is sometimes difficult to distinguish one from the other. Perhaps it is no accident that at the very moment literary critics, New Historicist and otherwise, began looking for the historical in the literary, historians such as Hayden White, Nancy Partner and Keith Jenkins began to look for the literary in the historical. This seemingly contradictory and paradoxical state of affairs can be seen quite clearly within the realm of historical fiction, which often concerns itself with the line between fact and fiction, real and unreal. Such contradictions

and paradoxes can also be found in this collection of essays, a collection that truly questions, problematizes and enriches our understanding of the historical novel.

The historical novel has had a very interesting history itself. During the 19th century the historical novels of Scott, Hugo, Thackeray, Dickens, Tolstoy and a host of other writers enjoyed both popular success and critical admiration. Success has never really died out, but admiration has been another matter. During the 20th century, historical fiction began to be disparaged by critics who looked down on the genre and its elements of romance, adventure and swashbuckling. This disparagement reached such a pitch that Robert Graves, author of *I, Claudius* and *Claudius the God*, felt compelled to say that he wrote these novels only because of pressing financial needs. As the century wore on, the genre began to move in a variety of interesting ways and reached even larger audiences. Some critics have continued to look down on the genre, but a growing number of historical novels have begun to receive wide critical praise. For example, the 2009 winner of the Man Booker Prize was Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall*, a historical novel depicting the life of Thomas Cromwell. The Roman historian Ronald Syme once wrote that narrative is the essence of history. What is the essence of historical fiction? Why does it continue to be such a popular and resilient genre? What is the history of historical fiction? What is its future?

The history of this collection of articles on historical fiction is fairly straightforward, for they came about as a result of a panel on the topic at the Northeast Modern Language Association conference in New Brunswick, New Jersey on April 8, 2011. The panel was entitled "Narrative is the Essence of History: The History of the Historical Novel," and it showcased many of the papers included in this volume. It was a very lively panel, and the papers presented produced an equally lively reaction from our audience, one that gave me hope that the topics we discussed really should be discussed further. However, not everyone who proposed a topic to me was ultimately able to attend the panel, so I was very pleased when offered the opportunity to bring together all of the wonderful responses my initial panel inquiry received. This collection represents the best of those responses, responses that show just how fertile the subject of the historical novel truly is.

The first section deals with issues relating to the historical novel and narratology. Just what is it that the historical novel is trying to achieve? How does it manage to do so? Zhanshu Liu takes these questions on in his article on George Eliot's *Romola*; this article discusses Eliot's own conflicting views of history, views that greatly influenced the narrative

form of her novel. One of the ways that Gustave Flaubert deals with these same issues is through the use of blanks, or absences, in his narrative that affect his readers' understanding of the historical events both depicted and un-depicted. Other novelists would find increasingly more elaborate ways to deal with telling the past. For example, Patrick O'Donnell shows us how John Dos Passos makes use of different narrative modes, such as newsreels, biographies, fictional narratives, and The Camera Eye, to help re-imagine a past that seems more and more fragmented and unimaginable.

Issues relating to our ability — or inability — to understand or re-imagine are not as modern — or postmodern — as they may seem. In fact, one can see these issues quite clearly in the novels of the writer who is generally considered to be the father of the modern historical novel: Sir Walter Scott. While some critics and historians have attacked Scott for his poor use of history, Darren Dyck shows that such attacks are generally misguided, for Scott's approach to history is more akin to that of the medieval historian, an approach laden with a generous amount of fantasy, than that of a Rankean. To these ends Dyck relates Scott's *Ivanhoe* to the works of Chaucer, while at the same time showing that Scott's penchant for false editors and invented novels and sources suggest a writer surprisingly well suited for the postmodern landscape. Such concerns over the issue of historical faithfulness begin to raise deeper questions about the actual differences between fact and fiction or the lack thereof, questions that historical novelists seem particularly interested in tackling. For example, Hamish Dalley's article on Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* discusses the very contentious issue of literary realism, particularly as it was once raised by Georg Lukács in regards to the historical novel, in order to try to find a way to create historical fiction with postcolonial concerns. Such concerns over realism also find their way into Michelle Phillips-Buchberger's article on John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman.* This novel has generally been seen as a precursor to later postmodernist forays into the genre of historical fiction, but Phillips-Buchberger clearly shows that Fowles' approach to these issues is far more nuanced and complicated. In Fowles the line between objective history and imaginative mythopoeisis may seem blurry, but that does not mean that such a line does not exist.

How does a nation deal with such historical issues in its literature? James J. Donahue takes this question head on in his article, for he looks at the ways that two very different historical novelists, James Fenimore Cooper and E. L. Doctorow, dealt with one of the most contentious aspects of American history: the American West and the belief in American Exceptionalism, a belief that has been defended and attacked for well over

a hundred years. The novels of Cooper and Doctorow help to shed light on these contradictions in American history and culture, particularly our often contradictory responses to the achievements and crimes of those who came before us. The weight of the past may seem to be surprising topic in a nation that often prides itself on its youth and vitality, but the past is as inescapable in America as it is anywhere else. This becomes abundantly clear in Daniel Irving's article on William Faulkner, particularly in relation to Faulkner's depiction of the traumatic impact that the nightmare of the past often have on those living in the present. Such trauma is also apparent in Katharine Polak MacDonald's discussion of Jason Aaron's graphic novel *Scalped*, in which characters are forced to find ways to come to grips with both the events of the past and the role they played in these events, a role that can never be truly forgotten. At the same time, Aaron's graphic novel shows that in addition to being traumatic, the past is also fragmented, disjointed, and unstable, so much so that our attempts to get a handle on and define it are almost guaranteed to fail. Do fictional imaginings succeed where historical documents fail, or are they equally fraught with contradictions, biases, and short-sightedness?

And so, finally, there is the issue of both the historical novel at present and the historical novel of the future. How will writers of tomorrow re-imagine the events of today? How will the writers that follow in their footsteps re-imagine those re-imaginings? Kate Kirwan deals with one of the more interesting trends in historical fiction at present: historical novels written in response to more canonical texts, novels that seek to rescue voices from the sidelines that have generally been overlooked or even blocked by past stigmas and prejudices. These response novels thus offer a challenge to both the literature of the past as well as our understanding of the past in general, particularly when it comes to our collective history of intolerance and injustice. These trends are also discussed in Ina Bergmann's wide-ranging article, an article that surveys several of the most recent trends and changes in the genre of historical fiction. These exciting new trends and changes suggest that our desire to re-imagine the past has a very lively and interesting future.

Further Reading

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CONTRIBUTORS

Ina Bergmann (Wuerzburg University)

Michelle Phillips-Buchberger (Franklin University)

John Cameron (Dalhousie University)

Hamish Dalley (Australian National University)

James J. Donahue (The State University of New York, College at Potsdam)

Darren J. Dyck (Dalhousie University)

Daniel Irving (Stony Brook University)

Kate Michelle Kirwan (University College Cork)

Zhanshu Liu (Nassau Community College/SUNY)

Patrick O'Donnell (Clark University)

Katharine Polak MacDonald (University of Cincinnati)

Rebecca Powers (John Hopkins University)

PART I:

THE HISTORICAL NOVEL AND NARRATOLOGY

CHAPTER ONE

READING *ROMOLA* AND GEORGE ELIOT'S "CONSCIENTIOUS REPRODUCTIONS" OF HISTORY

ZHANSHU LIU

> I want something different from the abstract treatment which belongs to grave history from a doctrinal point of view, and something different from the schemed picturesqueness of ordinary historical fiction. I want brief, severely conscientious reproductions, in their concrete incidents, of pregnant movements in the past. (Eliot, "Leaves from a Notebook")

Although none of George Eliot's works can strictly be categorized as a historical novel, history as a subject and narrative form is everywhere present in her works. The desire to historicize is stronger in *Romola* than in any other of her later novels. What Eliot writes in her "Notebook" clearly expresses her desire of not only writing a different kind of fiction, but also of reproducing history in a concrete narrative form. The change of the historical background not only sets *Romola* apart from Eliot's early novels that are set in provincial England, but it also creates the kind of distanced objectivity that emboldens Eliot to reflect on historical changes in Victorian England. Though influenced by the Comtian view of history, Eliot is also aware of the moments in which a nation's history is disrupted or an individual's life is displaced. Ironically, it is through the narration of disruptions and transitions that Eliot doggedly tries to stitch a web of continuity and stability in a changing society. In reading *Romola*, I focus on how, by placing at the center of a historical novel characters who struggle with the demands of the past, Eliot reveals both her conflicting views of history and the limits of the narrative form.

Eliot is not a historical novelist in the conventional sense, but her work certainly reflects the changes in the political life of the middle class in England during the Victorian period. For Eliot, history is essentially a

natural process that goes through different phases combining the internal conditions of subjectivity and the external manifestations of social progress. The insistence that history exists in a flux provides the philosophical matrix for Eliot's novels that often treat the past and the present as interconnected and interdependent modes of human reality. The most problematic and meaningful issue for Eliot is not that the past will never go away, but that it is that the process in which the past reluctantly recedes from the present. The past lingers on in the life of individuals not just in the form of memory, but in a persistent desire to shape their consciousness, undeterred by the resistance from the present. History can visit the present as a roaming spirit of nostalgia, or as a wandering soul of revenge.

With the enormous burden the narrative assumes in rendering a distantly strange Italian city life identifiable to readers in Victorian England, *Romola* both questions and reaffirms the values of a dynamic era in English history marked by the deep tension between a diffused culture and undiluted Christian faith. By holding up Renaissance Italy as a mirror to Victorian England, Eliot engages the narrative discourse to confront and converse with the temporal dimension of contemporary public discourse. In demonstrating the limits and growth of historical consciousness, Eliot also reveals the power and limitations of narrative discourse.

The form of the novel displays an ambivalent relationship with the flow of time. While narrative form is essentially temporal, the recounting of the past always seems to work against, albeit with much futility, the unstoppable progression of time.[1] The profound discontents of narrative, to borrow D.A. Miller's familiar term, seems to arise from the novel's internal force to totalize a discrete and heterogeneous external world that furnishes the context of its existence. The constitutive and deconstructive force of time, simultaneously present in the novel form, is succinctly pointed out by Georg Lukács:

> The greatest discrepancy between idea and reality is time: the process of time as duration. The most profound and most humiliating impotence of subjectivity consists not so much in its hopeless struggle against the lack of idea in social forms and their human representatives, as in the fact that cannot resist the sluggish, yet constant progress of time; that must slip down, slowly yet inexorably from the peaks it has laboriously scaled; that time—that ungraspable, invisibly moving substance—gradually robs subjectivity of all its possessions and imperceptibly forces alien contents

[1] On the relationship between history and narrative, see Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (The Univeristy of Chicago Press, 1984).

> into it. That is why only the novel, the literary form of transcendent homelessness of the idea, includes real time—Bergson's duree—among its constitutive principles. (*The Theory of the Novel* 120-121)

Lukács clearly perceives the impact of time's progression on the constitution of narrative structure. The progress of time separates meaning from form, idea from reality; however, it is the very nature of temporality that gives birth to the novel. The narrative in *Romola*, burdened with the daunting past and uncertain future and struggling with the duality of temporality, reveals Eliot's deeply embedded agony over the lack of harmony between society's changing structures and the development of individual consciousness, both of which are written into the novel.

To various degrees, the subjectivity of the principal characters in the novel is reshaped and burdened with the unrelenting demands of history. Caught in a changing world of time, Eliot's characters struggle with the widening rupture between interior subjectivity and the external world. Tito's rejection of the past, Romola's uncertainty of the present, and Savonarola's yearning for the future all point to the loss of harmony between the individual consciousness and the society as a whole. Such discrepancy is present in all the main characters, but it is most strongly felt in Tito.

A character like Tito is both engaging and alienating for any novelist to create, especially so for Eliot, who apparently relishes the moral vigor of a society found in the past. What Tito embodies — radical renunciation of the past — forms a sharp contrast to Eliot's own attitude toward the past. The enduring charisma of the character, which he uses to his advantage in re-establishing himself in a foreign city, enables Tito to quickly knit a web of his own in Florence. However, the ironic spin Eliot puts on the character becomes evident when we realize that the effort Tito makes in weaving the web never frees him from the invisible grip of the past that haunts and eventually ensnares him. The fact that Tito, his withdrawal and escape notwithstanding, is finally snatched by the past reveals not just the limitations of this seemingly resourceful figure, but also Eliot's complicated and even conflicting view of history and progress. While she yearns for an energizing force, like the advancing intellectual rigor she continuously provides society with, the yearning is often checked by her fond feeling for the past. As Basil Willey lucidly points out in his analysis of nineteenth-century British intellectual history, Eliot "showed the instinct which was deeply imbedded in the consciousness of the century as a whole to see both sides of any question: to tolerate the ordinary while admiring the ideal, to cling to the old while accepting the new, to retain the core of traditions while mentally criticizing their forms" (205).

Eliot's conflicting attitude toward the past is a reflection of a bigger crisis, which is the change in the perception of history. In his discussion of the crisis of bourgeois realism, Lukács points out that the revolutionary and progressive force of the bourgeoisie peters out when its own interest is threatened by the demands of the rising proletariat. The central question Lukács raises after reviewing the decline of the revolutionary force is: "What then can art take from a past conceived in this way" (*The Historical Novel* 182)? The change of the view of history from a progressive and organic process to a narrowed and stagnant one turns history not only to a pale reflection of ideas, but also to a profound philosophical and political crisis. What is past and how past should be represented is a question that points directly to the heart of the competing and shifting relationship between history and art.

Although Tito does not fully represent or embody such a changing perception of history, he faces a new and foreign world with strong interest and fascination that resembles and parallels Eliot's search for a new setting for her novel. To some extent, both Eliot and the character she creates are fascinated by Renaissance Florence as outsiders. While Eliot uses her position as an outsider to give an objective and accurate reproduction of Florentine society, her character only transforms his outsider position into the advantages he can take in wielding political power around him. The relentless determination to get inside the political circle and the constant awareness of being an outsider creates in Tito a divided consciousness of identity which, in a broad sense, reflects the tension that exists between rural and industrial England.[2]

Encamped in the margins of two different worlds, Tito seems to represent the idea of transcendent homelessness Lukács refers to as the defining feature of the novel. Unable, and probably unwilling, to anchor himself in any permanent position, Tito perceives his entire social experience as transient and non-committal. Tito maintains much freedom in weaving a web of relations, both public and private, according to his own interest and intention. However, the freedom he enjoys, founded as it is on lies and disguises, is constantly threatened by realities that could intrude at any moment. The life of Tito is ridden by the tension of the rift

[2] Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City*. What makes Williams' work relevant to refer to here is the critic's own feeling of the tension between the country and the city based on his personal experience of leaving his village to get his education in the city. For Williams, the city gives him the space to speculate his dual experiences and asks questions like "where do I stand in relation to these writers" (6), a question Tito may eventually ask when he is able to situate himself in the city of Florence.

he deliberately and selfishly creates between reality and his own imagination. The enduring fascination of the character has more to do with this sense of dividedness than with the sense of moral degeneration at turning points in history.

It seems that Tito's life is divided by the desire to move freely in the new world and the need to constantly dodge intrusion from the old one. It's not just the double life Tito leads, but the possibility of leading that life that best defines the character. As is stated before his dramatic meeting with Baldassare, his effort to escape from reality often puts him in a situation where he has to face it:

> He [Tito] had simply chosen to make life easy to himself—to carry his human lot, if possible, in such a way that it should pinch him nowhere; and the choice had, at various times, landed him in unexpected positions. The question now was, not whether he should divide the common pressure of destiny with his suffering fellow-men; it was whether all the resources of lying would save him from being crushed by the consequences of that habitual choice. (288)[3]

One of the unexpected positions Tito finds himself in is the encounter with Baldassare on the steps of the Duomo. The dramatic scene occurs when Baldassare, now an escaped prisoner, has to clutch one of the signori in order to regain his balance while mounting the steps of the church to listen to Savonarola's preaching. The man whose arm he grips happens to be Tito, who is startled by the sudden and unexpected appearance of his adoptive father. Tito's immediate reaction, mixed with disbelief and fear, and the long, silent stare that ensues, are all witnessed by the ubiquitous painter, Piero de Cosimo, who later deliberately puts Baldassare in the portrait of Tito he is commissioned to paint. The oil-sketch of Tito, with Baldassare added to the picture, is accidentally found out by Romola when she visits the painter's studio to get the portrait of her father. The strange, fierce-looking man, whose presence Romola also notices in the church, starts to raise suspicion in Romola about a hidden relationship between the prisoner and her husband.

The dramatic meeting of Tito and Baldassare on the steps of the church not only hastens the movement of the plot, it also reveals to us Eliot's meticulous manipulation of time and space in narrative construction. Compressed in the scene is the inevitable clash between two opposing forces — the old and the new — that propel the flow of time. Such conflict is not made meaningful unless and until it is enclosed, in this case,

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[3] George Eliot, *Romola*, ed. Andrew Sanders (Penguin, 1980). All subsequent quotations from *Romola* will be indicated by their page number in this edition.

and framed by a carefully delimited space. Eliot uses the painter's seemingly innocent, yet deeply ironic artistic vision to capture in a striking tableau two conflicting figures who are enmeshed in the relentless progress of time. Temporality seems temporarily suspended in the narrative by the space carved out intentionally to highlight the continuity of time. This moment of irony reveals to us not only Eliot's deeply ambivalent view of history as a continuous flux of human things constantly disrupted, but also the inherent structural conflict the novel possesses. Inscribed in temporality, the novel seems to assume the most natural form in displaying the mighty moving power of time, but at the same time, the novel, from the moment of inception, is engaged in what Lukács might call a hopeless "battle against the erosive power of time" (122). The desire to continue has to go through a constant negotiation with the urge to cease. The mobility of Tito, gained at the expense of sympathy and morality while providing the narrative of the novel with an infinite motor force, eventually makes him the most haunted and hunted character in *Romola*. The character does not seem to win much sympathy from the reader because of his extreme selfishness; however, the divided consciousness of belonging and not belonging in Tito cuts through the wall of egotism, making him at least a character Victorian readers can relate to.

The radical denial of the past by Tito is replaced in Romola by a much more complicated and even ambivalent act of preserving and distancing. For much of her cloistered life, Romola is confined to the service of her blind father who struggles to cling to his library and scholarship that are removed from the present life in Florence. To some extent, Romola's relationship to Bardo is comparable to that of Dorothea and Casaubon in *Middlemarch*, in that the female character plays the role of a servant to the male figure with almost unconditional faith and absolute willingness to sacrifice. As a daughter, Romola tries to fulfill her filial duties to her father, especially when his sight and health are failing. Her father's pursuit of his scholarship and undying desire to preserve the memories of the past command Romola's reverence. She spends her youthful life in her father's world, a world that belongs to the past, filled with books and marble fragments of Greek and Roman busts. Unlike Dorothea, Romola's sacrifice seems to lack a spiritual and saintly quality, but humane feelings are brought out of this young woman in a much more touching and poignant manner:

> 'Stay, Romola; reach me my own copy of Nonnus. It is a more correct copy than any in Poliziano's hands, for I made emendations in it which

> have not yet been communicated to any man. I finished it in 1477, when my sight was fast failing me.'
>
> Romola walked to the farther end of the room with the queenly step which was the simple action of her tall, finely wrought frame, without the slightest conscious adjustment of herself.
>
> 'Is it in the right place, Romola?' asked Bardo, who was perpetually seeking the assurance that the outward fact continued to correspond with the image which lived to the minutest detail in his mind.
>
> 'Yes, father; at the west end of the room, on the third shelf from the bottom, behind the bust of Hadrian, above Appollonius Rhodius and Callimachus, and below Lucan and Silius Italicus.'
>
> As Romola said this, a fine ear would have detected in her clear voice and distinct utterance, a faint suggestion of weariness struggling with habitual patience. But as she approached her father and saw his arms stretched out a little with nervous excitement to seize the volume, her hazel eyes filled with pity; she hastened to lay the book on his lap, and kneeled down by him, looking up at him as if she believed that the love in her face must surely make its way through the dark obstruction that shut out everything else. At that movement the doubtful attractiveness of Romola's face, in which pride and passion seemed to be quivering in the balance with native refinement and intelligence, was transfigured to the most lovable womanliness by mingled pity and affection. (95)

Such passages reveal to us not only the demanding nature of the father-daughter relationship, but also the conflicts of deeply lodged human emotions. Bardo's dependence on Romola and his passion to preserve an illusion of permanency puts to test anyone's patience and endurance. Captured in these paragraphs is a moment of the habitual life in which the father and daughter spend their time together. Behind her submission to her father's dying legacy lies a long subdued desire for change. Even though there is only "a faint suggestion of weariness" on Romola's face, the yearning for an enlarged and refreshing world is evident. Unable to see the world he moves in, Bardo struggles to cling to the past both mentally and psychologically by preserving a fragile yet meticulous order in his private life. In this sense, Bardo resembles Baldassare, Tito's stepfather. Their fear of losing their relevance intensifies as their roles in the present world become increasingly marginalized and limited. By putting two antiquated figures in the lives of the young, Eliot seems to show that in spite of her profound respect for tradition and history, she never relishes a culture or tradition entirely separated from the living and the present, the kind of mummified legacy represented by Baldassare and Bardo. It is really the connection with present that gives meaning to the past.

The two forces in the novel — to disown and to preserve the past — come into conflict when Romola discovers that Tito has sold her father's library to the French agents when the Medici family is ousted. The library, a collection of manuscripts valuable to Romola's father, serves as a reminder for Romola of her obligation to her father in preserving the cherished relic. The sense of duty, enhanced by Bardo's death, makes Romola aware of public life, which she has previously not been interested in. As the narrator explains: "her new keen interest in public events, in the outbreak of war, in the issue of the French king's visit, in the changes that were likely to happen in the State, was kindled solely by the sense of love and duty to her father's memory" (311).

The desire to preserve her father's legacy leads Romola to the public life that has so far only been filtered through Tito, who has managed to work his way to the heart of Florentine political life. It is through this gradual access to public life that Romola learns to know Tito's real identity and the power and limitations of Savonarola's religious guidance. Romola's narrow vision of the past is widened to a stronger sense of responsibility to people who are lost and confused at the moment of great social change in Florence. From the attempt to preserve her father's legacy, Romola learns the importance of saving the tradition of humanity. Only when she finally frees herself from the deep sense of obligation toward the past is she able to develop and extend her sympathy to other people, including Tessa, the woman Tito secretly marries and whose children she bears.

But the growth of Romola's self-recognition takes a long and arduous path. With the death of her father and the betrayal of Tito, Romola finds herself in a state of loss and agony. The desire to escape from the disturbing present intensifies as she faces the bewilderment of a changing world:

> When Romola sat down on the stone under the cypress, all things conspired to give her the sense of freedom and solitude: her escape from the accustomed walls and streets; the widening distance from her husband, who was by this time riding towards Siena, while every hour would take her farther on the opposite way; the morning stillness; the great dip of ground on the roadside making a gulf between her and the somber calm of the mountains. For the first time in her life she felt alone in the presence of the earth and sky, with no human presence interposing and making a law for her. (428)

The passage captures a rare moment when the heroine, now freed from the two dominant male figures in her life, enjoys her new-found space and time filled with freedom and solitude. For a moment, Romola is intensely

aware of not only the "widening distance" that separates her from Tito physically and emotionally, but also joy of embracing nature, where no human laws apply. The new spatial experience for Romola does not last long when the tranquility is broken by the loud and "arresting voice" of Savonarola, who, at this critical moment of Romola's life, serves as her spiritual visionary and anchor.

The commanding voice of Savonarola, which first arouses a strong sense of anger and resistance from Romola, reminds her of her duty as a wife and citizen of Florence just as she is fleeing. The role of Savonarola in the novel becomes more important as his influence on Romola appears more obvious and necessary. He reasserts his influence by reminding Romola of the crucifix he gives her. The symbolic power of the crucifix seems irresistible when Savonarola asks Romola to look carefully at "the sudden impression of the wide distance between her present and her past self" (432). The commanding voice, coupled with the divine image, becomes a compelling force that raises Romola's consciousness to a higher level, which enables her to reflect on the disparity between her past self and her emerging new consciousness enlivened by a new sense of responsibility.

Eliot's treatment of Savonarola, a religious character who casts the most imposing and profound influence on the development of Romola, reveals most directly the novelist's concept of historical progress, the theme of the novel. In incorporating this powerful, religious figure in the narrative, Eliot struggles to tread a balance between the conflicting impulses of raising history's great men onto a pedestal and then toppling them down. The divided view of Savonarola's role in the spiritual growth of Romola and the public life of Florence is evident everywhere in the novel. While his concern for the fate of Florence and humanity in general is genuine and touching, his religious preaching is often mixed with irresistible willfulness, which is clearly demonstrated in his meeting with Romola. Later in the novel, the challenge to his prophetic power through the trial of fire, while further revealing the weakness of this great figure, somehow makes Savonarola more human and believable as a character.

Savonarola's chief concern is to restore the medieval tradition of Florentine liberty to the Italian city after nearly sixty years of domination by the Medici family. To choose this struggle for the restoration of popular government in Florence as the historical background for the novel strongly suggests Eliot's belief in the continuity of human progress. Florence is treated as a symbol that constantly reminds us of how we resemble rather than differ from human beings in the past. The yearning in Eliot for stability and continuity reflects the need nineteenth-century

British middle class felt in the age of industrial development and political reforms. George Eliot expresses the need to nurture the ties to the past in an increasingly industrialized Victorian England:

> The nature of European men has its roots intertwined with the past, and can only be developed by allowing those roots to remain undisturbed while the process of development is going on, until that perfect ripeness of the seed which carries with it a life independent of the root. This vital connexion with the past is much more vividly felt on the continent than in England, where we have to recall it by an effort of memory and reflection; for though our English life is in its core intensely traditional, Protestantism and commerce have modernized the face of the land and the aspects of society in a far greater degree than in any continental country. (*Essays* 288)

While Eliot's words may well be used as an explanation to the choice of Italy as the setting of her historical novel *Romola*, they reveal her conception of society, and European society in particular, as "incarnate history." The domes and towers in the Renaissance city of Florence, in a very material form, remind the people of the past historical conditions which yield the ideas that give the form to the current social reality. The flux of human things keeps the past alive, making it a form-giving presence in the present. Eliot's wish for social stability, however, does not preclude her from lashing out at the role religion plays in maintaining harmony in society. The reservation Eliot has about Christianity is clearly shown in the gradual yet calculated revelation of the flaws of Savonarola, the character who attempts to restore the liberal tradition through the power of the Divine. As a spiritual leader, Savonarola exerts his influence over the public through his personal charisma and religious fervor during the time when political struggle disrupts the social order in Florence. His relentless pursuit of a liberal and purified government eventually makes him the true leader of Florence.

However, Savonarola's intention to use religious power to achieve political stability is always risky. When the Florentines are starving and waiting for food provision and supplies from Marseilles, Savonarola assures them in his sermon that God will help them if they persevere; otherwise, he consents to have his frock stripped off. The Frate puts his supernatural power and the trust he earns from his followers on the line by making such a bold prophecy. The food and supplies from France finally arrive after much delay at sea because of strong wind, ending the test of Savonarola's prophetic power. But how to distinguish Savonarola from other mysterious visionaries is a question with which Eliot is particularly concerned: