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Flawed and Beloved: The Spiritual Teachers of Romola and George Eliot

George Eliot is a paradox. The first thing everybody notices about her is how moral she is, how serious and respectful toward religion, how devout. Critics wrote of one novel, “In the highest sense we may call this a religious novel” (Dallas 11), of another, “The art of this story is essentially religious” (Hutton 94). “She makes us feel that we are in the hands of a thinker who has thought far down into the depths of the religious mind, and who has seriously and anxiously desired to ascertain what is the place of religious thought in the facts of life” (“Romola” ed. Haight 25). She constantly alludes to the Bible and writes beautiful and moving sermons for fictional characters like Dinah Morris. When she first began writing under her pen name, her publisher believed that she was a clergyman (Cross 1: 304). In sum, it is clear that George Eliot’s works are sincerely and profoundly religious, and specifically Christian, in tone, attitude, and theme. The one slight problem? She was an atheist.

In order to gain a new perspective on this dilemma in Eliot’s life and thought, I have examined the parallels between the biography of Marian Evans, the girl who became George Eliot, and the story of Romola, one of her fictional characters. Romola’s conflicted relationship with her mentor, Savonarola, presents a mirror image of Eliot’s own relationship with Christianity. In both cases, a profound spiritual message of duty and self-sacrifice is presented by a messenger who is flawed by false teachings and failure to live up to his own ideals. Romola and Eliot must learn to distinguish between valuable truth and superstitious or pernicious falsehood, and even more importantly, they must learn to accept and love their teachers as they are—a mere mortal man, a mere human institution, not to be revered as divine and rejected when shown to be less than perfect, but to be forgiven for their flaws through the virtue of sympathy.

In the year 1841, at the age of 22, Marian (or Mary Ann) Evans became convinced that the documents we know as the Bible were historically inaccurate and their philosophical implications degrading. She believed that Jehovah was a tribal myth which, even if real, would be unworthy of worship, and that Jesus of Nazareth was a wise moral teacher whose life and death were irrelevant to salvation. Instantly she was cut off from the culture in which she was raised, the people with whom she had the deepest bonds of natural affection, and—according to a society that equated morality with Christianity—all noble duty, high virtue, and sincere charity. The rest of her life may be considered as the attempt to deal with the fallout of this deconversion, and to communicate the insights she found along the way to the world through her writings as George Eliot.

Her eventual solution was a religion cleanly divided into two parts. As she wrote in an essay, “Our civilization, and, yet more, our religion, are an anomalous blending of lifeless barbarisms, which have descended to us like so many petrifications from distant ages, with living ideas” (Eliot, “Progress of the Intellect” 269). The lifeless barbarisms were fantastic stories of miracles and divine intervention, made obsolete by modern science, and stifling, constricting doctrine that had little to do with the practical matter of living a good life. Eliot jettisoned those elements of Christianity which she regarded as mythology and false morality, but she hoped to retain the living moral and spiritual truths that had drawn so many people, including herself, to the religion. These included the stern moral code of duty, the glorification of renunciation and self-sacrifice, and the central virtue of charity, which Eliot termed sympathy. To love and serve others above oneself was Eliot’s primary ideal; insofar as Christianity advanced and encouraged that love and service, it was commendable, and insofar as it retarded or diluted them, it was pernicious. This division between dogma and living idea, letter and spirit—this Christianity cleft

in twain—is integral to Eliot’s work, and necessary to understand her deep love and respect for a religion she very firmly did not believe in.

Many of these themes are especially clear in Eliot’s fourth novel, *Romola*. Although the story deals with a wide range of material, from Florentine history to the tragic downfall of Tito Melema, its focus is on Romola’s religious journey. Her spiritual growth is primarily achieved by following, and finally transcending, her mentor Fra Savonarola Girolamo. The real Savonarola was a Dominican monk who strove to reform the corruption of Florence and the Roman Catholic Church through charismatic preaching, prophecies, and involvement in secular politics. Ultimately he was labeled a false prophet, defied Rome, and was executed. As Eliot portrays him, Savonarola is a great man who teaches and practices a genuine and radical altruism. However, he is also deeply flawed by uncritical acceptance of visions, veiled egoism, and internal contradiction. In the course of her spiritual journey, Romola must learn how to recognize and accept both her mentor’s greatness and his flaws in order truly to live out his moral message.

Romola, like Eliot, meets the church in its many forms—simple, credulous peasants, corrupt priests, zealous ascetics, half-skeptics who believe in pagan philosophy but observe Catholic rites just in case. She moves in a world permeated by Christianity, interacting with individual representatives of a Church too large and various and contradictory ever to treat as a monolith. But Romola has a special privilege reserved only for fictional characters—and perhaps for those men and women who live in a time of tension and change, when there arises one of those mysteriously great personalities who act as agent and catalyst for the social forces around them. For she meets and talks with a single man who embodies all the essential elements of his culture, so distilled that they can be clearly identified and understood. Savonarola is one man, speaking with a single voice, whom Romola can confront, argue with, and bow before; yet

he epitomizes the best and the worst of Christianity, the spiritual self-sacrifice that Eliot admired and the crude doctrines that she despised. Although he is no simple allegorical figure, Savonarola stands in the same relationship to his followers, especially Romola, as Christianity, in Eliot's view, stands to Christians and former Christians like herself.

At first glance Romola and Marian's stories seem to be opposites. Marian was raised in an orthodox Christian family and developed a fervent faith in her youth; then, quite suddenly and completely, she rejected Christian belief and practice, so staunchly refusing to be involved with the church that she offended her family. Over the next several years, she slowly reconciled her upbringing and her new beliefs, realizing that the "truth of *feeling*" is shared even when doctrines differ. Romola, on the other hand, is raised a proud pagan. She feels nothing but contempt for monkish visions and superstitions until the charismatic Savonarola confronts her and challenges her to live the self-sacrifice she has theoretically admired. Her deep respect for Savonarola brings her into the church, but she cannot ignore his increasingly evident falsities and moral failings. Ultimately, she honors him as an individual even though she no longer adheres to his doctrine.

Although the two stories begin at opposite points, they reach the same conclusion; they are mirror-images, with the order reversed but every part intact. Both women place at the center of their lives a stern, high-minded, and inescapable duty. This duty is based on tradition and natural affection and demands sacrifice of one's self for others. Both feel immense respect and gratitude for the person or institution which first proclaimed to them this divine message, and yet both see serious intellectual and moral flaws in those messengers which they are compelled to oppose. For social and personal reasons it is difficult, almost impossible, to accept some aspects of this teaching while rejecting others, or to separate the messenger from the message. But this division—the ability to distinguish gold from dross when they are given mingled together—is,

according to Eliot, the only way to reap the real and irreplaceable benefits of religion without being entrapped in error and false moral motives. This capacity to see with clear eyes all the ugliness in a man, and still love him—in Eliot’s terms, sympathy—allows us to render due honor and gratitude without being led astray, grants acceptance and reconciliation in the place of bitterness, and lies at the heart of all true morality.

Marian and Romola’s stories come to us in completely different formats. One is a polished novel, full of introspection and carefully plotted detail; the other must be pieced together from letters and essays written for varied purposes and readers, and it is full of the messiness of real life. These differences are precisely why, read side by side, the two stories illuminate each other. The nonfiction works which explain Eliot’s fully formed opinion help us understand what she intended the novel to illustrate, bringing out points we otherwise might have neglected. More importantly, in the fictional narrative Eliot can describe the anguish and inner struggle of a crisis of faith, giving insight into the mind of the young girl whose love and conscience seem to be tearing her apart. In her letters and prose works describing her deconversion, Eliot was defending her decision to unsympathetic or hostile readers. She could not show doubt, anxiety, or regret; she could not reveal how much the structures of her life might be trembling with the removal of their cornerstone. In *Romola*, however, across a distance of countries and centuries, Eliot would have no such hindrances. While in the novel the story is obviously dramatized and its effects heightened, the model for Romola’s feelings is drawn from Marian’s own experiences.

Romola’s relationship with Savonarola is characterized by intense gratitude. At the darkest moment in her young life, with her father’s legacy scattered and her beloved husband proved callow and disloyal, Romola resolves to flee the city into exile. Savonarola meets her on the road and confronts her with her own selfishness, teaching her a high morality that places her

duty to her city, her people, and even her unworthy husband over her own avoidance of suffering. She returns to live a noble life of service, a life in which she can stand proud of her good deeds, rather than running in despair. After this, “Nothing that had come, or was to come, could do away with the fact that there had been a great inspiration in him [Savonarola] that had waked a new life in her” (*Romola* 549). She feels an immense debt to him and an unbreakable personal tie. Her love for him lasted through years of suffering, bitterness, rejection; she learned this love, she says, because he “helped me when I was in great need” (569). She never ceased to believe that Savonarola’s call to duty, which led her into humiliation, pain, and danger, was a blessing to be thankful for. Her great need was for rescue from her own selfishness and despair.

Eliot must have shared a similar feeling towards Christianity, without which she might never have heard of the virtue of self-renunciation and the duty of altruism which became central to her life. Quite simply, “she owed her ethics to Christianity and she knew it” (Svaglic 289). She wrote to a friend, “Pray don’t ever ask me again not to rob a man of his religious belief, as if you thought my mind tended to such robbery. I have too profound a conviction of the efficacy that lies in all sincere faith, and the spiritual blight that comes with no-faith, to have any negative propagandism in me” (Cross 2: 270). Christianity was indisputably a direct source of Eliot’s personal morality; as “the only system that associates happiness with self-renunciation” (Fleishman 22), it was the only religion that could have taught her not just that sacrifices must sometimes be made, but that life is sacrifice, and sacrifice is glory. Thus, she felt the same kind of gratitude and obligation to Christianity that Romola does to Savonarola.

Both Romola and Eliot might have learned some morality from other sources. Romola especially, trained in the Classical philosophers of old, certainly had the opportunity to learn lofty moral principles. In fact, she agreed theoretically with the morals of the philosophers and adhered in practice to a deep devotion to her family. But Eliot makes it clear that Savonarola’s

message is substantially different from both of these sources of morality. Familial ties are a living and active power in Romola's life, enabling her to give selflessly and continually to her father; however, that fierce and instinctive loyalty cannot help her act rightly toward other people, and would drive her to abandon other duties if it went unchecked. Savonarola widens her scope, reminding her that charity belongs to all, not merely those who are of the same blood. Romola ought to have known this already from her readings. Thus Savonarola chides her, saying, "Doubtless you were taught how there were pagan women who felt what it was to live for the republic; yet you have never felt that you, a Florentine woman, should live for Florence" (353). He shames her by showing her that she has failed to live up to her own standards, those which even pagans recognize, by "breaking the simplest law... which binds man to man—faithfulness to the spoken word" (353). This passage makes it clear that the morality Romola learned from books and philosophical arguments was intellectual and theoretical, without any binding force; it demanded a high level of conduct but was helpless to supply the strength to achieve it. Savonarola's demands are far more exacting—going beyond the ordinary call of morality in both scope and intensity—but they are accompanied by a power that makes them possible. As the visible Madonna for the poor and suffering people of Florence, and as the faithful wife of a morally loathsome husband, Romola really does live an altruism as far beyond the duty of the pagans as the torture of crucifixion is beyond the peaceful hemlock. What enabled her to live in this way was the image of the cross, and the voice of a man who knows greatness and suffering—the example, company, and fellow-feeling of minds greater than her own, within a religious system in which charity and sacrifice are exalted.

In her Anglican home and Evangelical school life, in a rural England still overwhelmingly and virtually exclusively Christian, Marian Evans was not exposed to alternative sources of morality in her formative years. She received the call to duty and altruism

solely from doctrinal Christianity and originally accepted it as an inextricable part of doctrinal Christianity. Eventually, of course, she met ostensibly moral non-Christians like the Hennells and Brays, read historical and philosophical works like the ones that Romola had been influenced by, and came to affirm that morality and spirituality could be attained through many kinds of beliefs. However, Eliot retained a special affection and devotion to Christianity, referring to it more often and drawing more strength from it than from other philosophies and religions. It seems that she, like Romola, was directly and immediately touched by the story of the Crucified God where theories about altruism and obligation had little practical impact. Eliot wrote of Christianity, “I see in it the highest expression of the religious sentiment that has yet found its place in the history of mankind” (Cross 326)—meaning that she admired the religion not only as the means by which she, personally, had learned moral truth, but the most likely means for others to do so. Christianity thus taught the same moral standards, and provided the same inspiration to live up to them, to Marian Evans as Savonarola gives to Romola.

This gratitude for a life-changing moral message must, however, be weighed against several serious problems in the messenger. One of the charges Eliot brings against Savonarola and Christianity is simple enough: they teach things that are not true. The Bible is not inspired; there is no omnipotent Creator, no forgiveness of sin through the blood of Jesus, no existence after physical death. What Savonarola prophesizes—an imminent catastrophe and the subsequent reform of the Catholic Church—does not, in fact, happen. But there is more to it than simple intellectual disagreement. For Eliot, as for many atheists, some of the complaints against Christian doctrine seem to have not just factual but aesthetic grounds. Physical miracles do not only contradict materialism, they offend good taste—if there were a God, surely he would not be so crude and simplistic, would not break his own elegant laws for a mere human’s request. That God would speak to an individual, not just in a mystic experience, but with concrete,

practical information about things that are going to happen, seems incredibly naïve and vainly anthropocentric. In general, the elements of Christianity that Eliot criticizes are precisely those which involve God's action upon not just emotions and thoughts, but physical and spiritual reality. As one critic notes, "The moral egotism of both Lantern Yard in *Silas Marner* and Florence in *Romola* takes the form of a preoccupation with personal salvation and miracle" (Myers 18). For Eliot, factual inaccuracy and apparent naiveté about the relationship between the spiritual and material worlds would automatically mean that Savonarola, and Christianity, could not be trusted. But she also considered another criteria far more significant than the literal truth of beliefs—their effect on the moral lives of those who believe them.

Eliot is always clear that Savonarola's character and message contains moral elements both noble and base. In his preaching "there were strains that appealed to the very finest susceptibilities of men's natures, and there were elements that gratified low egoism, tickled gossiping curiosity, and fascinated timorous superstition" (233). For Savonarola, the two strains are inextricable; in his mind doctrine and fervor are so fused that one cannot appear without the other. However, those who come into contact with him may have an affinity or inclination for one element of his message and attend to it only, while the rest falls on deaf ears. They take from his preaching only what they want to hear or are able to understand. Eliot describes this effect on a mixed audience:

His need of personal predominance, his labyrinthine allegorical interpretations of the Scriptures, his enigmatic visions, and his false certitude about the Divine intentions, never ceased, in his own large soul, to be ennobled by that fervid piety, that passionate sense of the infinite, that active sympathy, that clear-sighted demand for the subjection of selfish interests to the general good, which he had in common with the greatest of mankind. But for the mass of his audience all the

pregnancy of his preaching lay in his strong assertion of supernatural claims, in the denunciatory visions, in the false certitude which gave his sermons the interest of a political bulletin. (233)

Eliot shows us this tendency demonstrated in specific individuals as well. Baldassare, with violence and vengeance in his heart, hears only Savonarola's promises that God will punish evildoers; "no word that was not a threat touched his consciousness" (229). He entirely misses the political and spiritual context, instead applying the emotion to his case against Tito. On the other hand, Romola "was so deeply moved by the grand energies of Savonarola's nature that she found herself listening patiently to all dogmas and prophecies, when they came in the vehicle of his ardent faith and believing utterance" (381), but only while he is actually preaching. When they are repeated by lesser men, "the wearisome visions and allegories" cause her to "[recoil] in disgust" (380). Both Baldassare and Romola take from Savonarola only those ideas which they are prepared to hear, which already exist to some degree in their own minds.

There is similar ambiguity in Christianity. In her essay "Evangelical Teaching: Dr. Cumming," Eliot explains two alternative and opposed messages that Christianity can teach, depending on how one listens to it. She contrasts a morality in which the motive and standard for right action is the glory of God with a morality that springs out of love of goodness itself and sympathy for one's fellows. She characterizes the first system as base, mercenary, unnatural, weak, and evil—base, because it does not recognize good or evil as inherent in an act but only in a powerful being's opinion of the act; mercenary, because it encourages men to seek good only so that they may avoid punishment and reap reward; unnatural, because it neglects or even attacks the spontaneous impulses of affection, generosity, and honesty in favor of a more calculated motive; weak, because without such impulses to sustain it a decision of the will has little force; and evil, because the cumulative effect is to turn altruism itself into egoism. She

writes, “There perhaps has been no perversion more obstructive of true moral development than this substitution of a reference to the glory of God for the direct promptings of the sympathetic feelings” (“Dr. Cumming” 136). However, religion need not necessarily be a competitor and antagonist to natural solidarity. According to Eliot, “the idea of God is really moral in its influence ... when God is contemplated as sympathizing with the pure elements of human feeling, as possessing infinitely all those attributes which we recognize to be moral in humanity” (136). Just as a fellow-sufferer teaches us compassion, a fellow-traveler offers us encouragement, and a man who has already faced the trial gives an example to imitate, God can be imagined as coming alongside the believer and helping him to do what is inherently right. Contemplation of heaven, hell, salvation, resurrection, and redemption through faith is likely to encourage a God-based (and thus, in Eliot’s mind, mercenary) morality; contemplation of the incarnation, the temptation, the crucifixion, and the believer’s duty to imitate Jesus is likely to encourage a sympathy-based one. Every orthodox Christian asserts all of the above and recognizes no contradiction. However, Eliot thought of these two moral motives as incompatible and fundamentally opposed paradigms which had been unnaturally yoked together. Individual Christians would listen to one strain or the other in greater or lesser proportion depending upon their own egotistical or sympathetic natures, and the doctrine they focused on would confirm their bias.

In Savonarola we see a nearly identical struggle between two different forms of moral reasoning, which creates contradictory actions. In his speeches to Romola, Savonarola preaches a morality virtually identical to Eliot’s own. He lauds tradition and the bonds of family, place, and pledged word, and above all he insists upon the sacred obligations of duty. Personal ties of natural affection, such as Romola’s relationship to Tito as a wife and her relationship to Florence as a citizen, are considered imperative duties which Romola cannot abandon. Religion enters

only in the use of the crucifix as the model which Romola's life must follow. In other words, high moral callings do not conflict with, but are strengthened by, human institutions and sympathetic feeling. However, as Romola notes, her brother Dino was taught a different standard. When he deserted his family to join a monastery, "He broke ties. He left his place" (356). And Savonarola not only permitted but supported him in doing almost exactly what he is trying to stop Romola from doing. In response to her criticism, the Frate offers the rather feeble excuse, "That was a special vocation. He was constrained to depart, else he could not have attained the higher life" (356). This kind of reasoning "places visions before natural duties" (*Romola* 157) and puts God in conflict with normal human relations—exactly what Eliot condemned Dr. Cumming and his ilk for doing. Romola and Dino are in very similar circumstances, but Savonarola applies different moral reasoning in the two cases and ends up giving them opposite advice, telling Romola to honor her familial duties and Dino to disregard them. Eliot sees this as a fatal contradiction which exactly mirrors that which she observed in the Church. Just as the same Christianity leads Dr. Cumming to hate his fellow man and Dinah Morris to love him, so the same Savonarola leads Dino to renounce his father and Romola to remain with her husband. The ambiguity and inconsistency of both these sources of spiritual teaching raises a serious problem for their young disciples.

An even more emphatic contradiction is presented in Savonarola's treatment of Bernardo del Nero. In more peaceful times, Savonarola championed a law guaranteeing the right of appeal to convicted criminals and actively intervened on behalf of a Medicean conspirator, arguing for mercy. But when Romola's godfather, Bernardo, and four others are condemned to die, the Frate does nothing. The lives of five individuals seem to him relatively unimportant compared to "the cause of freedom, which is the cause of God's kingdom upon earth" (481). Here we see the same conflict between natural feelings and grand abstractions. Savonarola is setting up a

situation where God's will and the furthering of his kingdom are in conflict with "the plea of justice—of mercy—of faithfulness" (482)—something that Eliot believes a true religion will never do. Romola, by contrast, is moved by "that sympathy with the individual lot that is continually opposing itself to the formulae by which actions and parties are judged" (487).

In the case of Bernardo, Savonarola demonstrates the same egotism of preferring the cold, abstracted "glory of God" over an action good in and of itself that Eliot condemned in Dr. Cumming. But he also demonstrates a much more obvious and direct form of egotism, which, sadly, has also been practiced by the church. "The cause of my party *is* the cause of God's kingdom" (482), he says. There is a petty parochialism in this definition, which must be a limitation, and which puts the Infinite at the service of man. Romola's response is Eliot's own—"God's kingdom is something wider—else, let me stand outside it with the beings that I love" (482). The historical reality that Savonarola here personifies can be found in Eliot's nonfiction when she writes that false dogmas retain power because they have "allied themselves, on the one hand with men's better sentiments, and on the other with institutions in whose defence are arrayed the passions and the interests of dominant classes" ("Progress of the Intellect" 269). The wrongs done by religion are not all honest mistakes; spiritual authority can dabble in, or be manipulated by, secular power. Christianity, like Savonarola's mission, has often been misused for political or personal goals. Such a contaminated, chimerical power, appropriating men's deepest hopes and noblest desires for merely worldly ends, is the most likely to corrupt.

Eliot gives us another example in which Savonarola places his political agenda and personal position above strict virtue. When Camilla, a supposed prophetess, had called for the violent death of Bernardo, Savonarola did not dare to "publicly denounce these pretended revelations" because of political concerns. The moment he said that Camilla's visions were not from God, his enemies would cry out against him that he "would suppress all Divine inspiration

of which he himself was not the vehicle,” that his own visions had no more substantiation than the ones he condemned (434-5). He could not admit the truth, that Camilla was deranged, because he was forced to protect the doctrine of inspired prophecy to maintain his role as a political and religious leader. This kind of suppression of truth was another of the characteristics of Christianity that Eliot excoriated in her essay on Dr. Cumming. “Minds fettered by doctrine ... do not search for facts, as such, but for facts that will bear out their doctrine” (113), she writes. The egotistic desire for heaven makes the need to defend doctrine at all costs, and thus the reluctance to examine evidence for its own sake, even more imperative; Eliot insists, “so long as a belief in propositions is regarded as indispensable to salvation, the pursuit of truth *as such* is not possible” (“Dr. Cumming” 113). Doctrine and institutional religion thus poison the intellect. Savonarola’s refusal to criticize Camilla is closely analogous to the self-imposed blindness Eliot saw in Christianity.

Despite these many and serious problems, Savonarola and Christianity retained widespread respect, and many factors made it difficult to separate the good and evil in them. Florence owed a real debt to the Frate in many ways. He attacked the corruption, simony, and hypocrisy of the Roman Catholic Church with courage and a passion for righteousness that overwhelmed his own personal concerns. He and his followers strove after “a law of justice, peace, and charity, that the hundred thousand citizens [of Florence] may be governed righteously” (Romola 353), seeking to extend power from the few to the many, and transform it from secretive personal allegiances to clear and open discussion of ideas. He encouraged simple and virtuous lives free from luxury, vanity, and excess, and supported his stern teaching with his own austere example. He restrained potential mobs and social disorder by “preaching peace and quietness, and the laying aside of party quarrels” (258); even his enemies had cause to thank him for his mercy to the defeated Medici party (338). Because Savonarola had truly reformed the

city, combating real vices and instilling real virtues, “men of ordinary morality and public spirit felt that the triumph of the Frate’s enemies was really the triumph of gross license” (557). The Florentines could not afford to recognize Savonarola’s excesses because they thought that by criticizing the man, they would be renouncing the real benefits he had given them; they could not disassociate his person from his message.

Most “men of ordinary morality and public spirit” in Victorian England, just like their Florentine counterparts, believed that the moral code could not be separated from the traditional religion which had been its historical keeper; Christian morality and Christian doctrine seemed inextricable. In describing the imaginary history of a typical atheist, Eliot says, “He cannot make his reasons intelligible, and so his conduct is regarded as a relaxation of the hold that moral ties had on him previously” (Cross 1:89). The assumption was so basic and pervasive that as girl of thirteen, the devout Marian says, “for some time ... I was considerably shaken by the impression that religion was not a requisite to moral excellence” after reading a novel featuring an “amiable atheist” (Cross 1: 47). Throughout her life, Eliot was challenged by opponents on this question again and again. Christianity was so linked with moral standards that many people considered it simply impossible to have one without the other, and many who might have doubted Christian doctrine on other grounds would defend it because of its invaluable contributions to society.

Although both Savonarola and Christianity were revered, the broad and diffuse impact of a man or institution upon a whole society may be overcome without too much intense emotional turmoil. Far more powerful is a relationship of indebtedness and gratitude, such as both Romola and Marian felt. In Romola’s case this relation is extremely strong because it was Savonarola, and Savonarola alone, who “waked in her mind a reason for living, apart from personal enjoyment and personal affection” (380) and brought her into the new life of sacrificial love. When she falls on her knees before Savonarola and obeys his command, she submits her entire

being to him without reservation. She enters into “yearning passivity” in which she looked to Fra Girolamo for direction in even the simplest actions (358-9). As she takes up again the burdens she thought she could not bear, “her trust in Savonarola’s nature as greater than her own made a large part of the strength she had found” (381); she need no longer struggle to determine the right on her own, because she is certain that what he commands is holy. Savonarola becomes for her “something like a rope suspended securely by her path, making her step elastic while she grasped it; if it were suddenly removed, no firmness of the ground she trod could save her from staggering, or perhaps from falling” (381). When this support is taken, she does fall—the ghastly illumination of Savonarola’s corruption seems to reveal that there is no hope, no meaning, in the sacrificial charity that he taught, and Romola forgets the needs of others and longs for her own death. She recovers spiritual strength only when, through her experience in a plague-stricken village, she learns that she can love those who suffer simply because of their suffering humanity.

In contrast, Marian’s own deconversion seems, at first glance, to have been singularly smooth and easy. In the midst of it, she writes to her friend Miss Lewis, “My only desire is to know truth, my only fear to cling to error” (Cross 1:74). While she does complain of the rift between her and her father and the distinctly cooled glances of her peers, Marian’s letters about her changing religious beliefs seem cheerful and confident, without a trace of the anguish that Romola felt. She even reports “a feeling of exultation and strong hope” upon being “liberated from the giant’s bed of dogma” (Cross 1:88). In later life she even went so far as to insist, “I say it now, and I say it once for all, that I am influenced at the present time by far higher considerations, and by a nobler idea of duty, than I ever was when I held the evangelical belief” (Cross 1:115). However, not all was as tranquil as it seemed.

The manner in which Eliot describes Romola's anguish seems the strongest indication that she knew a similar pain, not only sympathetically but experientially. She says definitively, "No one who has ever known what it is thus to lose faith in a fellow-man whom he has profoundly loved and revered, will lightly say that the shock can leave the faith in the Invisible Goodness unshaken" (*Romola* 491). Such a statement reaches beyond the individual character of Romola and asserts a universal pattern. And Eliot's descriptions of "those sickening moments when the enthusiasm which had come to her as the only energy strong enough to make life worthy, seemed to be inevitably bound up with vain dreams and willful eye-shutting" (*Romola* 435), when the disillusioned believer sees "all the repulsive and inconsistent details in his teaching with a painful lucidity which exaggerated their proportions" (490), are highly suggestive. She writes of Romola's pain with such vivid immediacy and tender feeling that it is impossible, knowing Eliot's history, not to imagine the author herself experiencing similar "sickening moments."

How might we reconcile the high probability, based on Eliot's own words, that her deconversion involved fundamental doubt and the threat of despair, with the scant evidence that such a crisis took place? Given how she dealt with other difficulties in her life, it is most likely that she simply avoided leaving evidence of her struggle. In a letter to M. D'Albert in 1849, Marian writes, "When I was at Geneva, I had not yet lost the attitude of antagonism which belongs to the renunciation of *any* belief; also, I was very unhappy, and in a state of discord and rebellion towards my own lot" (*Cross* 326). Her letters from the time reveal no such unhappiness; Marian writes enthusiastically about the beauty of the countryside and the friendliness of her companions and insists, "I have not the slightest pretext for being discontented—not the shadow of a discomfort" (*Cross* 1:170). She even goes out of her way to contradict the Brays' "suspicion that I paint things too agreeably for the sake of giving you

pleasure” (Cross 1:169). Without the later letter, we would have no inkling that Marian had felt such discord and inner turmoil during this time, or that eight years after her deconversion, six years after she had written of her recognition of the spiritual value of Christianity, she still felt lingering resentment towards the faith she had abandoned. Since Marian disguised her true feelings and painted a rosy picture of her time in Geneva even to her dear friends, it is preeminently likely she would have hidden her anguish and moral doubts during and after her loss of faith as well.

Given this likelihood, we should not expect any straightforward confession of doubt and pain, but, at the most, scattered hints. And that is exactly what we find. When Marian was translating the great German work of higher criticism, *Life of Jesus*, her friend Mrs. Bray wrote that she “says she is Strauss-sick—it makes her ill dissecting the beautiful story of the Crucifixion, and only the sight of the Christ-image and picture make her endure it” (Cross 1:100). The young atheist looking up from her heresies to fix her eyes on the crucifix is a vivid image and symbol of George Eliot’s entire life. Intellectually, she agreed with Strauss’s analysis, and yet her emotions recoiled. Marian’s upbringing, her sympathy, and all the poetry in her were on the side of the Crucified God in whom she could not believe—just as Romola longs to believe that Savonarola was no false prophet even as she condemns his treatment of her godfather. In addition, in describing the aftermath of her deconversion, Marian writes that “a year or two of reflection, and the experience of our own miserable weakness, which will ill afford to part even with the crutch of superstition, must effect a change” (Cross 1: 88). This curious sentence seems to indicate that despite Marian’s insistence that religion and morality were separate and her confident assertion that she was guided by higher moral principles as an atheist than a Christian, she did see detrimental effects on her efforts to live a moral life after her deconversion. We can easily imagine the new atheist encountering temptation, irritability,

despondency, or any of the ordinary trials of life, and reaching instinctively for her former aids of prayer and scripture—only to remember that she no longer believed them efficacious. In their absence, at least until she discovered new strategies, Marian would be susceptible to frustration and hopelessness—just as Romola, without her habitual recourse to the memory of Savonarola, was unable to continue in her duty and despaired. These signs, though slight, are significant, as they reveal a deeply buried struggle within Marian Evans.

Thus, it seems clear that Romola and her creator both experienced a dark night of the soul when they parted from their mentors. Whether it is the divine authority of the Bible or the inspired prophecy of the Frate, devotion to Christ or dependence on Savonarola's example, the revered traditions of the Church or the personal influence of a mentor, something that was once trusted to lean the whole weight of a moral structure upon had buckled. In Marian's case the blow was softened because her broken relationship was with an institution, not an individual, and because she was supported by friends who had gone through a similar experience. But she could not escape the shock of the fall, the contradictory and impossible yearnings for reconciliation, or the sickening moments of doubt in which her own moral will or morality itself seemed ready to fail.

A minor case, less bound up with strong emotion, illustrates what Eliot eventually recognized as the proper way to deal with mentors who were both admirable and flawed. When a friend ventured, with apologies, to criticize a favorite author, Eliot reassured her that “the writers who have most profoundly influenced me—who have rolled away the waters from their bed, raised new mountains and spread delicious valleys for me—are not in the least oracles to me” (Cross 1: 143). For example, she said, “I should never dream of going to [George Sand's] writings as a moral code or text-book;” it is not for infallible judgment or flawless technique that Eliot would “[bow] before her in eternal gratitude to that ‘great power of God manifested in

her” (Cross 1: 144). Eliot’s respect and affection for the writers she admires is not based on uncritical acceptance, but on a sympathy which is capable of nice discriminations. She looks to them as fellow-men, undoubtedly fallible, yet sharing in human dignity, and she is clear in her own mind what she has, and has not, learned from them. Armed with this understanding, she could find out that they were “miserably erroneous”—that their opinions had “degraded civilized man”—without once shaking her gratitude for the good she really has received from them (Cross 1: 143). This is precisely the attitude that brings both Romola and Eliot peace with their religious teachers. Thus, Eliot’s opinion of her favorite authors is an example, in miniature, of the general principle that governed her life and philosophy.

All of her books demonstrate this power of sympathy, as she treats misers, seducers, and infanticides with keen understanding and charity. *Romola* in particular distinguishes itself as the portrait of a man whose religion and position of authority are the source of both his triumphs and failures. His role as a spiritual mentor and leader gives Savonarola’s character, good and bad, unusual seriousness, and therefore makes his treatment by both his fictional protégé and his real authoress a dramatic and vivid example of the general principle of sympathy. Eliot’s stated principle in her delineation of Savonarola’s character is as follows:

It was the fashion of old, when an ox was led out for sacrifice to Jupiter, to chalk the dark spots, and give the offering a false show of unblemished whiteness. Let us fling away the chalk, and boldly say—the victim was spotted, but it was not therefore in vain that his mighty heart was laid on the altar of men’s highest hopes. (224)

She succeeds admirably. The portrait of Savonarola is, throughout, discriminating and balanced. Eliot is eager to praise one who she regards as a great man and reminds us often of his true virtues, but she never shies away from admitting his egotistical need not only to do a good work,

but to be the acknowledged and revered leader of a good work. Her commitment to a portrayal that is both sympathetic and truthful yields not only a good story, but significant historical insight. As Acton describes it,

No [other] historian has held more firmly the not very evident answer to the question how a man who denounced the Pope as fiercely as Luther, who was excommunicated and consigned to death by Rome, should nevertheless have left such a reputation behind him, that, within eleven years of his execution ... he was honoured among the saints in the liturgy of his Order. (155)

Not only does Eliot herself maintain a scrupulously sympathetic attitude toward Savonarola, she also portrays Romola gradually learning sympathy for her flawed and beloved mentor. Almost throughout the book Romola experiences sustained tension between her approval of Savonarola's person and her disapproval of his doctrine. Even when she hates the church for stealing Dino and considers its teachings pure foolishness, she muses that Fra Girolamo's "very voice seems to have penetrated me with a sense that there is some truth in what moves them—some truth of which I know nothing" (180). Even when Savonarola is discredited and utterly disgraced, "her soul cried out for some explanation of his lapses which would make it still possible for her to believe that the main striving of his life had been pure and grand" (558). In the epilogue, we see that years after Savonarola's death, Romola has finally discovered that explanation and made peace with her mentor's memory. She knows very well that "there are many good people who did not love Fra Girolamo" (569), and that they have good reasons. Yet for herself, she chooses to see what was truly noble in his character and the very great benefit that she had at his hand. She knows now that his is not the voice of God, speaking to her from above; she has disagreed with him, defied him, and forgiven him as a fellow mortal, subject to all the biases and blindness of humanity. He is a man, no more; and yet a great man, above the

common run of the trivial and self-absorbed; one worthy of honor and deep, abiding respect. She remembers Savonarola's sin, but she continues to lavish the selfless love he taught upon those around her, and she lays flowers at the altar for the man who gave her a new life of service and reconciliation instead of self-centeredness and bitterness.

Eliot's soul, too, cried out for an explanation that would allow her to see Christianity's flaws and yet still believe that, at its heart, the religion of her youth was pure and grand. She did so by dethroning Christian doctrine from its divine, supernatural status and treating it as merely a human institution. When she read the Bible as the perfect Word of God, she had to do violence to her modernistic spiritual assumptions and scientific beliefs; when she read the Biblical writings as "histories consisting of mingled truth and fiction" (*Letters* 128), she could appreciate their literary value and spiritual implications without being challenged to change her other views. When she believed that the church was the presence of God on earth, it seemed a miserable failure; when she believed that it was the fumbling efforts of ordinary men to reach beyond their naturally selfish and limited interests, it was remarkable for its success. Jesus Christ, considered as God, seemed insufficient; considered as a man, he was very nearly miraculous. Explaining her reconciliation with her former faith, she says,

I have not returned to dogmatic Christianity—to the acceptance of any set of doctrines as a creed, and a superhuman revelation of the Unseen—but I see in it the highest expression of the religious sentiment that has yet found its place in the history of mankind, and I have the profoundest interest in the inward life of sincere Christians in all ages... on many points where I used to delight in expressing intellectual difference, I know delight in feeling an emotional agreement. (Cross 326)

Christianity is not supernatural, and does not need to be supernatural—it is a “faith in which human sorrow and human longing for purity have expressed themselves,” and that very humanity inspires “a sympathy with it that predominates over all argumentative tendencies” (Cross 326). At its best, it teaches the most important truth that man knows, strengthens individuals to carry out the highest and hardest calling possible, and does so in the form of a beautiful and strangely moving myth. In the end, Eliot reports, “[I] have lost all interest in mere antagonism to religious doctrines. I care only to know, if possible, the lasting meaning that lies in all religious doctrine from the beginning till now” (Cross 2: 270).

In the course of their spiritual journeys, Romola and Marian Evans both learned to recognize and forgive the flaws of those who had taught and guided them. In order to do so, they had to separate the divine message of duty, altruism, and self-sacrifice from the very human person and institution which served as its messenger. Instead of looking up to Savonarola or Christianity as idealized authorities, they came to clearly understand their fellow-travelers’ virtues and failures and treat them with sympathy. The moral of Romola and Savonarola’s story, and one of George Eliot’s most important beliefs, can be neatly summed up in a sentence from a letter she wrote to Sara Hennell: “I wish less of our piety were spent on imaginary perfect goodness, and more given to real *imperfect* goodness” (Cross 1:282). If no supernatural world exists, we must find our inspiration and hope in this one. That, necessarily, means loving and admiring flawed people. This virtue of sympathy is not only central to *Romola*, not only a persistent theme in Eliot’s literary works, but also the guiding principle of Marian Evans’ life and the key to understanding her relationship with Christianity.

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