The Chains of Semiosis: Semiotics, Marxism, and the Female Stereotypes in *The Mill on the Floss*

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V. N. Voloshinov's theory of language is an important root of contemporary Soviet semiotics.¹ There are significant parallels between Voloshinov's semiotic theory and that of Charles S. Peirce. Both have important implications for the theory of literature, and provide a convenient starting point for an approach which integrates the insights of semiotics, Marxism, and contemporary critical currents such as feminist theory.

What is most characteristic of Voloshinov's semiotics is his insistence on the materiality of signs and ideological products: for him, "Every ideological sign is not only a reflection, a shadow, of reality, but is also itself a material segment of that very reality" (Voloshinov 11). There is no representation of reality from the outside: every representation has a definite place within reality. The same can be argued for representations of ideology: all ideological constructs translate into other ideological constructs. "And nowhere is there a break in the chain, nowhere does the chain plunge into inner being, nonmaterial in nature and unembodied in signs" (Voloshinov 11). Voloshinov's equation of ideol-

¹ The authorship of Voloshinov's works is a debated question. Voloshinov's theoretical views are roughly those of a circle of Soviet semioticians in the late 1920s and early 30s, which owes much to the central figure of Mikhail Bakhtin. For a discussion, see the first section of van Schendel, and the translators' preface to the 1986 edition of *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*. Be that as it may, his name remains a convenient label for the doctrine we discuss.

ogy with semiotic activity is a significant development of the orthodox Marxist opposition between base and superstructure, as well as a departure from it.² But it is not without its problems. And indeed Voloshinov does not draw the implications of this conflation of ideology and semiotics. Voloshinov's initial discussion of ideology attempts to preserve a difference between natural phenomena, means of production, consumer goods and ideological products (10). The notion of the ideological chain, however, is not easy to reconcile with such a difference. If it holds good, neither natural phenomena nor means or production nor consumer goods are accessible as other than ideological products. They can be argued to exist metalinguistically in Voloshinov's theory, but they do not stand on the same level of immediacy to knowledge as his ideological products. Voloshinov criticizes idealists for assuming that the chain at some moment plunges into inner being, while he mirrors their mistake at the other end of the chain, positing some unproblematic external beings which apparently are not ideological constructs. But his own definition of the ideological chain contradicts that earlier claim: a sign always translates into another sign, not into a non-semiotic object (11). Even the most unsemiotic object, for example, an eggplant, is a sign . . . of itself. And of what it is not. It may also acquire any number of more specific meanings in a given semantic or pragmatic field. Of course, there are signs and signs, but further analysis must start from the recognition of their fundamentally common nature. Voloshinov's assumptions have implications analogous to those of the Peircean and the Nietzschean semiotic theories.³

Anyway, there is little doubt that *a theory* does count as an ideological construct for Voloshinov. Science is ideology (14). For many Marxists this claim would rank him among the idealists, insofar as it bears on Marxist theory itself. But "ideology" no longer means the same for Voloshinov as it did for Marx. It does

² Wladimir Krysin (28) sees this move as a concession to the official Soviet doctrine of the time. But I do not see how Voloshinov's panideologism could be better suited for propaganda than the classical, restricted Marxist account of ideology. See also Reilly and Saiz for a negative estimate of Voloshinov's work on precisely this account—and a needlessly bleak reading of Voloshinov's conception of ideology.

³ On the relationship of Nietzsche's "will to power" to epistemology and semiotics, see *The Will to Power*, esp. 556, 560, 561.

not suggest an illusory or mendacious construct to which scientific truth can be opposed. With the suppression of one term of the polarity, the other is radically transformed. It can no longer be used as a missile against bourgeois thought. We may of course wish to say that the "naive" concept of objective truth is not really essential to Marxism. But if this theory is to be Marxist at all it will have to develop an alternative way of evaluating social superstructures and the relationship of class interest to objectivity. Objectivity can no longer be judged from the outside, or as an adequation of the concept to the thing. The assertion that all knowledge is a material segment of the reality it describes can be taken in two senses, a weak one (the signifier must ultimately rest on some material base) and a strong one (ideological products are a part of the reality they describe). This would include Voloshinov's own work, since Voloshinov sees literary or philosophical works as ideological products. Maybe this would make Voloshinov feel uncomfortable. Still, this assertion lays a common foundation for a theory of *ideology-making understood as praxis* and a theory of *reflexivity*. Both lines of development have implications for the workings of theory as well as for those of literature, but here I am more interested in the latter. We will see later on how theoretical praxis and reflexivity converge in a critical moment of *The Mill on the Floss*.

It is necessary, nevertheless, to distinguish the two senses of the word "ideology." I tend to look skeptically on both absolute objectivism and absolute relativism. A satisfactory theory of knowledge should aim at a historical and dynamic objectivism. Newton's theory of gravitation may serve as an example of what I mean. It does not correspond to (our) factual truth; so it emerges for us as an ideological construct. However, we do not consider it unscientific in the way that Milton's cosmology in the same century is considered to be unscientific.⁴ Its historical role as a scientific theory remains. In the same way, we may believe that our present representation of reality is another ideological construct which in time will be found to be inadequate, but we have to use it as a fulcrum to criticize those representations of

⁴ I am referring to the mathematical side of Newton's physics, which became a standard for scientific method, and not to the metaphysical derivations which Newton indulged in.

reality whose inadequacy is evident to us. We may embrace skepticism as abstract subjects, but in practical action, or rather, as historical subjects, we accept criteria for evidence. Maybe the logical consequence of the classical Marxist analysis of ideologies is to dismiss the problem of objectivity as a pseudo-problem, an argument necessary in order to further certain ends. In that case, theory would be mere propaganda. It seems clear that Marx did not support this view, and while that need not prevent us from embracing it, it may make us think twice about its implications. In the end, I think, any intellectual or political praxis will require that we embrace a view of history moving in a (desirable) particular sense, and develop—on the basis of evidence, not of bad faith!—a restricted (usable) concept of ideology and false consciousness to describe the forces which oppose that particular sense. Embracing a view of history, as I have put it, is not a matter of choice; our situation will provide us with a worldview and criteria for evidence. This definition of objectivity is circular, but so are all non-absolutist definitions. At least it explains the sense of direction that specific projects always have.⁵

For a Marxist, this definition of ideology would involve a recognition that Marxism is an ideological construct in the broader (Voloshinov's) sense, but not in the narrower sense. Voloshinov's theory may appear ultimately to be non-Marxist in that it only defines the broader sense of ideology, and therefore has no way to consider itself as being outside of ideology. Kryszinski observes that the essential Marxist notion of false ideology is ignored or done away with in this theory (26–27). Voloshinov's man is an ideological animal, which means that man sees reality through the glasses of ideology. Now, does this wide concept of ideology lead us towards solipsism? From Voloshinov's account it is clear that in any case it would be a kind of (oxymoronic) collective solipsism, since the notion of the individual presupposes the sociality of language. We are all in. Some people may feel nostalgic about the "reality" out there, but I think that the significant alternative is not one of epistemological realism, belief in things-in-themselves, versus idealism. It is one of objectivism versus

⁵ Although of course there is no hope of ever returning to an unproblematic concept of reality as opposed to ideology, and the two conceptions refer endlessly to each other: "we cannot just speak of the world as what a true theory refers to, but only as what another theory says that the initial theory is talking about" (Altshuler 48).

subjectivism, which is not quite the same thing. In spite of its idealist assumptions (clothed in an abundance of "material" adjectives), Voloshinov's theory is not subjectivist. It denies the possibility of any simple givability of the world "out there," but this does not paralyze its thrust against historically limited theories and attitudes.

Voloshinov's conception of ideology and Charles S. Peirce's theory of semiosis may be usefully compared. For Peirce, too, the chain of semiosis is an unbroken one. In Peirce's theory a sign is "a First which stands in such a genuine triadic relation to a Second, called its *Object*, as to be capable of determining a Third, called its *Interpretant*."⁶ But the moment we direct our attention to the interpretant, we find that it becomes a sign, which needs a further interpretant for its determination (Peirce 1:541). The meaning of a sign is the translation of the sign into another system of signs (Peirce 4:127). It is significant that Peirce criticizes the Cartesian notion of the ego's accessibility to immediate intuition much as Voloshinov declares that individual consciousness is a fiction. Before Voloshinov, Peirce had pointed out that there can be no cognitive functions outside the use of signs.⁷

That the semiotic chain is endless does not mean that it is cut off from the world. Instead, it means that the world is a semiotic construct:

Every sign stands for an object independent of itself; but it can only be a sign of that object in so far as that object is itself of the nature of a sign or thought. For the sign does not affect the object but is affected by it; so that the object must be able to convey thought, that is, must be of the nature of thought or of a sign. Every thought is a sign. (Peirce 1:538)

That is why Peirce can have his cake and eat it, or preserve a concept of truth while he denies that any sign translates finally into a piece of non-semiotic world.⁸ Peirce admits that there is a

⁶ Peirce 2:274. For another perspective on Peirce's relevance to a feminist theory of stereotype, see Ayins.

⁷ This metaphysical break with Descartes (or with Kant, who maintains the notion of "thing in itself" as a regulative principle) is found in various ways in Berkeley, Hume, Fichte, Nietzsche, Husserl, or Quine. The epistemological consequences are still being drawn today by structuralism and poststructuralism. For Peirce's critique of Descartes, see Michaels.

⁸ For Peirce truth is not a correspondence between the world and its representation,

final interpretant for the sign. However, this final interpretant connects semiosis not to a *ding an sich*, but to human action. And the object Peirce refers to is not outside semiosis; it is also a semiotic construct. It is not the object "itself," but an "Immediate Object," that is, the "Dynamic Object" (the object-as-independent-of-the-sign which is the cause of the representation) *as it is represented by the sign*, on the ground that only some traits of the Dynamic Object are declared to be relevant for the particular use we have in mind. That is, the "ground" is a component part of meaning. Immediate objects do not exist outside the scope of human action—and this is not a contradiction but a tautology.

Peirce's conception of the ground of meaning has its equivalent in Voloshinov's theory; it is what Voloshinov calls the implementation of the sign on the part of the receiver. It is Voloshinov's major objection against structuralist approaches that they do not account for an essential phase in linguistic communication: they only explain that an utterance is recognized to be conformed to a linguistic system of identities, they do not provide us with a way of understanding the novelty of the utterance with respect to the system: "*what is important . . . about a linguistic form is not that it is a stable and always self-equivalent signal, but that it is an always changeable and adaptable sign*" (Voloshinov 68). That is, understanding does not equal the mere recognition of the form, because already the form is one that does not belong to a single abstract system such as described by objectivist theories; it is caught in a net of multiple and changeable systems, and its co-text, context, and the contribution of the receiver will activate in a specific way its potential infinity of meaning. A lion, for instance, is not just a big African cat; it is also a symbol of might, of monarchy, of natural forces, of endangered species, of cruelty, of nobility of mind, of the Metro Goldwyn Mayer Productions. A specific discourse situation may work on these or other potential meanings to bring further echoes to the sign. Any use of the word in communication requires an ideological implementation, one that will define its meaning as it is used in this specific instance. "Any act of understanding is a

but "The opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate"; the real is not the real but "the object represented in this opinion" (5:407). At other times Peirce makes clear that we have to suppose an ideal scientific enquiry to define truth.

response, i.e., it translates what is being understood into a new context from which a response can be made" (Voloshinov 69). Or again, "Language, in the process of its practical implementation, is inseparable from its ideological or behavioral impletion" (Voloshinov 70).

In Umberto Eco's account of Peirce's conception,

"L'interpretante finale" esprime la stessa legge che governa l'Oggetto Dinamico sia prescrivendo il modo in cui ottenere l'esperienza percettiva che descrivendo il modo in cui esso funziona ed è percipibile. (Eco 43)

[The "final interpretant" expresses the same law that governs the Dynamic Object whether it be prescribing the method in which one obtains from it the perceived experience or describing the manner in which it functions and becomes perceptible.]⁹

The final interpretant, however, is not final in a chronological but in a logical, pragmatic sense. And it is not a fixed or determined one: it is a logical slot that must be filled in different ways as different objects are constituted for different purposes: the chain of semiosis remains endless (Eco 46). The contact between signs and actions is established by Peirce and Eco through habit, through the establishment of patterns of recognition which create "real world" identities:

Un segno, producendo serie di risposte immediate (Interpretante Energetico) stabilisce a poco a poco una *abitudine* [habit], una regolarità di comportamento nel proprio interprete . . . e l'Interpretante Finale di un segno è questa abitudine quale risultato. (Eco 43)

[A sign, bringing about a series of immediate responses (Energetic Interpretant), establishes a habit little by little, a pattern of behavior within the interpreter himself . . . and the Final Interpretant of a sign is this habit which results.]

What are the implications of this view for a theory of ideology? Basically it means that although all representations or theories are ideological constructs, some are more ideological than others

⁹ Editorial trans. of Eco by Dan Romani. According to van Schendel (132), Peirce's final interpretant is not of a logical but of an ideological nature. Under Voloshinov's concept of ideology, this is a tautology; elsewhere it does not seem to make much sense as a general rule.

with reference to the given moment of the development of knowledge and communication. They are less capable of making the most of the possibilities afforded by a culture at one given moment of history. They are less universally translatable, less economical or generally usable.

Peirce's scientism does not allow him to recognize the significance of social interaction in the shaping of the ideological chain. It is here that Voloshinov's theory bridges an important gap between linguistics and general semiotics. This ideological chain emerges in interaction between individuals; consciousness is social and not individual in nature. Voloshinov offers a compelling theory of how the "grounds" of meaning are systematically related to social difference and stratification.

According to Voloshinov, the error of both the "individual subjectivist" (Vosslerian) and "abstract objectivist" (Saussurean) theories of language lies in the fact that both assume the utterance to be a purely individual phenomenon, and ignore its social nature. A word is always used with an addressee in mind: "A word is territory shared by both addresser and addressee" (Voloshinov 86). But this common ownership need not be a peaceful partnership: indeed, the word may be subject to a tension between the different perspectives of the addresser and the addressee. Social stratification guarantees that multi-accentuality of language, and its dynamism:

Existence reflected in the sign is not merely reflected but *refracted*. How is this refraction of existence in the ideological sign determined? By an intersecting of differently oriented social interests within one and the same sign community, i.e., *by the class struggle*. (Voloshinov 23)

This is an important insight, only it is not carried sufficiently far. The different social interests and conflicts at play within the same sign community are not only the interests of class. There are many other significant relationships (*power* relationships) at work. Differences in gender, sexual preference, race, ethnic group, religion, age, authority, political creed, scientific or other beliefs shading into individual attitude—all these may be a source of the accent which implements the ideological sign. That is, Voloshinov's account of the social multi-accentuality of language as a dynamic factor in the evolution of language and the production of ideology is fundamentally right; only he under-

estimates the "multi" element in multi-accentuality.¹⁰ All these power relations are not at the same level, though, and to that extent Voloshinov is right in privileging the class struggle as a shaping factor: it is universally present and polarizes all individuals in all societies in a way that directs their whole lives.¹¹ However, gender may be argued to be at least equally important and constitutive; indeed, from a genetic perspective, it is likely that class differences originally derived from differences of age and sex, mediated through gender roles such as may be found in animal societies.

A theory of literature modelled upon this (modified) theory of language would have to take into account the role of literary production as action through speech, which works on ideology and transforms it. It would also have to recognize the specificity of literature as an ideological activity. There are some indications of this in Voloshinov's formulation.

The word is the basic ingredient of ideology, but it is itself ideologically neutral.¹² A consequence of this neutrality is that none of the fundamental, specific ideological signs is wholly replaceable by words for Voloshinov: his example is that a musical composition or a picture cannot be conveyed adequately through language.¹³ He does not mention literature, but it is included in the general statement. Voloshinov's position here is to some extent the equivalent of the Aristotelian and Formalist notion of the organic or structural unity of the work; it reminds

¹⁰ The reverse might be argued: Voloshinov might be said to have redefined the concept of "class" through his definition of the production of ideology. But this interpretation would confuse the issue still more (and would be more un-Marxist than Voloshinov is intending to be). It is more correct to assume that Voloshinov simply did not think that gender, age, etc. are as relevant as class.

¹¹ Actually, some of them are not originally power relations, although they all have effects which can be read in terms of the deployment of power.

¹² This is true only of the word as conceived in an abstract objectivist way (i.e., as an instance of Saussure's *langue*), not of the word in its actual use in speech (*parole*). There is a slight confusion here between the two senses of "ideological" Voloshinov is playing with. The word is not ideological in the sense that language is the medium presupposed by any kind of ideological activity (science, religion, etc.).

¹³ The contradiction follows immediately when Voloshinov asserts that "*Every ideological refraction of existence in process of generation, no matter what the nature of its significant material, is accompanied by ideological refraction in word as an obligatory concomitant phenomenon*" (15). Such phenomena as the evolution of pictorial styles, however, do not seem to be verbally determined, even if the verbalization of their significance may go along with them.

us of the New Critical "heresy of paraphrase" formulated by Cleanth Brooks, minus the religious metaphor. In semiotic terms: the structure of a semiotic whole amounts to more than a sum of its parts, because the relations between the parts are significant as well, and follow laws that constitute a specific ideological field of activity.¹⁴

A semiotic-ideological aesthetics will include a typology of material forms of expression in order to understand the way ideologies arise. This typology is a historical one. In the case of literature, it includes the study of the kinds of contact available between writer and public: the existence of the printed press, of periodicals which publish installments of novels, the extension of literacy to a wider reading public, the relationship between literacy (or kinds of literacy) and social role, etc. But it also includes a study of which is the repertory of types, conventions, genres, themes available to a writer. Once this repertory is understood to be ideological, and in no simple way "natural," we might as well speak of "forms of *production*." Literary production is determined by an enormous range of factors: the existence of a privileged literary tradition, the nature of the division between the cultural elite and mass culture, the commercial, cultural, and other links between countries which allow the influence of foreign literatures, etc.

The literary work is seen by Voloshinov in a way which combines the insights of Marxism with those of the Russian Formalists: it is an instance of semiotic performance, and it does not exist outside of a communicative context.¹⁵ The literary work is not a self-contained whole. As a signic construct, it needs the implementation of the receiver, and this changes from age to age.¹⁶ The interplay between theme and meaning described by Voloshinov takes place at several levels. In conversation we negotiate a specific theme from the meanings that we identify at word, sentence, and textual levels. Each level is more thematic than the previous one, but none is completely thematic: all rest ultimately on the intersubjective availability of meaning. This is

¹⁴ See Lotman for one of the best elaborations of this theory.

¹⁵ Compare, for instance, the idea of literary evolution as defined by Tynianov.

¹⁶ Cf. Roman Ingarden's distinction between a work and its concretization, and his notion of the life of a work of art (Ingarden 333ff.). In Voloshinov's work a more contextualized conception is advanced, if only schematically.

clearer in reading literature: the words on the page are set in a specific context, they refer to a fictional situation and we can identify an addressee-role or an implied reader who is a derivative of the communicative implementation coded in the text. This implementation does not close the text for the reader: the text remains inevitably open. The partial implementation is completed by the actual reader, or contradicted: we may feel that we do not want to become the implied reader of that text, and we implement the text in a different direction; we reject the "evaluative accent" that we detect in the authorial attitude. It is in this sense that we might say that, even in literature, "Any true understanding is dialogic in nature" (Voloshinov 102).

Moreover, the communicative context is in this case wider, and it includes the literary works of the past (at least, those which are more directly relevant to the situation of the writer and his audience). "Each monument carries on the work of its predecessors, polemicizing with them, expecting active, responsive understanding and anticipating such understanding in return" (Voloshinov 72). This conception amounts to a historization of T. S. Eliot's structural limbo, where the great works of literature are arranged in an "ideal order" which is altered each time a work of genius is created (Eliot 15). We could relate this insight of Voloshinov's to another concept introduced by him, that of "behavioral ideology," that is, "that atmosphere of unsystematized and unfixed inner and outer speech which endows our every instance of behavior and action and our every 'conscious' state with meaning" (Voloshinov 97). Behavioral ideology is linked to specific social activities, and there is a constant feedback between it and the systematized social institutions:

The established ideological systems of social ethics, science, art, and religion are crystallizations of behavioral ideology, and these crystallizations in turn exert a powerful influence back upon behavioral ideology, normally setting its tone. (Voloshinov 91)

Now, at least as regards literature, it is clear that it is not only an institution, a canon, etc., but also an activity: writing takes place as one more of the dialogic social activities. A writer is working in two contexts. The first is the institution of literature, consisting of works by writers of other nations or other ages, models, plots, character types, and narrative strategies. The second is his

experience of social life at large. A writer for example, George Eliot—may derive her semiotic materials from any of the "real life" contexts she is involved in, such as the discourse on/of woman in Victorian England. These two contexts are not separate: indeed, it is one of the main tasks of the writer to bring each to bear on the other, to turn them into one. Literature, as the first of the mass media (in a historical perspective), has been an influential way of diffusing ideological representations of the self and of social relationships. Its material is not a raw one: it has been socially elaborated.¹⁷ This material is often the ideology of everyday life. It is also a result, an important object of the writer's production.

A simple instance of this ideological production is the use of female stereotypes in *The Mill on the Floss*.¹⁸ Eliot's use of these stereotypes is one aspect of a wholesale reflection on the gender roles favored in her society. As a whole, *The Mill on the Floss* deals with an issue of gender representation, more specifically of female self-representation. The opening section of the book features a ghost-like authorial narrator evoking the image of a small girl looking at the mill. The closing lines of 1.1 suggest that the girl is the narrator herself. The conclusion of the book will prove otherwise, but the empathic maneuver stands: Maggie Tulliver (it is a conclusion easily drawn from Mary Ann Evans's life) will be an experiment in self-representation on the part of the author. This opening movement inaugurates the tension between a system of four terms: childhood and maturity, maleness and femaleness. The tension is established by their collapsing into each other in the narrator's reverie. An old person remembers a distant childhood; the voice of male maturity (remember the *George* on the title page) suddenly becomes sexually ambiguous. The conflict of gender in *The Mill on the Floss* reaches the level of narration, but here we shall only follow the thread of some of its manifestations at story level.

The issue of gender roles is at the core of the conflicts and tensions in the Tulliver household dramatized in book 1 of the novel, a book with the revealing title "Boy and Girl." Mr. Tulliv-

¹⁷ Cf. van Schendel 93.

¹⁸ There are male stereotypes as well in George Eliot's novels, which I think are also used deliberately by the author, but in *The Mill on the Floss* they are at the service of the central figure, Maggie Tulliver.

er's patriarchal convictions are already evident in the choice of his wife "'cause she was a bit weak, like; for I wasn't a-goin' to be told the rights o' things by my own fireside" (13 [1.3]). Male superiority is in this case accidental; the reverse, female superiority, is equally accidental in the case of the Tulliver children, Tom and Maggie. That is, generic difference is represented in the novel as *ideological* in the narrow sense of the word: it is a matter of tendentious representations on the part of the dominant group. Mr. Tulliver's prejudiced views will partly bring about the catastrophe of the novel, his ruin and downfall: he wastes his money on Tom with no better reason than his being his *male heir*, in a pathetic attempt to extract from the boy the proof of his own superiority as a male, while he devotes the same unconscious obstination to curb Maggie's spontaneous growth.

The child's socialization is portrayed in *The Mill on the Floss* as a complex of strategies of representation. Mr. Tulliver, Mrs. Tulliver, the epitome of alienated womanhood, Mr. Stelling, Mr. Riley, Tom:—all foist upon Maggie the behavioral ideology of patriarchy in the field of generic self-representation: a whole catalogue of activities, hearsays, admonitions, and attitudes of the child towards her own body, which is supposed to become the emblem of her successful socialization into female difference, a text of submission.¹⁹ But Maggie is always portrayed as striving to escape these stereotypes: she is rebellious, intelligent, she reads difficult books (11 [1.3]), her hair refuses to stay in place:

Mrs Tulliver, desiring her daughter to have a curled crop, "like other folk's children," had had it cut too short in front to be pushed behind the ears, and as it was usually straight an hour after it had been taken out of the paper, Maggie was incessantly tossing her head to keep the dark, heavy locks out of her gleaming black eyes—an action which gave her very much the air of a small Shetland pony. (7 [1.2])

Everything in Maggie, her very physiognomy marks her out as the contrary of what they all wish to read into her. Her hair, most notably becomes an emblem of her irrepressible, mold-breaking vitality, opposed to "Mrs. Tulliver's curls and cap-

¹⁹ With respect to the behavioral ideology of socialization through dress, movement, and attitude, see Haug.

strings" (25 [1.5]) or her blonde cousin Lucy's "row o' curls round her head, an' not a hair out o' place" (7 [1.2]).

In a reflexive section of the book, Maggie and Philip Wakem are talking about literature. Maggie opposes Philip Wakem's desire to idealize her: she declines to see herself as a muse, and contests the current literary portraits of women:

"Take back your *Corinne* . . . I'm determined to read no more books where the blond-haired women carry away all the happiness. I should begin to have a prejudice against them. If you could give me some story, now, where the dark woman triumphs, it would restore the balance. I want to avenge Rebecca, and Flora MacIvor, and Minna, and all the rest of the dark unhappy ones."

"Well, perhaps you will avenge the dark women in your own person and carry away all the love from your cousin Lucy. She is sure to have some handsome young man of St. Ogg's at her feet now, and you have only to shine upon him—your fair little cousin will be quite quenched in your beams." (299 [5.4])

As Nancy K. Miller notes, Philip anticipates here the second part of the novel, but not wholly—and that is Eliot's point. This is an astonishing passage, where the character denounces a literary stereotype of which she is herself an instance, used in a deliberate and self-conscious way by Eliot.²⁰ The stereotypical opposition of the blonde and the dark heroine we may take to be a construct of the behavioral ideology of a monogamous (Northern European) patriarchy. The idealized, socially productive elements of the female sex are embodied in the blonde heroine, while the more disturbing elements of womanhood go to the dark one. The dark heroines are not merely powerfully sexed; they also have a strong will; they tend to be self-assertive, courageous and demanding; they are the Amazon side of womanhood. Examples abound, especially in English and American literature: the female pairs of *The Last of the Mohicans* or *The Woman in White* come to mind, apart from the heroines Maggie mentions. But George Eliot does more than recognize and denounce the stereotype; she uses it. By means of Maggie's rejection of the stereotype, Eliot deprives it of any real basis; but that

²⁰ Northrop Frye notes several instances of this stereotype, as well as its inverted "male" version in *Wuthering Heights* (101). It may be significant that the two novels which use the stereotype in a deviant or self-conscious way are the work of women.

does not prevent her from exploiting it in the construction of Maggie, as a literary convention which adds a powerful echo to the work. Maggie Tulliver becomes an intertextual heroine; the unconsciously accumulated images of female subjection speak through her in a new way.

These figures of dark heroines may not be wholly "unconsciously accumulated," however. The standard example of this literary stereotype in Eliot's age was Mme. de Staël's *Corinne, ou l'Italie*, and it is a self-conscious one to some extent. Ellen Moers traces the fascination of nineteenth-century writers with Corinne, a "female Childe Harold," the superior (black-haired) woman who is crowned poetess in Rome and dies unhappily after losing her lover to her blonde cousin Lucile.²¹ Corinne was a thinly disguised self-portrait of her author, also black-haired and admired as a *rara avis* in a world of men. Moers notes the symbolism of black hair in *The Mill on the Floss*: throughout the novel it represents Maggie's difficulty to settle into the conventional female role. Moers notes the use of a similar symbolism in *Corinne* and deplores Eliot's use of the allusion, and her turning Maggie, not into a Corinne (which she does not want to be anyway), "but instead into a merely pretty and dangerous flirt who steals a rich, good-looking suitor away from her cousin Lucy" (174). Accordingly, Moers accepts the usual view of Maggie's death in the flood as a *deus ex machina*: "Maggie's convenient death in the flood is designed to smooth over, both practically and morally, her ugly revenge on blondes in the person of 'dear little Lucy'" (175). And Moers concludes her astonishingly inadequate reading with the comment that "George Eliot was always concerned with the superior large-souled woman whose distinction resides not in her deeds but in her capacity to attract attention and arouse admiration" (194). Moers ignores the crucial event in the plot: Maggie's *active decision* to abandon her lover and to be the object not of the admiration but of the jeers of society. The heroine she describes in the last quotation does not in the least resemble Maggie. Instead, she is the very image of Corinne. If she had accepted the last of the feminine roles foisted on her and run away with Stephen Guest, Maggie would

²¹ "Performing Heroinism: The Myth of Corinne," ch. 9 of *Literary Women*: esp. 176. Note the deliberate parallelism of Lucile / Lucy.

have been a successful Corinne, and would have had her "revenge." But she refrains from doing it. It is clear that Eliot is rejecting the stereotype of the "admirable woman" represented by Corinne and her literary daughters, a stereotype that declares the black-haired heroine admirable only as the exception of her sex, and on the traditional "feminine" grounds of powerful feeling and passion. As Eliot noted elsewhere, "Women have not to prove that they can be emotional, and rhapsodic, and spiritualistic; everyone believes that already. They have to prove that they are capable of accurate thought, severe study, and continuous self-command."²² This is a feminist program, although it does not look like one to such feminist critics as Moers or Lynn Sukenick. According to the latter, Eliot's readers have always been surprised to find that she is not a feminist: "she held closely for a time to the Comteian view that women are the prime receptacles of feeling in the culture" (Lion 42). However, it is clear that to the extent that Maggie Tulliver chooses to be a "receptacle of feeling" the author does not stand by her decision because of the fact that Maggie is a woman. "Feeling" should not to be restricted to women, in Eliot's view; consider, for instance, her masculine prototype, Adam Bede. Anyway, "feeling" is not the right word; "*reflexive* moral awareness" is a better description of the quality Eliot is endorsing. This is why Maggie abandons her lover and chooses moral responsibility and duty instead of romantic feeling. The choice of an image of the self which is wholly human involves the rejection of constraining ideological roles and elevation to a level of consciousness where mere sexual propriety is irrelevant.

George Eliot's attitudes towards gender can be easily deconstructed now, and shown to be, in the last analysis, a bow to the traditional generic roles. But this would be a facile maneuver, possible only because of our historical vantage point on the nineteenth century. Besides, some recent work on feminist theory acknowledges that the priorities defined by nineteenth-century feminists were legitimate ones for their situation.²³ Maybe we would have to live in the 1860s to fully appreciate George Eliot's project as a necessary task. It is one that she carried out

²² Eliot, *Essays* 334. Qtd. in Sukenick.

²³ See, for instance, DuBois and Gordon.

consistently in her life, not least in her decision to become a "male" novelist, a role which she could not help but subvert.

The analysis of female subjection in *The Mill on the Floss* does not stop here. With a sure instinct, Eliot portrays the material circumstances which insure the perpetuation of ideology. Attention is drawn to the connection between the ideological immobility of the inhabitants of St. Ogg and the stability of their material circumstances. The stagnant and inflexible transmission of property from one generation to another is emphasized by Eliot; beliefs are transmitted in much the same way as shops or cutlery. Mrs. Glegg inherits from her grandmother a magnificent symbol of the reification of social status, "a brocaded gown that would stand up empty, like a suit of armour" (106 [1.12]). There is a whole constellation of associations at work here. The family pride and reactionary ideology of the nobility speak silently through the allusion to a suit of armour; also the self-defensive attitude and the instinctive fear behind Mrs. Glegg's bourgeois intolerance. That the suit can stand *empty* is not a mere bow to the art of embroidery; it speaks of the inessentiality of the bourgeois self, the bourgeois (female) respectability, and of the alienation of the bourgeoisie in its possessions, in the fury of ownership. Indeed, if we are optimistic enough, George Eliot will let us read a materialist theory of conscience into her:

If anyone strongly impressed with the power of the human mind to triumph over circumstances will contend that the parishioners of Basset might nevertheless have been a very superior class of people, I have nothing to argue against that abstract proposition; I only know that, in point of fact, the Basset mind was in strict keeping with its circumstances. (68 [1.8])

But in fact, in George Eliot's universe, ideological mobility exists only in the direction of individual growth and moral awareness; in the last analysis she regards property as inessential. The bourgeoisie is not attacked as such: it is only a convenient vehicle for the attitudes George Eliot deplures. The values she endorses and sets against the bourgeoisie (individual growth, self-examination) are also bourgeois values.

Nevertheless, this passage points to the fact that, after all, Maggie Tulliver is an exception, the result, as far as we can see,

of chance and of the complex interplay of sexual roles in the Tulliver household. Elsewhere, the mind is in strict keeping with its circumstances. George Eliot shows why this is so, and why change cannot be a mere act of the will: everyone expects that we act our roles. In order to lead a normal life, Maggie would have to fight St. Ogg, the bourgeoisie, and the nineteenth century. As Miller notes, "Everywhere in *The Mill on the Floss* one can read a protest against the division of labour that grants men the world and women love" (Miller 357). The color and movement of Maggie's hair is a protest against this situation, a protest that only apparently is silent. Her "implausible" death by water points to an oblique symbol of the weight of social conformity against the mobility of generic roles. Maggie is doomed from the beginning; her family's admonitions against her boyishness are interspersed with alarm that she might have drowned in the river (6 [1.2]; 91 [1.10]). Moreover, there is in this death something like a fantasy of escape through suicide; witness a scene which maybe does not lack symbolic overtones:

The morning was too wet, Mrs. Tulliver said, for a little girl to go out in her best bonnet. Maggie took the opposite view very strongly, and it was a direct consequence of this difference of opinion that when her mother was in the act of brushing out the reluctant black crop, Maggie suddenly rushed from under her hands and dipped her head in a basin of water standing near-in the vindictive determination that there should be no more chance of curls that day. (20 [1.4])

That the parallelism with the novel's ending is most probably unconscious is all the more telling about the meaning of that ending, and of Eliot's deep compromise in this empathic self-representation.

Maggie Tulliver is the result of George Eliot's work on the female stereotypes of her age as she experienced them in both life and literature. *The Mill on the Floss* is a direct attack on the subject positions available to nineteenth-century women, even those that seemed most favorable, like the Corinne myth. It is a real work effected on material-social roles, representations of gender—which is at once imaginary and real; a fiction, but a liberating one, the kind of fiction people live by.

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