Essays on Religion in G. Eliot's Early Fiction

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To My Family

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INTRODUCTION

Robert Evans, George Eliot's father, notes in his Journal on January 2, 1842: "Went to Trinity Church in the forenoon. Miss Lewis went with me. Mary Ann did not go...."[1] Again, on January 16th: "went to church in the forenoon Mary Ann did not go to church" (*Letters* I, 124). Apparently he was upset. The novelist's biographers have said everything one needs to know about young George Eliot's enthusiastic and sincere faith, the good knowledge she had, for her age, of Christian history and doctrine, how her friend and former teacher in Nuneaton, Maria Lewis, as well as other religious people, like her Methodist aunt, Samuel Evans's wife, had influenced her, and finally how, after she became, in Coventry, acquainted with Unitarians and freethinkers like Charles Bray and Charles Hennell, she lost her faith. Mary Ann was about 22 years old when this change occurred. Gordon Haight, however, rightly points out that, "Her loss of faith, though sudden, was long in preparation. As a child she had wondered how heroic characters in stories could be noble without being Christians. Later she found that books which attempted to reconcile Genesis with geology and astronomy only encouraged speculation about the very doubts they meant to dispel."[2] But, still according to Haight, it is Hennell's *An Inquiry concerning the Origin of Christianity* which "precipitated her break with orthodoxy" (*Selections* 3).

We need to define "faith". If we go by Schleiermacher's conception of it,[3] it is different from that of the Bible, because in his view faith is caused by human feelings (feeling of dependence in particular) and experience, an idea close to Kierkegaard's existentialism. At any rate, according to Schleiermacher, as well as to Kierkegaard, man is capable of saving himself, since feelings and life experiences can lead to faith and salvation. This is a rationalist point of view, especially that of the German theologian, and not based on the Bible. But if we go by the latter's

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[1] *The George Eliot Letters.* Vol. I. Edited by Gordon S. Haight. New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1954, 124.

[2] *Selections from George Eliot's Letters*. Edited by Gordon S. Haight. New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1985, 3.

[3] Friedrich Schleiermacher. *The Christian Faith.* Edited and translated by H. R. Mackintosh and J. S. Stewart. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976, 5-12.

definition, which is also that of Augustine, Luther, Calvin, Melanchthon, Zwingli, etc..., without God's grace, faith is not possible. This also implies a change, or a conversion, in a person's life. One must die spiritually before one is reborn in Christ. It seems that George Eliot never experienced such a religious crisis in her life. The grace the Bible describes, brings about the belief in Christ as the only Redeemer and the only way to be justified before God. It is not in general the faith a Christian has as a child, which is inculcated by the parents and the society, an external faith, not the one resulting directly and mysteriously from God, like the one Abraham received. According to Paul, those who have faith were chosen by God before they were born, "For he chose us in him [i.e. Christ] before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding" (Ephesians 1: 4-8).[4] This faith should never disappear, unless temporarily, like when Peter denies Christ. Indeed, the Apostle soon returns to God, and as he feels guilty and deeply sorry, he weeps (Marc 14: 72). This faith is bestowed by God upon the one He has chosen in advance, according to the Scripture. For example, it is Jesus who calls Simon (Peter) and his brother Andrew, who were fishing, to follow Him (Matthew 4: 19). Their faith was not the result of their own will, reasoning, or works. In the same way, a little after, Christ decides to call James and his brother John (Matthew 4: 21-22). Melanchthon writes that "Faith does not mean merely knowing the story of Christ, for even the devils confess that the Son of God appeared and arose from the dead, and in Judas there was a knowledge of Christ. *True faith* is truly to retain all the words which God has given to us, including the promise of grace; it is *a heartfelt reliance on the Savior Christ, a trust that God for his Son's sake* graciously forgives us our sins, receives us, and makes us heirs of eternal blessedness. Romans 4 clearly shows that this is the meaning in the word 'faith' when we say, 'Through faith we are justified'."[5] Now, with regard to George Eliot, I assume that she lost not the faith Paul or other

[4] *The NIV Study Bible*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995. Schleiermacher criticizes Paul and his conception of faith (*The Christian Faith* 61).

[5] *Melanchthon On Christian Doctrine. Loci communes 1555*. Translated and edited by Clyde L. Manschreck. New York: Oxford University Press, 1965, 158. The author's emphasis.

apostles talk about, but the one in the religion in which she had been raised, and in the way she had understood it herself as a child. When, after having reached a certain age, she read Hennell's book, and later on Spinoza, Strauss, Feuerbach, etc..., she changed to such an extent that she basically abandoned the religion of her youth. Nonetheless she still believed in a "divine mystery", a good Creator, as well as in the ethical principles of Christianity. Actually, many of the latter are shared by various philosophers in the world, and found in other religions as well.

When in January 1842, Mary Ann decided not to attend anymore the family (Anglican) Church to which she had been faithful up to that time, she tried to explain her reasons to her father, but he could not understand her. Therefore, she thought that she should write him a letter in the hope that she would be more successful in that way. Indeed, she loved her father so much that she did not want to hurt his feelings. So, finally on 28 February 1842, almost two months after she stopped going to church, she wrote him a pretty long letter, of which I must quote some important passages. Since her father had thought that she had been influenced by some Unitarians, she tells him first the following: "I wish entirely to remove from your mind the false notion that I am inclined visibly to unite myself with any Christian community, or that I have any affinity in opinion with Unitarians more than with other classes of believers in the Divine authority of the books comprising the Jewish and Christian Scriptures" (*Letters* I, 128). So she did not reject her church because she preferred another denomination, and if she did not want to attend church anymore, it was because she did not believe in the Scriptures as she had done before. She came to "regard these writings as histories consisting of mingled truth and fiction." This means that she had in the past a tendency to read the Bible somewhat literally. Of course, the Bible is full of fiction, but those stories are allegories many people have taken for historical events. Apparently George Eliot was like those people when she was a passionate evangelical adolescent. Another point Mary Ann makes in her letter, which must also be mentioned, is that, "while I admire and cherish much of what I believe to have been the moral teaching of Jesus himself, I consider the system of doctrines built upon the facts of his life and drawn as to its materials from Jewish notions to be most pernicious in its influence on individual and social happiness." She does not give any example of what she considers "pernicious" in the New Testament. Furthermore, although she implicitly praises Jesus' moral teachings, she only sees in Him a sublime man and thinker. Nonetheless, as Gordon Haight contends, "Though she never returned to orthodox Christianity, George Eliot was deeply religious," so much so that "No author of the 19th

century had a loftier ethical influence" (*Letters* I, xlvi). In order to justify herself better, Mary Ann tells her father that "some of the finest minds in Christendom in past ages," as well as "the majority of such in the present" have shared the same ideas, including a person Robert Evans apparently liked, namely Benjamin Franklin ["as an instance more familiar to you than any I could name I may mention Dr. Franklin" (*Letters* I, 128)]. Concerning the latter, let us remind the following regarding his religious beliefs, from his *Autobiography*:

> "I had been religiously educated as a presbyterian; and tho' some of the dogmas of that persuasion, such as *the eternal decrees of God, election, reprobation, etc*., appeared to me unintelligible, others doubtful, and I early absented myself from the public assemblies of the sect, Sunday being my studying day, I never was without some religious principles. I never doubted, for instance, the existence of the Deity; that he made the world, and govern'd it by his Providence; that the most acceptable service of God was the doing good to man; that our souls are immortal; and that all crime will be punished, and virtue rewarded, either here or hereafter. These I esteem'd the essentials of every religion; and, being to be found in all the religions we had in our country, I respected them all, tho' with different degrees of respect, as I found them more or less mix'd with other articles, which, without any tendency to inspire, promote, or confirm morality, serv's principally to divide us, and make us unfriendly to one another. This respect to all, with an opinion that the worst had some good effects, induc'd me to avoid all discourse that might tend to lessen the good opinion another might have of his own religion..."[6]

Benjamin Franklin also explains the reason why he decided not to attend his Presbyterian church anymore. Of course, George Eliot's reasons are not exactly the same, but she does share some of Franklin's ideas. Thus they both were more interested in moral perfection than in the Christian Doctrine strictly speaking. In the letter to her father, she stresses the fact that she is sincere and cannot just for the sake of others, including him, live like a hypocrite: "Such being my very strong convictions, it cannot be a question with any mind of strict integrity, whatever judgment may be passed on their truth, that I could not without vile hypocrisy and a miserable truckling to the smile of the world for the sake of my supposed interests, profess to join in worship which I wholly disapprove. This and *this alone* I will not do even for your sake—anything else however painful

[6] *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin.* Penn Reading Project Edition. Edited by Peter Conn. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005, 64. The author's emphasis.

I would cheerfully brave to give you a moment's joy" (*Letters* I, 128-129). That is why some time later, in May, she will accept, just to please her father, who was not satisfied with her letter, to accompany him again to church. She respected her father's will until his death in 1849. In any case, her letter shows her honesty and sincerity, as well as her belief in God as a good Creator. She thus concludes: "As a last vindication of herself from one who has no one to speak for her I may be permitted to say that if ever I loved you I do so now, if ever I sought to obey the laws of my Creator and to follow duty wherever it may lead me I have that determination now and the consciousness of this will support me though every being on earth were to frown upon me" (*Letters* I, 130). She never became an atheist or agnostic, but her thought concerning religion was already at age 22 pretty complex and profound. She will remain more or less a rationalist, an optimistic humanist, and a believer in a good but mysterious creator of the universe. Ethically speaking, she will be faithful to the principles of Christianity. It is, then, not surprising that after her beloved partner, George Henry Lewes, died, she married John Walter Cross in a Unitarian church. It may have been the closest to her beliefs.

As we go through the future novelist's letters before the famous one addressed to her father on 28 February 1842, we can notice certain ideas and features, which reveal that the change happening at age 22 was not sudden, as Gordon Haight pointed out. Moreover, her personality will remain more or less the same throughout her life, always much concerned about morals, always scrupulous, always searching for a more spiritual life. Most of Mary Ann's letters that have been saved from the years 1836 to 1842 are addressed to Maria Lewis, but this does not really matter, for she is everywhere the same sincere and honest girl. Nothing fake, even in the letters stuffed with biblical quotes and sometimes truly annoying, not only because of their over religious or preaching tone, but also of a style sometimes indigestible, of which she herself was not satisfied.[7] For the sake of brevity, I will only consider two main features in the letters of this period, namely compassion and humility, then I rapidly conclude.

Compassion. One of the main traits of Mary Ann's character is that she truly cares about others. Here are just a few examples: the first letter we have from her and addressed to Maria Lewis on January 6, 1836—she was only 16—in which she talks with great sadness about the suffering of her

[7] A few months after Mary Ann was born at South Farm, Arbury, Warwickshire, on 22 November 1819, the Evans family moves to Griff (March 1820). Then in 1841, they move from there to Foleshill. George Eliot's mother had died of illness five years before (February 1836). It is at Foleshill that George Eliot's life is going to change

mother, who would die less than a month later, and also of her sick father, is an example we might consider normal, since it is about her parents. Another one, dated 26 may 1838, and addressed to the same Miss Lewis, concerns Christiana's health. Her older sister, who had got married the year before, was hardly recovering from her recent pregnancy and delivery. This is the way the future novelist writes about her: "I know you will be glad to hear that Chrissey is wonderfully well, a blessing that calls for much gratitude. Truly may change be called our only certainty; may our experience of the fact lead us feelingly to join in that beautiful collect which closes with praying that amidst all the changes of this transitory life, our hearts may *surely* there be fixed, where true joys are to be found" (*Letters* I, 4-5).[8] To this prayer, which seems somewhat artificial to a reader today, she adds the following concerning her former teacher, now a family friend: "You have had a change of a trying nature since we met, the loss of a dear friend, but I trust you may safely apply the comfort the apostle gives to those whose friends sleep in Jesus, and that you have real warranty for not sorrowing as without hope." She cares about everyone, and also constantly needs to justify her compassion and love by referring to the Scriptures.

Humility. Nowadays, humility is not appreciated, and self-love is considered a good moral quality, but a Christian ought to be humble, according to the Bible. La Rochefoucauld in his *Maximes* considers *amour-propre* as the main source of all our misery, and unfortunately the real motive for all that we do. It is nothing but pure vanity and selfishness, and in fact against Christian ethics. If George Eliot, all her life and already at age 16, had a tendency to be humble, it was not by hypocrisy. Far from that. She was morally a superior person. One or two examples of her humility will suffice for us here. In a letter Mary Ann addresses on 6 February 1839 to her aunt, Mrs. Samuel Evans, the Methodist preacher who will be her model for Dinah Morris in *Adam Bede*, she begs her to write to her, not only for giving some news about herself and her family, but also for edifying her:

> "If you are able to fill a sheet I am sure both Uncle and you would in doing so be complying with the precept, 'Lift up the hands that hang down and strengthen the feeble knees.' I need not tell you that this is a dry and thirsty land, and I shall be as the traveler in the eastern deserts is to the unknown hand that digs a well for him. 'Unstable as water, thou shalt not excel' seems to be my character, instead of that regular progress from strength to strength that marks even in this world of mistakes the people that shall in

[8] The author's emphasis.

> the heavenly Zion stand before God. I shall not only suffer, but be delighted to receive the word of exhortation, and I beg you not to withhold it." (*Letters* I, 14)

We realize that just in this short passage, there are two quotes from the *Epistle to the Hebrews*, one from the *Psalms*, and one from *Genesis*. Maybe too much. But what is more interesting, is the fact that Mary Ann, who is sincere after all, is searching the truth and really needs help. Her humility is a positive sign and reveals her genuine religious mind, but she also admits that she is, referring to *Genesis* 49: 4, "Unstable as water." That is why she can attend an Anglican church with her family, but she also gets inspired by her Methodist uncle and his wife, as well as by Baptists like Maria Lewis or the Franklin sisters, and later on she can also feel at home with Unitarians like the Brays, etc.... On the other hand, if we consider the religious authors she admires much, we can see the names of a Jansenist like Pascal,[9] a religious humanist like Erasmus,[10] as well as an Anglican like Jeremy Taylor.[11] She basically did not care much about their theological differences, but was mainly interested in their good moral ideas. In other words, the Christian doctrine, strictly speaking, did not matter so much to her already in those days.

To conclude, in my view, the change that takes place in 1842 in Mary Ann's spiritual life is not so surprising, if we consider the fact that maybe she never was a Christian in the "orthodox" sense. For the latter can be summarized in the double motto of Luther and other Reformers: 1) Justification by faith alone, and 2) Scripture alone. It is indeed Saint Paul's motto as well as that of other apostles. Now, according to the Bible, faith comes from above. It is the fruit of Grace and a free gift of the Father. We are not justified by our good works, but by truly believing in Christ. Mary Ann Evans apparently believed mainly in good works and in salvation coming from men, thanks to their own will. A good person like her aunt could then edify her. Thus, in her doubts, she thought that truth could be found in diverse interpretations of the Scripture, in various churches and denominations, also in other religions and philosophies. *Daniel Deronda* is a good example of this humanist approach. George Eliot would then easily sympathize with Spinoza, Schleiermacher, Strauss, Feuerbach, and

[9] For example in her letter to Maria Lewis on 18 August 1838, she says to her, "I do not wonder you are pleased with Pascal; his thoughts may be returned to the palate again and again with increasing rather than diminished relish..." (*Letters* I, 7).
[10] See for instance the letter to Maria Lewis on 20 May 1841 (*Letters* I, 92).
[11] See her letter to the same Miss Lewis on 4 June 1841 (*Letters* I, 95).

Spencer. However, this lack of understanding the true Christian doctrine, which was already her case when she was young, did not prevent her from being subconsciously closer to Christianity than many openly Christian authors. She truly believed in goodness, and sincerely loved humanity. Her novels are indeed among the most ethical and religious ones found in any literature. I say subconsciously Christian, as the religious unconscious is a phenomenon Saint Paul clearly refers to, as he affirms: "For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse" (Romans 1:20). So Christ is always present in George Eliot's works. As a humanist, believing in God, close to the Protestant liberal theology, George Eliot continued her spiritual quest by translating important works by D. F. Strauss (*The Life of Jesus*), Spinoza (*The Theological-political Treatise* and *Ethics*), and L. Feuerbach (*The Essence of Christianity*). She also wrote a number of essays for *The Westminster Review*, some of which concern religion from a positive viewpoint, before she became a novelist with the *Scenes of Clerical Life* in 1857. We must not forget her poetry either, as she started writing poems when she was a teenager, and remained active in this art basically all her life. We see that not only in her novels and novellas, but also in her poems, religion *is* a fundamental theme and a positive phenomenon.

CHAPTER I

NOSTALGIA IN "THE SAD FORTUNES OF THE REV. AMOS BARTON"

Jean Starobinski has clearly distinguished between the emotion of nostalgia and the word itself, coined by the physician Johannes Hofer whose dissertation for his doctorate in medicine at the University of Basel, in 1688, was entitled, *Dissertatio medica de nostalgia*.[1] So the term "nostalgia" initially refers to a mental disease. In this sense, the following remark by Kant is also interesting to note:

> "The homesickness of the Swiss (and, as I have it from the lips of an experienced general, also of the Westphalians and the Pomeranians from certain areas), which befalls them when they are transferred to other lands, is the result of a longing that is aroused by the recollection of a carefree and neighborly company in their youth, a longing for the places where they enjoyed the very simple pleasures of life. Later when they visit these places, they find their anticipation dampened and even their homesickness cured. They think that everything has drastically changed, but it is that they cannot bring back their youth."[2]

To Kant, too, "homesickness" is a pathological phenomenon. Starobinski also points out that "By the end of the eighteenth century, throughout all the countries of Europe, all doctors recognized nostalgia as a frequently fatal disease" (Starobinski 95). He adds that the clinical approach to nostalgia has preoccupied physicians and psychiatrists till the twentieth century. A famous example is that of Karl Jaspers's 1909 medical dissertation titled, *Heimweh und Verbrechen* (Starobinski 101). The critic, however, admits that nostalgia is not viewed in this way anymore, and that:

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[1] Jean Starobinski. "The Idea of Nostalgia," translated by W. S. Kemp, *Diogenes*, Summer 1966, 54, 81-103.

[2] Immanuel Kant. *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*. Translated by Victor Lyle Dowdell. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1978, 69.

> "In psychiatry, several concepts have taken the place of nostalgia. They correspond, on the one hand, to a determined effort to analyze the behavior of nostalgic people. On the other hand, they have radically modified the very idea of the disease. The emphasis has changed. We no longer speak of disease but of reaction; we no longer underline the desire to return but, on the contrary, the failure of adaptation" (Starobinski 101).

A number of important studies have appeared on the notion of nostalgia,[3] but, basically, the idea of "maladaptation", mentioned by Starobinski, might in part apply to G. Eliot. Indeed, if it is hard to find explicit nostalgic feelings concerning her childhood in her journals and letters, there are certainly allusions to her difficulty to adapt in the big city of London. In any case, as the Geneva critic concludes,

> "Nostalgia no longer designates the loss of one's native land, but the return toward the stages in which desire did not have to take account of external obstacles and was not condemned to defer its realization. In the case of civilized man, who is no longer rooted in a particular place, it is not the uprooting which causes trouble; it is rather the conflict between the exigencies of integration into adult world and the temptation to conserve the unique status of the child. The literature of exile, more abundant than ever, is, for the most part, a literature concerned with the loss of childhood." (Starobinski 103)

In her Diary, on Tuesday September 22, 1856, George Eliot notes: "Began to write 'The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton', which I hope to make one of a Series called 'Scenes of Clerical Life'."[4] On

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[3] See in particular, Vladimir Jankélévitch's *L'Irréversible et la nostalgie*. Paris: Flammarion, 1974; James G. Hart's "Toward a Phenomenology of Nostalgia," in *Man and the World: An International Philosophical Review* 6, 4, 1973, 397-420; Frederic Jameson's "Nostalgia for the Present," in *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 88, 2, 1989, 517-537; John D. Lyons's "The Ancients' Ironic Nostalgia," in *Paragraph: A Journal of Modern Critical Theory*, 29 (1): 94-107, 2006; and Linda Hutcheon's "Irony, Nostalgia, and the Postmodern," in *Methods for the Study of Literature as Cultural Memory*, edited by Raymond Vervliet and Annemarie Estor. Proceedings of the XVth Congress of the International Comparative Literature Association. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000, 189-207. See also Tamara S. Wagner's *Longing. Narratives of Nostalgia in the British Novel*, 1740-1890. Lewisburg: Bucknell Univ. Press, 2004, and Janelle L. Wilson's, *Nostalgia. Sanctuary of Meaning*. Lewisburg: Bucknell Univ. Press, 2005.

[4] *The Journals of George Eliot*. Edited by Margaret Harris and Judith Johnston. Cambridge: CUP, 1998, 63. It was written on the 23rd, according to the editors, as well as to Thomas A. Noble (see his edition of *Scenes of Clerical Life*. Oxford:

Wednesday November 5, she records the following short entry: "Finished my first story—'The Sad Fortunes of Amos Barton'" (*Journals* 64). It was published in two parts, respectively in the January and February 1857 issues of *Blackwoods' Edinburgh Magazine*. In her journals and letters in the months preceding the writing of "Amos Barton", it would be hard to find anything showing nostalgia for her childhood, but it is striking to note that Shepperton Church, at the beginning of her first narrative, is basically the same church as the one in Chilvers Cotton, south of Nuneaton in Warwickshire, where she was baptized in 1819, and that the story takes place at a time when she was a child.[5] On the other hand, we learn that she had been dreaming about fiction writing for a long time. Indeed, in her essay, "How I came to write fiction," dated December 6, 1857 (*Journals* 290), she states that "It had always been a vague dream of mine that some time or other I might write a novel, and my shadowy conception of what the novel was to be, varied, of course, from one epoch of my life to another" (*Journals* 289). Then she explains what was on her mind, in other words what images obsessed her: if she wrote something, it did not go beyond "an introductory chapter describing a Staffordshire village and the life of the neighbouring farm houses" (*Journals* 289). She knew obviously Staffordshire as well as Warwickshire, and so her description could be quite realistic. But why starting a novel by a familiar childhood scene? This fact is significant. Furthermore, the strong desire of writing a West Midlands' story became more acute as she was far from home, that is during her stay in Germany in 1854-55: "My 'introductory chapter' was pure description though there were good materials in it for dramatic presentation. It happened to be among the papers I had with me in Germany and one evening at Berlin, something led me to read it to George" (*Journals* 289). That may have been a story different from that of "Amos Barton", but that is not the issue. The fact is that later on, back in England, "one morning as I was lying in bed, thinking what should be the subject of my first story, my thoughts merged themselves into a dreamy doze, and I imagined myself writing a story of which the title was—'The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton'" (*Journals* 289). She begins then writing her story with a description of a familiar childhood scene. It happens to be a church, a building very similar to the one she had attended

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Clarendon Press, 1985, xv). G. Eliot, however, states in her essay, "How I came to write fiction," on December 6, 1857, that it was on September 22, 1856, that she began writing "Amos Barton" (*Journals* 290).

[5] The story starts thus: "Shepperton Church was a very different-looking building five-and-twenty years ago" (7). That is in 1831, when G. Eliot was about 12 years old.

as a child. It is hard for me to prove that there is nostalgia in the choice of the setting, and as I said before, I cannot easily find nostalgia for childhood in G. Eliot's Journals and Letters in general, but the idea of "maladaptation" in London, or the feeling of exile, is found in them. Besides, this is one type of nostalgia, and hers is much more complex than that. Furthermore, I would like to relate it to religion and the phenomenon of the religious unconscious. At all events, I agree with the novelist herself, who affirms that "The best history of a writer is contained in his writings—these are his chief actions."[6] Therefore let us focus on her first artistic creation and on what she implicitly conveys through her narrator to the reader.

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Thus George Eliot's first story begins with the reminiscences of a religious building, Shepperton Church, which was the narrator's family church in his childhood. He is now back, contemplating this provincial little church and comparing it with the way it was twenty-five years ago. He sees it with mixed feelings: although the stone tower and the clock have not changed and still look "friendly," other things unfortunately have. The sense of humor, however, expressed throughout this description, reveals that these changes should not be considered tragic. Here is an example of the humor: "and the walls, you are convinced, no lichen will ever again effect a settlement on—they are smooth and innutrient as the summit of the Rev. Amos Barton's head, after ten years of baldness and supererogatory soap" (7). This is the tone the narrator uses to tell about the building, but also about Amos Barton himself, the story's protagonist.

The fact that the church is much better maintained today is not so important from the standpoint of the ironic narrator. Yes, now "the outer doors are resplendent with oak-graining, the inner doors reverentially noiseless with a garment of red baize" (7). There is no lichen on the walls, as we were told before, but the narrator mocks the so-called "well-regulated mind," which sees in these superficial changes a sign of "human advancement." He certainly prefers "that dear, old, brown, crumbling, *picturesque* inefficiency"[7] to the new "spick-and-span new-painted, new-varnished efficiency" (7). The present building is not as "picturesque" as the old one was; and, the narrator adds, ironically of course, "Mine, I fear, is not a well-regulated mind: it has an occasional tenderness for old

[6] *The George Eliot Letters*. Vol. 7. Edited by Gordon S. Haight. New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1956, 230.
[7] I underline in the quotes.

abuses" (7). Not only the building, but also the people, in his view, had more charm in the past. So he remembers "with a fond sadness Shepperton Church as it was in the old days, with its outer coat of rough stucco, its red-tiled roof, its heterogeneous windows patched with desultory bits of painted glass" (7-8), but also the "nasal clerks and top-booted parsons" (7), as well as "the departed shades of vulgar errors" (7). Most probably, these villagers, including their preachers, were rather "vulgar" and uncouth folks, and Shepperton Church was not a very pretty building either. Moreover the term "abuse," although said with some irony, reveals a society far from being perfect. On the other hand, it is the present generation who probably calls "abuses" habits and manners which seemed natural in the past. But the society has not become more ethical for all that. Besides, there was a certain charm in the way things were in those days in spite of people's "errors" and ignorance. In any case, there is irony in the terms "improvement" and "advancement" in the following sentence: "Immense improvement! says the well-regulated mind, which unintermittingly rejoices in the New Police, the Tithe Commutation Act, the penny-post, and all guarantees of human advancement" (7).Two notions must be clarified: "picturesque" and "advancement." The former is certainly positive, though vague, including ingenuity, simplicity, and goodness. As for the latter, the general conception of it is questionable. What, indeed, does "improvement" mean? What is "advancement"? Has the society really progressed? The narrator shows no optimism, because on the one hand he is nostalgic and, on the other, ironic towards the present.

The appearance of the church today is better, according to the general opinion, "but alas! no picture" (7), adds the narrator whose aesthetic taste is decidedly different from that of the "majority." Now let us look more closely into this passage about the interior of the church:

> "Then inside, what dear old quaintnesses! which I began to look at with delight, even when I was so crude a member of the congregation, that my nurse found it necessary to provide for the reinforcement of my devotional patience by smuggling bread-and-butter into the sacred edifice. There was the chancel, guarded by two little cherubim looking uncomfortably squeezed between arch and wall, and adorned with the escutcheons of the Oldinport family, which showed me inexhaustible possibilities of meaning in their blood-red hands, their death's-heads and cross-bones, their leopards' paws, and Maltese crosses...." (8)

The narrator remembers, mostly with emotion, more than the things themselves the pleasure felt by a happy child enjoying all these things, as well as the forbidden "bread-and-butter" his nurse would bring him to

church in order to keep him quiet in the "sacred edifice"—"for the reinforcement of my devotional patience," he explains humorously. He imagines the child's feelings, and tries to look around the place through the latter's bewildered and fascinated eyes. For instance, he remembers very well how impressed he was by "the escutcheons of the Oldinport family," so mysterious to him! The point is that he really felt happy in this church—he looked at things "with delight," he enjoyed the snack, and obviously loved being with his family too.

We can distinguish in these first pages two different visions: the narrator's as a child through his present memories, and the one he has today. The basic difference is that the child was enthusiastic, trustful, and had faith, whereas the adult seems disillusioned and somehow nostalgic. What does he miss exactly, since the old days were not so wonderful either—they *seem* good to the child, or at least through the memories he has of those days—for the Shepperton society was not more spiritual than it is today. And people were even rather crude, too conservative, and prejudiced. Remember for instance the remark on the innovation of the hymn-books. As for the pastor, Mr. Gilfil, he was not a very profound or learned preacher, though he was "an excellent" man. He is being described in this concise and humorous/ironical way: he "smoked very long pipes and preached very short sermons" (9). Certainly Shepperton has become a little more sophisticated. Appearances are considered more important today than they were in the past. Everything *looks* better, but is *not*, morally speaking. Moreover, the Church could symbolize the whole provincial society of the day: it is a more polished place than it was in the past, but not more spiritual.[8] Many nostalgic people truly exaggerate the beauty of the past, but that is not the case of our narrator here. He wants to be realistic. So our question is: what does he miss, besides the personal happiness related to his childhood, which makes him nostalgic?

Although the narrator should be distinguished from the author,[9] it is hard not to think of the numerous similarities between the latter's life and her story. Indeed, as Frederick Karl points out, " 'Amos Barton' burrows deeply into Marian's past; and her use of materials in and around Barton

[8] Alain Barrat writes that, "For all her nostalgia and admiration for a past way of life, George Eliot seems to be aware of the imperfections of traditional provincial England" ("Nostalgia and Reform in *Scenes of Clerical Life*," *Cahiers Victoriens et Edouardiens* 41, 1995, 48).

[9] T. J. Winnifrith is correct to say that "by refusing to equate Eliot's fiction with her life we pay tribute to her genius as a novelist" ("Subtle Shadowy Suggestions: Fact and Fiction in *Scenes of Clerical Life*," *George Eliot-George Henry Lewes Studies*, 1993, 24-25, 2, 65).

(...) reveals how close her own religious background still was to her."[10] According to this critic, G. Eliot misses the stability of the old days: "we catch her desire," he writes, "to maintain a stable, highly structured society which replicates what she experienced twenty and thirty years before" (Karl 226). This is true. Yet, the complex religious sentiment associated with her nostalgia has not been sufficiently examined by critics so far. What I would like to put forward in the present essay is that G. Eliot, in her first work of fiction, does not miss as such the religion she had in her youth, or the one her father had, or that of her Methodist aunt, but she does miss the happiness whose secret was a sincere faith in a transcendence she had when she was young. She misses the simplicity and the trustful faith she had as a child, and she is conscious of this blessing bestowed on children alone. She may be thinking of Jesus' words, "who ever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it" (Mark 10: 15). She does not want to become like that child again, obviously, for she now is more or less a rationalist, a mature thinker, and apparently satisfied with her new understanding of religion. She still deeply respects the Christian ethic, though, like Feuerbach does, but she does not believe in conversion. Subconsciously, however, through her fiction, there seems to be a "religious" quest.

To return to our text, after a detailed description of church music in those good days at Shepperton, remembering in particular "a carpenter understood to have an amazing power of singing 'counter'" (8)—this carpenter reminding us of Adam Bede as well as the author's father—, there is a cancelled passage in the manuscript, which must be cited:

> "Oh that happy time of *childish veneration*! It is the fashion to regret the days of easy merriment, but we forget the early *bliss of easy reverence*, when the world seemed to us to be peopled with the great and wise, when the old weather-prognosticating gardener was our Socrates, and our spirits quailed before the clergyman without needing to be convinced of the *Apostolic Succession*. Words cannot convey the awe I felt for every member of the Shepperton choir. The bassoon player was a public character whom no effort of my imagination could follow into the penetralia of private life, and when he and his compeers came round at Christmas for their yearly money and beer, I clung to my mother's apron, and felt a sort of *polytheistic awe*, as if I had thought that these psalmodizing tosspots might be *Olympian deities* in disguise. Another functionary whom I endowed with inimitable science was the school

[10] Frederick Karl. *George Eliot, Voice of a Century. A Biography*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1995, 226.

> master, who stood and sat in official prominence at the front corner of the Free School gallery. Alas! If the truth must be known he was an old soldier, of aberrant orthography and disordered liver, whose pedagogic functions brought on a premature death from *delirium tremens*. But he carried himself military-wise, and looked round with an imposing air of authority; and when he cuffed reprovingly the head of some too communicative schoolboy, I dreaded the implicit censure he might be passing on my own devotional bearing. ” (n. 8, 9)

The essence is expressed in the first sentence: the narrator is nostalgic for the specific childish idealization of the world, “that happy time of childish veneration.” Yet a close examination of the reality reveals something disappointing: “Alas! If the truth must be known” is a sad exclamation, indeed. The problem of “realism” is posed, as to whether it is worth knowing the truth. Even the meaning of truth is somewhat questioned. And this is an ethical issue. The schoolmaster, for instance, was not a very educated person, and thereby could not possibly be an efficient teacher—he was “of aberrant orthography.” Nevertheless, in the child’s mind, he was a scholar (“whom I endowed with inimitable science”). Besides, he did not treat the children well—he punished them physically. Although this was not an uncommon practice in those days, the narrator does not seem to approve of that, because he uses this example in a critical context—telling about the weaknesses of the schoolmaster. But from the child’s standpoint, he still was a great man. The child did not criticize the cuffing of the “too communicative schoolboy,” but “dreaded the implicit censure he might be passing on my own devotional bearing.” We are sorry to learn that the teacher had serious health problems and died prematurely. Obviously he was an alcoholic, but the poor man had to teach for a living, even though this was not his real job—he had been a soldier before. On the other hand, dealing with children required a lot of patience, which he was probably lacking. Moreover, likely due to his work (his “pedagogic functions”), he had to abstain from alcohol, which “brought on a premature death from *delirium tremens*.” So, what is positive about the illusory world of children is its charitable spirit. Surely the realistic narrator feels sorry for this man who died so sadly and relatively young, and wishes that the reader would share his compassion. But, at the same time, he reveals how much more generous he was when he was a child, because he did not have a feeling of pity in those days, but that of esteem and respect towards the teacher. The implicit question, the narrator is asking, is the following: ethically speaking, was it not better for others, especially for the children studying under that teacher, to have had a positive image of him, even though he had not done anything remarkable?

For, does not everyone deserve being loved, regardless of one's qualities? The child had naturally a great deal of respect for his teacher, and although the esteem was exaggerated, it was better than the adult's critical and supposedly realistic evaluation. The wonderful generosity, characteristic of the child, is usually lost in the adult. The schoolmaster's example is certainly a tragic one, but the same can be said about other people too, such as the honest gardener, who appeared to the children as a philosopher, "our Socrates." Another example is the bassoon player, "a public character whom no effort of my imagination could follow into the penetralia of private life." Indeed, he did not know anything about this man. But the grown-up narrator did not know much more about him either—except for the fact that the man was just an ordinary musician, rather needy, and a drinker. But as far as the depth of his soul was concerned, the "penetralia of [his] private life," what did he know? Nevertheless, unlike the positive child, who looked at the musician with "awe" and admiration, the adult is prompt in judging him with severity. This generous attitude also allows the child to hold in high esteem the pastor: "our spirits quailed before the clergyman," as if he were God in person. This is precisely the way Rev. Gilfil was regarded, not only by that child, but also by many naive and good people in the Shepperton congregation.

Besides the ethical question associated with realism and truth, which makes the narrator nostalgic for the positive spirit he has lost, the question of religion and faith is, in an interesting way, also raised in this cancelled passage. The latter begins with the expression "childish veneration," and ends with that of "devotional bearing." I underline in the quote other religious phrases: "bliss of easy reverence," "Apostolic Succession," "polytheistic awe," and "Olympian deities." There is a religious sentiment that is lost, which made life so happy to the narrator in his tender years. But what did this religion consist in? The child's religion, according to this paragraph, is quite simple. At this age, no particular doctrine is understood or needed. Thus allusions are made to Catholicism ("Apostolic Succession"), to Polytheism ("Polytheistic awe," "Olympian deities"), as well as to Anglicanism, which is the Shepperton church's denomination. But does the narrator truly care about doctrinal distinctions? No. What matters *a priori* is not theology, but one's attitude towards life and society. This ethical vision may be compared to that of Feuerbach, but also to that of Schleiermacher, who remained a sincere Christian. What seems wonderful to the narrator in the child is the "childish veneration." To the rationalist or "realistic" reader, it is hard to explain this sublimating spirit ("Words cannot convey the awe..."). Veneration is "a feeling of deep respect and reverence directed towards some person or thing," and to

venerate is "to look upon something exalted, hallowed, or sacred" (Oxford English Dictionary). Being religious is nothing else: it is precisely having this feeling of the "sacred." Religion is associated with the concepts of "obedience, reverence, and worship" (OED). Now, the narrator's mind was in his childhood filled with this religiousness, and though this was different from the adult's understanding of religion, it still appears definitely positive to the narrator. All religions may seem good to him, having in common the "bliss of easy reverence." The bliss, this "perfect joy of heaven" (OED), comes from faith, or, as the atheist would say, illusion. But without this "illusion," life is unbearable to many people.

The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton begins with the name of a place, Shepperton Church, which is quite similar to the church in Chilvers Cotton. This is a significant fact. Why choosing a church, and that particular one? Maryan (or rather Mary Anne) was raised in a family of sincere Anglicans, but her religious mind was mostly influenced by Maria Lewis, her teacher, and later on by her other teachers in Coventry, Mary and Rebecca Franklin. She remembers quite well those days, her happy childhood and adolescence. In London, where she has been living for a long time now (in 1856), her life is so different, and not always easy. She does not miss the religion itself, and does not idealize the past, but she is certain of one thing: she had a happy childhood in a small provincial town, and this happiness was somehow related to religion, a non-intellectual one, but a religion based on a strong and simple faith. In the passage she decided to cancel, she was revealing a little more of this feeling. Perhaps she suppressed this passage for formal reasons, but it is also possible that she did not want to insist too much on her vague religious nostalgia. Maybe she felt the same thing as Faust did, when he said,

> "Was ich besitze, seh ich wie im Weiten,
> Und was verschwand, wird mir zu Wirklichkeiten."[11]

[11] "What I possess, seems far away to me,/And what is gone becomes reality" (Goethe. *Faust*. Edited and translated by W. Kaufman. New York: Anchor Books, 1990, 31-32).

CHAPTER II

HOPE IN "THE SAD FORTUNES OF THE REV. AMOS BARTON"

"Hope", from Old English *hopa*, is the "expectation of something desired" or "desire combined with expectation."[1] It is also the "feeling of trust or confidence" (*OED*, "Hope", 2). I believe that this feeling of hope, as a positive notion, exists in every "normal" individual, from the child to the elderly. In art and philosophy, though, it is not always the case; but we must distinguish between a Ionesco/author and a Ionesco/man. If he had been in his life as pessimistic as he had shown himself through his art, he would not have even produced those plays…. As Ernst Bloch rightly points out at the beginning of *The Principle of Hope*, "From early on we are searching. All we do is crave, cry out. Do not have what we want. But we also learn to wait (…). We even wait for wishing itself…."[2] This is true about almost everyone, at any age! Now, of course, this hope fluctuates. Moreover, it is not equally shared by people.

In George Eliot's works, even in the most tragic ones, I can see much hope in the positive sense. Besides, it is intrinsic to her Meliorism, "The doctrine that the world, or society, may be improved and suffering alleviated through rightly directed human effort" (*OED*). Interestingly enough, it seems that she herself coined this word. In her letter to James Sully, on January 19, 1877, she thus states: "I don't know that I ever heard anybody use the word 'meliorist' except myself. But I begin to think that there is no good invention or discovery that has not been made by more than one person."[3] And we also read the following in Sully's *Pessimism*, published that same year of 1877:

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[1] *Oxford English Dictionary* ("Hope", 1 a). Oxford, UK: OUP, 2013.

[2] Ernst Bloch. *The Principle of Hope*. Vol. 1. Translated by Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice, and Paul Knight. Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell, 1986, 21 (from *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1959).

[3] *The George Eliot Letters.*Vol. VI. Edited by Gordon S. Haight. New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1955, 333. Actually, the earliest use of the word "meliorist" in the *OED* is from a text dating back to 1846, which means that it was not invented by

> "Our line of reasoning provides us, then, with a practical conception which lies midway between the extremes of optimism and pessimism, and which, to use a term for which I am indebted to our first living woman-writer and thinker, George Eliot, may be appropriately styled Meliorism. By this I would understand the faith which affirms not merely our power of lessening evil—this nobody questions—but also our ability to increase the amount of positive good."[4]

Later, the term "Meliorism" will also be used by William James who, in criticizing determinism and propounding "free-will", considers the latter a "*melioristic* doctrine."[5] He further declares that, "Design, free-will, the absolute mind, spirit instead of matter have for their sole meaning a better promise as to this world's outcome. Be they false or be they true, the meaning of them is this meliorism" (James 63).

However, I am not mentioning here Meliorism with regard to the future of the world, or optimism in history, but as to its association with hope in general. An *individual* Meliorism is what I am hinting at, or the will to improve oneself and the belief in its possibility, or hoping for one's better condition. I observe this hope throughout G. Eliot's works, including in all three narratives which make up the *Scenes of Clerical Life*. A few examples will be helpful in this introduction. In the second novella, "Mr Gilfil's Love-Story," the beginning is no doubt sad with the description of the protagonist's death. But this was happening *thirty* years ago; so we feel less sad already. Then we are led still farther back in time, when Mr Gilfil was a young man. Here, in Chapter II, starts the main plot. It recounts the young pastor's romantic love with a Tina…, but the story ends mournfully, since at the conclusion, just after "Mr Gilfil tasted a few months of perfect happiness,"[6] his beloved wife, who was ill, died: "Tina died, and Maynard Gilfil's love went with her into deep silence for evermore" (*Scenes…* 165). Sorrow at the beginning, sorrow at the end. Nonetheless, hope and Meliorism are also shown in Rev. Gilfil's life, for despite his terrible loss, which caused him to remain single, he lived peacefully and rather cheerfully, and also made others happy. How could he do that? Love was *within* him, and not only for Tina, whom he loved

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G. Eliot. For "Meliorism," however, the first example in the dictionary is precisely from the novelist's famous letter to James Sully.

[4] James Sully. *Pessimism. A History and a Criticism*. London: Henry S. King & Co, 1877, 399.

[5] William James. *Pragmatism*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1975, 61. The author's emphasis.

[6] George Eliot. "Mr Gilfil's Love-Story," in *Scenes of Clerical Life*. Ed. Thomas A. Noble. Oxford, UK: OUP, 2000, 165 [Oxford World's Classics].