George Eliot's Religious Imagination

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Chapter 1

Incarnation and Inwardness

George Eliot’s Early Works in the Context of Contemporary Religious Debates

The secret of our emotions never lies in the bare object, but in its subtle relations to our own past: no wonder the secret escapes the unsympathising observer, who might as well put on spectacles to discern odours.

—George Eliot, *Adam Bede*, 2:18, 180

Is there not a spiritual existence that belongs to individuals?

—Søren Kierkegaard, *Repetition*

In the great age of religious questioning, which U. C. Knoepflmacher says was “obsessed with epistemology,” George Eliot’s importance was such that an early reviewer could call her “the emblem of a generation distracted between the intense need of believing and the difficulty of belief.”1 In the “conflict of interpretations” that David Carroll rightly sees as central to her narrative situations, George Eliot’s fiction reveals, I will argue, her own exploration of faith and imagination and her discovery of their inseparable connection as hermeneutical mind-sets.

It is impossible to read George Eliot’s novels without thinking about religion, one would think, since, even when they do not directly concern religious clerics, they focus on characters engaged in deeply religious struggles. George Eliot’s work is rich enough that astute readers can find material for almost any sophisticated reading, and it is perhaps not surprising that while critics in a secular culture have tended to follow the standard view that Marian Evans “lost her faith” as a young woman, there is increasing interest in the necessary complexities of any such trajectory. While there have always been critics and readers speaking against the tide, the pervasive tendency has been to acknowledge her early piety and reiterate the “conventional wisdom”3 that after her encounter with Higher Criticism, firstly through Charles Hennell and then Strauss and Feuerbach, and with the Comte school, her Christian
beliefs were replaced by a Feuerbachian version of the religion of humanity. While the crucial influence of all of these is undeniable, I agree with Peter Hodgson when he argues that George Eliot never became a disciple of any system or ideology. Instead, I will argue, her views were deeply evolutionary. Rather like one of the mollusks which were the subject of her husband’s study, she accreted these beliefs like so many layers, with each new level of knowledge adding to and adapting, rather than displacing, her earlier views. While it is easy enough to find comments in her letters declaring her rejection of conventional forms of Christianity, it is not much harder to find as many comments that modify and complicate these declarations of unbelief.

In his book, Hodgson briefly analyzes each of George Eliot’s novels for their Christian content, and extrapolates from this the principles of what he calls George Eliot’s “future religion,” a form of “revisionist postmodern” theology that he aligns with various theologians from Schleiermacher to Ricoeur. Hodgson’s idea that George Eliot practiced a “faith, which kept the reality of God in suspense” echoes ideas of the philosopher Richard Kearney, himself a student of Ricoeur. Kearney’s recent work, as suggested by the title of his book The God Who May Be, analyzes the ways that modernist writers such as Joyce and Woolf invoke sacramental language that shadows forth a “possible” God. Kearney’s work on “narrative imagination” as the basis for the “narrative identity” that is acquired “in large part by receiving others’ narratives and re-narrating itself in turn to others” informs my whole argument. It seems to me that we might put George Eliot in the company of Kearney’s modernists of sacred possibility, for George Eliot’s religious imagination took her beyond Feuerbachian humanism toward a far more complex understanding of religious experience. The first stage of this development is enacted in her early fiction, in which she constructs an aesthetic that is deeply rooted in two fundamental elements of her early experience among Evangelical Christians, incarnation and inwardness.

A brief sketch of her religious history is in order. Mary Anne Evans (as she was christened) grew up in a middle-of-the-road Anglican household but as a schoolgirl came under the powerful influence of intense Evangelicalism with a Calvinist/Puritan streak in the persons of a teacher and fellow students. Her youthful letters, which sound cringingly pious to most modern ears, reflect what one biographer calls an “unforgiving, damnation-conscious form of religion” and are a convenient source for any who are on a quest for evidence of the pathologies of adolescent faith. For my purposes, they point to the way in which faith and imagination were already at odds in her thinking, for in them she records a suspicion of “imaginative literature, particularly fiction,” which she overcomes out of a conviction of the necessity to be familiar with common references, and of musical settings of biblical passages, which she at once revels in and deplores.

The next landmark on her intellectual journey was her meeting with a warm and intelligent family of free-thinking Unitarians. While the Hennell
sisters became Mary Anne’s close and lifelong friends, their brother Charles Hennel’s *Inquiry concerning the Origin of Christianity* (1838) began what became the sea change in her thinking, as he carefully explained Christianity in entirely natural terms. The result was a temporary but hugely significant rift with her beloved father, whose housekeeper she was, when she refused to accompany him to church. Mary Anne relented after several weeks because, characteristically, her relationship with her father was more important to her than the principle of truth, once she had made sure to demonstrate it to him. But the break was made, and not the least important development was her determination to become financially independent from her father and brother.

In 1851 she moved to London and became Marian Evans, writer of reviews and essays, the shadow editor of the *Westminster Review*, reading and writing prodigiously. The two most famous landmarks in her religious life bracket this move: her translations of Strauss’s *Life of Jesus*, published after almost two years of painstaking labor in 1846, and of Feuerbach’s *Essence of Christianity* in 1854. For now, I will just say in a sentence that Strauss’s work demythologized Christianity, taking earnest, sympathetic pains to do so, and Feuerbach’s work situated the origin of God-ideas in the human mind: “All religious cosmogonies,” writes Feuerbach, “are products of the imagination.”

Before moving away from biography, it is important to note the most important presence in Marian Evans’s adult life, the man she would call her husband, George Henry Lewes, whom she met between the translating of these two tomes. And it is important to say as well that in the case of George Eliot, the intimate personal relations of her life as Mary Anne and then Marian Evans must be seen as the ground of her intellectual life. In other words, her ideas were always inseparable from her feelings, and from her body in the world: there were no words without flesh. This sense of the necessity to incarnate ideas is the basis of the embodied aesthetic of her fiction. For what early reviewers saw as what Carroll calls her “dissociated sensibility”—a conflict between George Eliot the artist and George Eliot the philosopher—is what might also be called a paradoxical effect of her effort to incarnate her aesthetic.

In this study I am taking up George Eliot’s works more or less chronologically because, as others have recognized, there is a deeply evolutionary quality to George Eliot’s career. Like many writers I suppose, she is loathe to repeat herself and, while readers might recognize characters and situations that she is revisiting, she always needs to believe in her own development as a writer. In her letters she repeatedly champions her first stories, for example, largely because they contain “ideas” that she doubts she “can ever embody again.” This is an important idea in a broader sense too in that her philosophy was grounded in a belief in the idea of progress. This is most neatly exemplified in *Silas Marner*, which is often called a fable, but is a fable not just of one man’s life but of the progress of humanity and civilization, as reflected in the growth of a single consciousness and community. (I will save
further comment on Silas Marner until chapter 5, in which I will discuss more fully George Eliot’s work in the context of evolutionary ideas.)

Two of her earliest reviews reflect the importance of this belief in progressive thinking. In 1849, writing of Froude’s The Nemesis of Faith, she affirms “its suggestive hints as to the necessity of recasting the currency of our religion and virtue.” In an important essay of 1851, her review of R. W. Mackay’s The Progress of the Intellect, George Eliot explicitly refutes the Comtean view that “human progress” means “devot[ing] our energies to the actual rather than to the retrospective,” affirming instead Mackay’s “survey of the past,” which shows “how each age and each race has had a faith and a symbolism suited to its need and its stage of development.” It could be said, I think, that George Eliot’s whole opus demonstrates this view with regard not only to her characters but to herself. In the same essay she affirms “Mackay’s faith” in what theologians came to call progressive revelation, which he sees, she writes, as “co-extensive with the history of human development.” She quotes Mackay at length on the alliance between religion and philosophy. Sounding very much like a prosaic version of the “Prologue” to Tennyson’s In Memoriam, Mackay writes:

Religion and science are inseparable. No object in nature, no subject of contemplation is destitute of a religious tendency and meaning. . . .
Faith [is] the inseparable companion and offspring of knowledge . . .
Faith, as opposed to that blind submission to inexplicable power which usurped its name in the ancient East, is an allegiance of the reason; and as the “evidence of things unseen,” stands on the verge of mysticism, its value must depend on the discretion with which it is formed and used.

In a statement resonating with Kearney’s ideas, Mackay states, “True faith is a belief in things probable.” Equally important to George Eliot’s work is Mackay’s criticism of the pervasive understanding of religion as having “nothing to do with the head” but rather as “exclusively an exercise of the heart and feelings” meant to train moral character yet leaving the feeling “uneducated,” abandoned by reason. It might not be overstating the case to cite this essay as the central text of George Eliot’s philosophy, except that to do so would contradict the philosophy it states. For, as I mentioned above, it is crucial to recognize how vital to her work is this belief in progress. And it is interesting to note that in her last novel, Daniel Deronda, as we will see in chapter 4, her religious revisioning finds her back before her own time, in a kind of mystical Judaism. In her own way, then, George Eliot was engaged in the work that Carlyle called retailoring the tailor, refashioning the myth for a new age. And as with Carlyle, Mackay’s mention of mysticism is apt, in that this is about a new way of seeing the “evidence of things unseen” which is faith.
Incarnation

Another way of talking about this is in terms of “incarnation,” in Christian terms the doctrine that God took on human nature in Jesus Christ: the Word became flesh; the Idea became actual. This is of course the central doctrine of dispute at this time. Strauss takes enormous pains respectfully to debunk the possibility of a historical Jesus and reaffirms the Idea of Jesus despite his lack of historicity; he redefines the incarnation as the idea of humanity as a whole incarnating Christ, pointing to the evolution of an ideal human type. Feuerbach famously turns theology into anthropology, seeing the idea of God incarnate as a projection of human need and desire. It is primarily in her response to various works, mainly in the form of reviews and, in the case of Strauss and Feuerbach, in her translations, that the writer who would become George Eliot (hereafter referred to by that name) articulates her own understanding of the incarnation, but essential to her response is what Kierkegaard would call “indirection.” This approach is evident in two main ways: first, in her refusal to articulate a positive doctrine. As she writes in a letter in 1870, “I have an unreasonable aversion to personal statements. . . . I shrink from decided ‘deliverances’ on momentous subjects, from the dread of coming to swear by my own ‘deliverances’ and sinking into an insistent echo of myself.” Secondly, implicit throughout her fiction is the kind of secular faith expressed in my epigraph from Adam Bede: the belief that finding the truth of things is a matter of discovering and interpreting what has been revealed to the individual heart and remains otherwise hidden. In Hennell and Strauss she found an articulation of her own understanding of faith as a matter of mythical rather than historical truth, and this understanding of the power of story soon led to her own creation of stories that speak of and indeed seek to incarnate human and divine truths, their language replete with biblical echoes. But even when she agreed with them on important matters, none of the writers she studied satisfied her. While convinced of the merit of the scientific view of the fundamental power of nature, for example, she famously refused to embrace Darwin’s Origin of Species: “But to me the Development theory and all other explanations of processes by which things come to be, produce a feeble impression compared with the mystery that lies under the processes.”

It is possible, then, to trace what we might call the progress of George Eliot’s own intellect and her understanding of faith through her works, and I would like now to highlight views that point to her understanding of incarnation. First, however, it is important to clarify how I am using the term “incarnation” for, as Gerald O’Collins points out as he begins his book of that title, the primary theological meaning of incarnation—that God became a man—needs to be distinguished from the common usage by which we describe someone as incarnating a particular quality. Yet, as the writer Kathleen Norris makes clear—beginning with her pointed indefinite article
in “A Word Made Flesh”—incarnation can be seen as the task of all writers, who are advised to “show, do not tell”: good fiction-writing aims to embody and reveal the truth, rather than argue it discursively. Further, related to this is the common understanding of the importance of matching actions to words, commonly called practicing what one preaches—an ethical demand that carries greater weight for writers, who, after all, live by words. It is for these reasons that, as A. S. Byatt notes in her discussion of George Eliot’s understanding of fiction, the question of how to write fiction—because it is a question of bringing together form and substance—became so pressing in the century that challenged the meaning of the Christian concept of the incarnation.

As I hope will become clear, George Eliot’s struggles over the form of her fiction were always struggles to incarnate her ideas in Norris’s sense and were always, at least implicitly and often explicitly, deeply entangled with her own beliefs regarding the incarnation of Christ. In what follows I will highlight four main ways in which George Eliot’s complex understanding of incarnation emerges in her work: first, as suggested above, in the sense of nature itself manifesting the immanent presence of God; second, in her conviction that genuine Christians will put their beliefs into action in the form of love; third, in the way that she affirms the value of the lives and the words of ordinary folk; and, fourth—the foundation for her entire incarnational aesthetic—in the way that she affirms empathetic understanding and ultimately suffering for others as the basis of ethical and fully human living.

George Eliot’s sense of the importance of incarnation and her struggles over its implications are evident in one or more of these four ways in all of her nonfiction. As I mentioned above, she takes from Hennell a completely naturalized, and then from Strauss a demythologized, view of the divine, but in the same year as her translation of Strauss’s Life of Jesus is published she speaks with conviction of “the grand law which God has impressed on all nature—the production and development of life.” While this is far from a belief in the incarnation of Christ of course, it does testify to her fundamental sense of nature’s giving physical form to the divine. More telling is George Eliot’s conflicted response to Strauss’s deconstruction of the idea of God becoming a man: throughout her work on Strauss George Eliot famously grieved for the image of Christ she was abetting him to desecrate. As her biographer Gordon Haight reports:

[She] had a cast about twenty inches high of Thorwaldsen’s “Risen Christ” standing in her study, and on the wall an engraving of Delacroix’s Christ, which she had once thought of using for a frontispiece. She told the Brays that “she was Strauss-sick—it made her ill dissecting the beautiful story of the crucifixion, and only the sight of her Christ-image and picture made her endure it.”
It is interesting to note that her very body rebelled against the words that sought to demythologize the notion of an embodied God.

It is noteworthy that George Eliot’s reviews of Froude and Mackay, with her implied affirmation of their understanding of the incarnation in terms of progressive revelation, follow her Strauss translation in 1849 and 1851 respectively. One can surely speculate that she was seeking a way to reconcile current knowledge with ideas of faith. It is widely understood that she found this a few years later in Feuerbach’s religion of feeling, and I certainly agree that his translation of the theological question of incarnation into anthropological terms and his focus on human feeling as its source and ground—particularly since her work of translating Feuerbach coincided with her becoming intimately involved with the decidedly godless Lewes—satisfied for a time her need to reconcile her rational views with her feelings. But, as with Strauss, her endorsement of Feuerbach was measured according to her determination not to allow her desire for faith to override the truth of experience.

I will speak more of George Eliot’s response to Strauss and Feuerbach when I discuss her early fiction, but it is worth noting here the shift in her theological interest that took place around this time, owing partly at least to her happiness with Lewes and the consequent or at least concurrent move farther away from the Unitarian Bray/Hennell family, with whom she had conducted lively debates about pressing matters of faith. Now, and increasingly as she submerges herself more deeply into her fiction and into her relationship with Lewes, she responds to Sara Hennell’s earnest efforts to clarify doctrines of faith as a mildly interested observer of her friend’s work rather than as a participant in the debates. For a time, indeed, George Eliot shifts attention beyond Christianity to broader theological concerns as she begins translating Spinoza, thus engaging in a more strictly philosophical way in questions of theology, ethics, and metaphysics.

All of these efforts turn out to be significant stepping-stones toward the emergence of George Eliot the novelist, and I want to mention three essays of the time in the context of her developing understanding of incarnation. The first two, “Evangelical Teaching: Dr. Cumming,” published in 1855, and “Worldliness and Other-Worldliness: The Poet Young,” published two years later, are mainly taken up with the second meaning of incarnation mentioned above, the failure of these two clerics to incarnate their faith in love. The first is a scathing rebuke of an evangelical preacher, whose “absence of genuine charity” and “perverted moral judgement” incur the wrath of a vitriolic pen. More fortunate than Dr. Cumming in being a century dead, the poet Edward Young comes under her scrutiny as “a remarkable individual of the species divine,” whom she charges with “radical insincerity as a poetic artist . . . deficient intellectual activity and deficient feeling.” Throughout this piece, as in this comment, we note George Eliot’s understanding of the interrelation of the two senses of incarnation that Norris speaks of, in her
conviction that, for a Christian writer, bad poetry—both intellectually vapid and emotionally false—follows from an inadequate expression (one could say incarnation) of love. Interesting as well is the fact that both Cumming and Young serve as foils for her to express a truer idea of Christianity. “The best minds that accept Christianity as a divinely inspired system,” she writes, “believe that the great end of the Gospel is not merely the saving but the educating of men’s souls, the creating within them of holy dispositions, the subduing of egotistical pretensions, and the perpetual enhancing of the desire that the will of God—a will synonymous with goodness and truth—may be done on earth.”

“The highest state of mind inculcated by the Gospel,” she goes on, “is resignation to the disposal of God’s providence . . . it is to dwell in Christ by spiritual communion with his nature, not to fix the date when He shall appear in the sky.” In contrast to Young’s “deficiency in moral, i.e., in sympathetic emotion,” she celebrates Cowper’s *The Task* “in the genuine love that it breathes.”

George Eliot’s wrath is provoked against both Cumming and Young for their hypocrisy and the superficial thinking that goes along with a lack of genuine charity and sympathy; like a latter-day Chaucer, she lays bare their failure to practice what they preach, as the saying goes, or, in other words, to demonstrate the word incarnate.

Norris’s idea that incarnation for a writer means “show, do not tell” also comes to mind in considering an essay George Eliot published between these two. “Silly Novels by Lady Novelists” is even more caustic but also hilarious, not only perhaps because the object of her rebuke is her own sex but because she was soon to become a “lady novelist” herself. The lady novelists are charged with failings similar to those of the writer clerics above, particularly since their pious aim is to represent Christian ideas. Concerning their attempts to describe human beings, George Eliot charges them with a complete lack of experience “in every form of poverty except poverty of brains” and the consequent complete “want of verisimilitude.” The lady novelist of the “oracular species” fails to convey spiritual truths, a failing which is not surprising since “the means by which she usually chooses to conduct you to true ideas of the invisible is a totally false picture of the visible.”

Interesting here again, then, is her sense that bringing ideas to life in fiction requires a full intellectual and emotional engagement with real-life experience, a notion that suggests her conviction of the interrelation of incarnation and realism.

Even more amusing is George Eliot’s send-up of these poor ladies’ attempts at philosophical reflection in their fiction: “Lady novelists, it appears, can see something else besides matter; they are not limited to phenomena, but can relieve their eyesight by occasional glimpses of the *noumenon*, and are, therefore, naturally better able than anyone else to confound sceptics, even of that remarkable but to us unknown school, which maintains that the soul of man is of the same texture as the polypus.” Further, as poor as the lady novelist is at representing chivalry, “we like the authoress much better on her medieval stilts than on her oracular ones—when she talks of the *Ich* and of ‘subjective’
and ‘objective.’”  The humor here is of course all the more delicious when we realize that George Eliot is making great fun at the expense of the “lady novelists” who fail at doing just what she wants to do: to dramatize in fiction the philosophical and theological ideas that were in the air by incarnating these ideas in the persons of clerics and their female parishioners, a desire that was soon to bear fruit in the three *Scenes of Clerical Life*.

I will talk in more detail about one of these *Scenes* later in this chapter when I focus on the idea of inwardness, but here I want first to follow the theme of incarnation. No one could fail to notice the change in tone from these essays to the stories, which, while anatomizing in sharp detail the failings of various specimens of the divine, never revert to what Rosemary Ashton calls the “magnificent malice” of the essays. Flawed as these clergymen are, riddled as Amos Barton, for example, surely is with the egotism, shallowness, and vanity that would place him firmly among the evangelical preachers she describes in the opening sentence of the essay on Dr. Cumming, the storyteller moves from satirizing and bemoaning Barton’s faults to sympathizing with, perhaps we might say forgiving, his weaknesses and vulnerabilities and even appreciating his few and feeble strengths. Whereas the essayist might herself have been accused of the “lack of genuine charity” she identifies in her targets, the novelist promotes and reflects the kind of fellow feeling that becomes one of the markers of her aesthetic, as she encourages readers to forgive as they would be forgiven. Indeed, particularly in the first story, many find an excess of sympathizing and an overflow of sentiment.

As Elizabeth Jay points out, it is perhaps not surprising that George Eliot should be more careful in writing her stories, since, while she could count on her essays being read by like-minded radicals, who would expect a critique of Christianity from the *Westminster Review*, her stories are meant for the general reading public, and she would be careful not to offend. While this is undoubtedly likely, to me a more important idea emerges here: in writing fiction, I believe, George Eliot encountered a different kind of truth. Bringing characters to life in words demanded a kind of entry into human experience that commanded sympathy. And here it is interesting to look behind the scenes. Because George Eliot published these first stories anonymously, there was much discussion in the reading world about who the author could be. Most readers guessed a cleric, some a cleric who was also a man of science, some crediting his wife with the so-called feminine touches. Much of the speculation fed on trying to identify the real models for the characters. Of interest at this stage in George Eliot’s life is the great drama that would ensue, which came to a head after the anonymous publication of her first novel, *Adam Bede*, when characters in the novel and stories were identified—some of them accurately—with actual people. The drama intensified when a certain Mr. Liggins was widely held to be the real George Eliot and when *Adam Bede, Junior*, a sequel to her novel by another pretender, was announced.
Here was a real confusion between reality and imagination, which soon led George Eliot to disclose her true identity. Obviously, the stakes were high, if a woman—and a freethinking woman at that—came to be revealed as the author of these stories of clerical lives and Christian themes. But more interesting for my purposes here is the struggle one reads of in the letters of this time, when George Eliot seems genuinely surprised to find that some of her characters are recognizable as based on actual people. While she staunchly and eloquently argues for the authenticity of the artistic imagination, in several cases she maintains silence, presumably rather than lie. What seems to be unfolding here is her own understanding of the nature of imagination; she learns that she is bringing to life on the page not abstractions but real persons. The source for her characters is not, as she had supposed, only her imagination, but her imagination drawing from her memory. Of course she always had known that she was writing about what she remembered, but this controversy was crucial in furthering her sense of the mysteries of imagination, and central to this realization was her understanding of incarnation.

I referred above to A. S. Byatt’s edition of George Eliot’s essays, in which she dedicates a whole section of her introduction to “Incarnation.” It begins:

The long nineteenth-century debate about the precise meaning, or lack of meaning, of the Christian concept of the Incarnation, the meeting-point of the divine and the human, the infinite and the finite, is inextricably connected, consciously and unconsciously, to the development of the form of the novel.

Byatt’s thesis certainly is borne out in George Eliot’s case. Despite turning away from the church of her youth, she continued to follow Christian themes and characters in all of her fiction, beginning with a whole volume dedicated to “clerical life.” For, while she abandoned religion in the institutional sense, she not only promoted what she saw as the essential truths of Christianity but proclaimed in a letter, “writing is part of my religion.” Indeed, it might be said that writing became her religion, and that its most recognizable tenet was the living out of the incarnation. Byatt quotes a letter George Eliot wrote during a correspondence in 1866 with the Positivist Frederic Harrison, who wanted her to use her fiction to represent his philosophy, with which she was in some agreement at the time. In this letter George Eliot explicitly speaks of her incarnational aesthetic, as she writes of having “gone through again and again the severe effort of trying to make certain ideas thoroughly incarnate, as if they had revealed themselves to me first in the flesh and not in the spirit.” Here George Eliot echoes Kathleen Norris’s understanding of the writer’s practice: even as the incarnation was the Word made flesh, her job as an artist was the Word (or spirit) made word (fiction) in the incarnate “flesh” of her characters. This has huge implications for the doctrine of her so-called
realism, which she is claiming here was never about imitating real people. The origin, rather, is “in the spirit.”

I want to show now how George Eliot’s realist aesthetic, most explicitly articulated in chapter 17 of her first novel, *Adam Bede*, which was published a year after *Scenes of Clerical Life*, is at the same time a doctrine of incarnation, by illustrating the four main ways (cited above) in which George Eliot’s understanding of incarnation is manifest. Concerning the first point, the immanent presence of God in nature, George Eliot’s fullest response to Darwin (mentioned above) comes in the “indirect” form of her fiction. Throughout her early works in particular many have noted a Wordsworthian celebration of nature and of ordinary human nature, an approach that reflects as well what Erich Auerbach calls the *sermo humilis* that characterizes the language of the Bible, in whose heroes “humiliation and elevation” meet. One example from “Janet’s Repentance,” the third “Scene,” represents many. Commenting on how the restoration of Janet’s spirit lends wonder to “the flowerless monotony” of an ordinary walk, the narrator says: “A very commonplace scene indeed. But what scene was ever commonplace in the descending sunlight, when colour has awakened from its noonday sleep, and long shadows awe us like a disclosed presence?”

Extending this view, *Adam Bede*, her novel of the same year as Darwin’s *Origin of Species*, positively revels in the power of nature and its Ecclesiastes-like imperviousness to human woes. But for George Eliot’s narrator the facts of evolution and natural selection are the text for a lesson: as “children” of nature’s “large family,” we must learn “to be content with little nurture and caressing, and help each other the more.” In other words, the inexorable inhuman power of nature calls human beings to be all the more human. *Adam Bede* reflects the understanding that pervades George Eliot’s early fiction that the natural tragedies of human experience are the site of a kind of natural redemption that carries hints of an underlying supernatural “mystery.”

The second way in which George Eliot demonstrates the mutually reinforcing doctrines of realism and incarnation in *Adam Bede* is to promote an anti-doctrinal form of Christianity that is lived out in the form of love and sympathy (what we would call empathy or compassion) for the weak among us. The two main clerics here are the Anglican Reverend Irwine and the Methodist Dinah Morris, who show their true Christian character by putting doctrine aside in favor of love. Despite Dinah’s rather otherworldly, asexual character (eventually modified when she falls in love), George Eliot convinces readers to see past Dinah’s prim exterior to the genuine faith and love that pervade her spirit. Like Adam, we might not accept her words except that we see her acting on them: “I don’t know what I should ha’ thought of her and her letter if I’d never seen her,” he says, thus testifying to a faith in her words because of the genuineness of her actions, the incarnation of her words. Extending this one step further, we could say that George Eliot wants us to believe, not what Dinah believes, but in the Dinah who believes it.
With Reverend Irwine, George Eliot produces another in her lifelong series of flawed but in this case highly admirable Anglican clerics. As is her wont, she interrupts the flow of her narrative about a third of the way through with the famous chapter 17, entitled, à la Fielding, “In Which the Story Pauses a Little.” By this time, we have already been introduced to Mr. Irwine by her characteristic method (of which more later) of taking us into his home, where he lives with his mother and unmarried, dependent sisters, one of them ill in the irritating way of nineteenth-century ladies, and we have seen him treat his family members and a semiliterate pompous parishioner with deep respect and consummate courtesy. The narrator even makes sure that we notice that he takes off his shoes upon entering the sickroom. But we have also seen him, with huge consequences, miss the opportunity to hear the confession of a young gentleman who visits him, thereby failing to avert the tragedy that is the story’s center. This clerical failure is the catalyst for the narrator’s interjection, as he feels the need to persuade his readers of the worthiness of his cleric. Here follows the famous manifesto of realism in which George Eliot, echoing Wordsworth’s “Preface,” declares her dedication to “the faithful representing of commonplace things.” While much has been made of the realist’s commitment to represent “vulgar details,” it is clear that George Eliot sees “Art” as called to be representative of ordinary life in the context of a love of beauty, not just for its own abstract sense (which she seems to mock as “the divine beauty of form”), but in the form of its “secret of deep human sympathy.”

Therefore let Art always remind us of [“these common, coarse people”]; therefore let us always have men ready to give the loving pains of a life to the faithful representing of commonplace things—men who see beauty in these commonplace things, and delight in showing how kindly the light of heaven falls on them.

This dual commitment pervades her whole career: as she proclaims here, “paint us an angel, if you can, with a floating violet robe, and a face paled by celestial light; paint us yet oftener a Madonna,” but do not “banish from the region of Art those old women scraping carrots.” Indeed this is, I think, more than an aesthetic code to her; it is a religious doctrine. Years later, in the letter to Harrison quoted above, George Eliot states this in her own terms: “I think aesthetic teaching is the highest of all teaching because it deals with life in its highest complexity. But if it ceases to be purely aesthetic—if it lapses anywhere from the picture to the diagram—it becomes the most offensive of all teaching.” What is most interesting to me is the way that her discussion of art in chapter 17 of Adam Bede, which we might see as a violation of her own doctrine, in that she feels compelled to speak in abstract, diagrammatic terms of her belief instead of letting her “picture” express itself through story and character, in a larger sense does exactly
represent her belief, in that her defense of Mr. Irwine is also a defense of her art, and vice versa. She moves seamlessly from the outline of her aesthetic to Adam’s defense of Mr. Irwine and his non-doctrinal brand of religion that spills over from the pulpit into the mundane activities of his life. In other words, Mr. Irwine is like George Eliot herself, whose art loves her characters despite what they believe or even how they behave. When she talks about her art, she is also talking about religion; when she tells her reader, echoing the Book of Common Prayer, that here is a man “with whom I desire you to be in perfect charity,” she is also echoing Mr. Irwine himself, who would not only speak the words of Common Prayer but would speak the words and perform the acts of charity to everyone. She would have her readers do unto him as they would be done by, as she is doing by him and by every one of her characters, in charity. It is supremely logical, then, that George Eliot moves in one chapter from a defense of her aesthetic to a defense of her cleric. The relation between the two is essential; her job as an artist is to represent her cleric as he really is and to treat him with the same loving care that he treats his parishioners. Understanding that “the true and the good are one,” as she says in her essay on Mackay, is “the essential element of religion.”

Language is important to this aesthetic—as central as it is to Wordsworth—and while George Eliot might be seen to violate her own code when she soars off into a eulogy of art, her true love for the common folk comes out when she speaks their language, always a moment of genuine sympathy and pleasure for the reader. When the narrator says, for example, that Mrs. Poyser “thanked God she never had any of your varnished rubbish in her house,” George Eliot has thoroughly entered into the canny, honest pride of the farmer’s wife. Likewise her immersion in biblical culture is clear when she has her characters speak the language of Methodists. She too, then, is practicing what she preaches in using “loving pains” to bring her characters to life, thereby exemplifying the third way in which her incarnational aesthetic takes realistic shape. And here we touch on the key element in George Eliot’s understanding of the incarnation, which underlies her whole aesthetic and provides the major theme of Adam Bede: the necessity for and the meaning of suffering, or, as she calls it in that novel the “mystery of human sorrow.”

Feuerbach’s description of the God who is made in the image of man turns on the human desire for a God who loves us to the point of excruciating suffering and painful death. He writes eloquently of the idolatry of feeling that produces the idea of an incarnated god. “But the proposition: God is a feeling Being,” Marian Evans translates him as writing, “is only the religious paraphrase of the proposition: feeling is absolute, divine in its nature.” In another famous section (chapter 25), Feuerbach celebrates the value of bread and water as purely physical substances, thereby naturalizing the elements of Christian sacraments. Both of these ideas have been widely used to support readings of a Feuerbachian Adam Bede. And generally critics see in the
novel either a naturalizing of the sacred or a sacramentalizing of the natural. Both of these perspectives are valid, I think, because they are rather mutually illuminating than oppositional. As I noted before, George Eliot represents her two key religious characters as genuine embodiments of their beliefs, meaning that they practice what they believe in (although Rev. Irwine’s beliefs are stated as expressions of his church affiliation, rather than in more personal terms). And she affirms the faith of these characters as being founded in what has been seen as a Feuerbachian kind of religious feeling. Dinah’s faith, for example, is expressed in terms of the kind of Methodist “inner light” which she experiences as a deep feeling of God’s presence and guidance. And Adam, likewise, expresses his own non-Methodist faith and affirms that of Rev. Irwine in terms of “deep, spiritual things in religion” that are matters of “feelings,” not “doctrines and notions.”

Throughout, George Eliot affirms feeling as an expression of human participation in “an unfathomable ocean of love and beauty” that makes human love “hardly distinguishable from religious feeling.” Adam, for example, in trying to win Dinah away from religious feeling to feeling for him, says, “feeling’s a sort of knowledge” and Dinah’s ultimate affirmation of the incarnation, one might say, is expressed in her ability to love God and Adam.

But the fullest expression of this capacity for feeling is through sympathy with weaker fellow beings and the suffering this entails. The whole novel is based on a demonstration of what must be seen as the essence of the Christian doctrine of incarnation, the transformative power of suffering, as George Eliot implicitly argues against the hated doctrine of compensation on the one hand and the notion of meaningless pain on the other. The most explicit reference to the Christian interpretation of suffering in the novel comes in a curious incident when the narrator notes how he has come across, in foreign lands (never in his own Loamshire) “an image of great agony: the agony of the cross.” He speculates that a traveler who did not know the meaning of “this image of agony” would “find it strangely out of place in the midst of this joyous nature,” not knowing that it pointed to the sufferings of some “foolish lost lamb,” such as the wayfaring Hetty. He goes on, “No wonder man’s religion has much sorrow in it: no wonder he needs a suffering God.” This moment echoes the much-repeated report (cited above) that while Evans was translating Strauss “it made her ill dissecting the beautiful story of the crucifixion, and only the sight of her Christ-image and picture made her endure it.” George Eliot continued to have a strong attraction to the story of a suffering savior. And, while it is easily possible to read Adam Bede as a revisioning of the incarnation in Feuerbachian terms, the image of Hetty as a straying lamb is one of many allusions to Christ’s parables that points to Eliot’s non-Feuerbachian response. For George Eliot could not think of God as what Feuerbach calls “a commonplace book, a nucleus of aggregation” from which humans derive “an aim” for moral action. And, perhaps in spite of herself, her own stories reflect an aesthetic that is grounded in an
incarnational approach that is modeled after the parables and stories of the incarnated God.

As I mentioned before, it is crucial to recognize George Eliot’s indirection as essential to her approach. Like Kierkegaard, I would argue, she uses stories, not to tell the reader what to believe, but to inspire in the individual reader a belief in her or his own “capability of an altered vision.” Like Kierkegaard’s parables, as described by the theologian Thomas Oden, her stories “intend to communicate an enriched capacity for self-examination leading to increased moral sensitivity and intensified spirituality.”

As the theologian and storyteller John Shea puts it, “A Christian culture must always generate secondary forms. The imagination must play with the story of Jesus and resymbolize it under the influences of the present experiences of the Spirit.” Like Jesus, in fact, Christian storytellers must release their stories and allow for this kind of “play” of interpretation. It is important, then, to affirm for George Eliot’s stories the possibility of differing interpretations, because just such hermeneutic openness is essential to her aesthetic, even as it was essential to Christ’s storytelling. One reader may in fact see her stories as affirming Feuerbach’s religion of humanity, and another reader may not. The only thing one can say with certainty is that she leaves the theological meaning a matter of interpretation, demanding only that readers recognize the personal message of love and charity. And perhaps in this regard, oddly enough, she is imitating the message of the Gospel: as Adam says, it isn’t notions and doctrines, but actions and feelings that count.

Inwardness

George Eliot’s understanding of incarnation is knit together with her understanding of inwardness. Firstly, in a way that I have already been suggesting, incarnation—in religion and in art—is a matter of revealing what will remain hidden to those who do not have eyes to see (and various forms of the trope of vision and blindness, as has often been noted, are rife in her work). While George Eliot is clear that her call as an artist is to represent the “commonplace things,” it is at the same time “to see beauty” in them: women peeling carrots need to be represented alongside angels and madonnas. In this respect she is explicit about the fact that the manifest superiority of her major characters—Adam, Dinah, and Rev. Irwine—is based on the extraordinary perceptual ability that they share with their creator: the ability to see beauty and worth in apparent unworthiness. Throughout her career George Eliot represents social groups in need of a special person. What qualifies these characters as special is their capacity for inwardness. Inwardness is the corollary to incarnation, in that while incarnation makes the idea visible (though as noted above, infinitely debatable), inwardness is a matter of a hidden, invisible, “unfathomable” space of engagement.
Most readers associate George Eliot with the idea of inwardness in the form of her masterful psychological approach to character, and Michael Davis’s recent book situates her skill in the context of nineteenth-century psychology, showing her conversance with a complex and erudite mass of contemporary works on psychology, most importantly those of her husband. Davis includes a chapter on religion and science, focusing on *Daniel Deronda*, but the extent of the interplay in George Eliot’s work between religious consciousness and psychological consciousness has not, to my knowledge, been explored. Davis finds abundant evidence in George Eliot’s works for two points that are fundamental to what I want to argue here: he reiterates how important to George Eliot is the fact of individuality, including the individuality of each consciousness; and the fact of unknowability: that each mind is to a great extent an unknown, not only to others, but, I would argue, to itself. In light of the wave of philosophical debate on this issue—notably, as I have mentioned, Strauss’s argument for a universal human and Comte’s idea of a kind of social salvation—George Eliot’s adherence to the belief in an ultimately mysterious individuality is important. In fact, I want to argue, her belief in individuality, and the inwardness that is its marker, is profoundly religious.

Charles Taylor speaks of the idea of inwardness when he traces the development of the modern sense of the self, showing that it is Augustine who first invokes “the language of inwardness,” thus creating what Taylor calls “a stance of radical reflexivity.” Augustine takes this step from ontology to epistemology to show that “God is to be found in the intimacy of self-presence,” but Descartes later concludes that what we find in this space is not God, but our selves. I turn again here to Kierkegaard, the great prophet of inwardness and individuality. Although George Eliot never knew his work, so far as I have been able to discover, Kierkegaard’s response to the great Hegelian wave, including Feuerbach, is useful to establish the ground of my argument because it is based on an aversion to Hegel’s dismantling of the importance of individuality, an aversion which George Eliot clearly shared. Feuerbach turns the space of inwardness—human subjectivity—into a reflector of and projector onto the outer world. “I unconditionally repudiate *absolute*, immaterial, self-sufficing speculation—that speculation which draws its material from within,” he asserts; “I hold *that* alone to be an object which has an existence beyond one’s own brain.” Feuerbach wants to turn the gaze of religion “from the internal to the external,” from “the sign to the thing signified.” The supposed object of religious feeling, he claims, is also its subject: “thy own being.” There is only our perception, he would say, which claims to find outside what is really just inside of us; we would understand this if we truly appreciated what is really outside of ourselves, natural elements such as bread and wine, for example. (No wonder the “silly ladies” were confused.)

In opposition to such ideas, Kierkegaard’s consuming passion was to restore authenticity to contemporary Christianity by rescuing the essential ingredient
that he saw as being destroyed in Hegel’s philosophy—the individual—and
to do so by redefining the individual as the religious subject. Kierkegaard
identifies the meaning of existing as a human being with existing religiously;
that is, with a sense of what he calls inwardness. For Kierkegaard, “subject-
ivity,” for individuals located in time, “is the truth” and “the truth exists for
them in inwardness.” Also relevant to my argument here is Kierkegaard’s
understanding of the meaning of suffering: it is only when suffering “turns
the person inward,” he says, with Keatsian resonance, that a person can
“become an individual.”

George Eliot’s attention to inwardness, in terms very similar to Kierke-
gaard’s, constitutes a virtual epistemology, if not a theology, of interiority.
Indeed, it seems to me that her understanding of inwardness takes her away
from Feuerbach and toward Kierkegaard. In writing to a friend to explain
how she could have written in Adam Bede of Evangelical Christianity
from the inside, as it were, George Eliot writes that, despite her rejection of
“dogmatic Christianity,” her experience from the ages of 15 to 22 among
Evangelicals left her with “the profoundest interest in the inward life of sin-
cere Christians.” And though she acknowledges here that “that inward self”
of her own has changed since those years, it is clear that, as Gordon Haight
writes in his “Introduction” to her Letters, “Without her intimate knowledge
of the Evangelical mind George Eliot would have lacked part of the experi-
ence on which her wide sympathy was founded.” It is in fact her insistence
on interiority that is the basis of her characterization and her epistemology.

There are two main elements to George Eliot’s epistemology of interi-
ority. The first is the repeated, multifaceted invitation to readers to “come
inside”—the church, the farmhouse, the bedchamber, the mind of her char-
acters. In a way, George Eliot is the great historian of human conscience and
consciousness because of her profound sense of inner space, and of the dif-
ference between the outside and the inside, of surface and depth, which she
represents as markers of egotism. One of many memorable moments that
construct this sense of different spatial orientations is the “Bed-chambers”
chapter in Adam Bede, when Hetty’s solipsistic and shallow gaze in the
mirror is contrasted with Dinah’s visionary gaze out the window and up to
the sky. (Taylor might call this reflection vs. reflexivity.) Related to this and
also represented well in Hetty and Dinah is the kind of “feeling knowledge”
that George Eliot celebrates: a knowing that is not only sympathetic or empa-
thetic but personal and individual and costly. It is a knowing that is a kind of
suffering because it requires that one enter in to the experience of the other.
As I’ve said, sympathetic imagination is the mark of George Eliot’s religious
and aesthetic code. As many have noted, she was fortunate to have George
Henry Lewes as her first and her ideal reader; it was largely because her first
reader was an intelligent man who loved her that she was able to love her
characters into existence. And indeed, her letters record how making him cry
was the sign that she had engaged his sympathetic imagination. If she could
make this intellectual, critical, unchurched man cry about the sorrows of
“an Evangelical curate and a woman with ‘spiritual’ weaknesses,” as Lewes
described the main characters of “Janet’s Repentance,” then, she believed,
she had done something worth doing.

George Eliot’s understanding of interior being, like Kierkegaard’s, is most
often constructed in terms of an intimate relationship, not of romantic love,
which she leaves to our imaginations, but of confession. It is at this site of
intimacy that her desire to “make others feel” what she feels is most evident,
just as Dinah’s desire to make others believe what she believes is most power-
ful and effective not when she is preaching in public space but when she is
fighting for the soul of Hetty in the richly symbolic prison cell. The confes-
sion scene in “Janet’s Repentance” is the climax of a story that is based on a
real-life situation from the time when George Eliot’s “inward self” was develop-
ing in the Evangelical community. In one of her many stories of rescue, the
abused, wayward Janet is saved by the intervention of the Evangelical minis-
ter, Mr. Tryan, another of George Eliot’s admired clerics. This is the third of
the clerical Scenes, and from the first page of the first one, when the reader is
bid to “pass through the baize doors,” she now arrives at the inner sanctum
of intersubjectivity. George Eliot frames the narrative with pleas to the reader
to recognize that “the only true knowledge of our fellow-man is that which
enables us to feel with him”; that, whatever the followers of the “philosophic
Deity” of abstraction might tell us, one lost sheep shows the “transcendent
value of human pain”; that “analysis” must be “lit up by . . . love”; that
“feelings of trust and resignation” must fill up the blanks of “the margin of
ignorance which surrounds all our knowledge.” Mr. Tryan proves a worthy
confessor when, accepting that necessary ignorance, he “enter[s] into the only
half-expressed secrets of her spiritual weakness” and responds to Janet’s need
for confession with a confession of his own. George Eliot makes clear that
for Janet and Mr. Tryan this confession takes place in the inward space that
Augustine and Kierkegaard posit, even seeming to invoke the latter when she
writes that “confiding in human sympathy . . . prepared [Janet’s] soul for that
stronger leap by which faith grasps the idea of divine sympathy.” In explicit-
ly differentiating on the last page of the story between Janet’s sense of the
“Divine love that had rescued her” and the “human love” that had mediated
the rescue, George Eliot constructs the inward self as what Kierkegaard calls
“a relation” to both the human and the divine other.

What is remarkable, however, is George Eliot’s intention to show that even
the shallowest characters, notably Hetty, have a depth, an inside, which is far
from evident on the surface; or that they have a possible depth, which can
be learned or perhaps constructed, with the help of a loving community, by
their response to suffering. Along with that of Hetty, George Eliot’s explora-
tion of Silas Marner’s consciousness is a brilliant example, as I will discuss
in chapter 5. Hetty’s failure is represented as a kind of childish but at the
same time vicious egotism that manifests itself as a failure of empathy and a
complete self-absorption, as if she is stuck in a Lacanian pre-linguistic mirror state. In fact she is nothing but a reflection. And the huge struggle in the prison cell, which Dinah sees as a spiritual battle to save Hetty’s soul before she is executed, is at the same time an intense struggle to make Hetty see that there is something besides herself in the world, that there is an outside, and, conversely, an inside, to herself. Hetty’s failure throughout the novel is not only a moral and emotional failure but fundamentally a failure of imagination, which to George Eliot is at the same time a failure of memory and of belief, which together constitute for her the basis of human fellowship and community and of individual identity.

George Eliot delves more deeply into the fraught relation between imagination, memory, and identity in her next works. Although many see George Eliot’s early period as including Silas Marner, mainly because of its obvious affinity in setting and tone, I believe that in a psychological and religious sense this novel is written on the other side of a great divide, nicely symbolized by the bridge that the narrator leans on in chapter 1 of The Mill on the Floss, the novel that follows a year after Adam Bede. For Silas Marner, while it deals with the time of her early experience in the Midlands, is written from the perspective of the writer who has used earlier fictions to take her beyond that formative time.

Along with Wordsworth and Dickens, George Eliot helped create a more vivid evocation of childhood than readers had before seen. The importance of childhood to the shaping of consciousness and identity is most strongly represented in The Mill on the Floss, where its memory and imaginative reconstruction are represented, as in Wordsworth, as a religious shrine. For George Eliot, our response to “the joy of childhood” is deeply akin to our response to religious experience, and her sense of the interrelation of memory, imagination, and faith is nicely captured in the midst of a description of Adam’s faith in Hetty: though “much” of “the joy of childhood” has “vanish[ed] utterly from our memory” and “is gone forever from our imagination,” she writes, “we can only believe in” it. It is interesting that in The Mill on the Floss, which, rooted as it is in a working out of the trauma of familial and social rejection, is certainly the most autobiographical of her novels, George Eliot asks the reader to “believe in” Maggie’s childhood joy while showing how much of the purported joy was a product of Maggie’s imagination, mixing memory and desire, breeding lilacs out of the dead land. The Mill on the Floss clearly puts a whole other spin on the idea of inwardness, first of all simply in taking George Eliot to a deeper inward place than any of her other works. Before looking further at the implications of this, I want to bring in to the discussion a short story, published between Adam Bede and The Mill, which served as a kind of doorkeeper to this other level of interiority. For my purposes the story bears the perfect title “The Lifted Veil,” for it is densely figured with inwardness. The story is unique in George Eliot’s opus in that it is a dark Gothic tale about a very unpleasant, self-centered,
melancholy young man with unusual powers of insight. It comes at a crucial juncture following the revelation of George Eliot’s real identity after she became fed up with being impersonated; and, given the associations of the veil with marriage and discretion, it seems to reflect anxieties of self-exposure, not only as an author but as a common-law wife who is daring, after all, to preach to her readers.\footnote{Two of George Eliot’s most famous statements are relevant here. One (mentioned earlier) is her comment in a letter of this time with regard to Darwin’s \textit{Origin of Species}: “But to me the Development theory and all other explanations of processes by which things come to be, produce a feeble impression compared with the mystery that lies under the processes.”} The other is the famous squirrel sentence from \textit{Middlemarch}, commenting on the hidden tragedy that comprises ordinary experience: “If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel’s heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence.”\footnote{In “The Lifted Veil” it is as if Eliot lifts the veil and sees the unmediated pain underneath the surface. To me it is as if she is contemplating the horror of a kind of Nietzschean perception without sympathy, inwardness without religious consciousness.} In \textit{The Mill on the Floss} memory itself and the past from which it comes are the antagonists. This novel is the great culmination of George Eliot’s early work and the enabler of what comes after, as she explicitly explores the implications of the “progress of the intellect” and of society, mainly by thematizing the education of a girl and boy and the growth of their consciousness in an oppressive provincial backwater. George Eliot explicitly structures the novel in biblical terms of a Paradise Lost, and the narrator explicitly identifies Maggie and Tom as “martyr[s]” of “historical advance.”\footnote{One could say that Maggie is Mary Anne Evans reincarnated: the precocious, affectionate child deeply in need of the love of her father and particularly her brother. Like Mary Anne, Maggie revels in the world of imagination and seeks safety and transcendence as a young woman in a strict religious otherworldliness that is actually a self-repression. Instead of making the break from her family that Mary Anne was able to do, Maggie binds herself to her past, living under the sway of a fierce god named Tom, who knows no forgiveness and no pity. Here, it seems to me, George Eliot allows her imagination to spell out some of the implications of her creed. In particular, the notion that feeling is a kind of knowing is a fatal one for Maggie, who}
invests her own identity in her brother’s unforgiving care, believing that he must love her because he knows her so well. The narrator of *Adam Bede* had told us we must believe in those childhood joys; here, Maggie does believe, and it is this belief that kills her. When Tom says, after her elopement, “I can’t believe in you anymore,” we know, as does Maggie, that he has never believed in her. Her faith is completely one-sided, completely a construction of her imagination.

As she had *Adam Bede*, George Eliot interrupts the story of the Tullivers mid-way, this time to tell readers that tragedy is possible among these “vulgar” provincial types. She uses two European rivers, the Rhine and the Rhone, to set up the same kind of contrast she had created in the earlier novel between the woman peeling carrots and the angel, again affirming two different kinds of beauty. When tragedy does come, in the form of a river overflowing its banks, it is as if her art is rebelling against “the divine beauty of form” that allows her to keep from going mad with hearing the squirrel’s heartbeat, as if the tears of sympathy are mocking their proponent. What, after all, she might be saying, is the value of art, of culture, of sympathy, when nature is always and everywhere the conqueror? Maggie’s dramatic drowning with her nemesis brother Tom has been the subject of endless interpretations, almost all of them correct. Maggie does triumphantly kill Tom; she does allow social disrepute to destroy her; George Eliot does fantasize a death that is both revenge and defeat; it is a sacrifice, a martyrdom, a shame. That it is all of these things and more testifies to the glorious triumph of George Eliot’s narrative imagination. Frank Kermode has written that the loss of “the sense of an ending” and of an authenticated beginning is responsible for a rich literary heritage. There is a direct correlation, he writes, between “the subtlety and variety in our fictions and remoteness and doubtfulness about ends and origins.”

It is not just Maggie who dies at the end of George Eliot’s novel, then, but the whole culture, the whole past that gave birth to her. For it is because of the death of that young self, because she has the courage to test the limits of faith and imagination, that we have novels of such “subtlety and variety” as these.

### A Concluding Unscientific Postscript

The Word became flesh, says the author of the Gospel of John, and dwelt among us. The Word Incarnate spoke in parables and metaphors, inspiring faith by activating imagination and awakening an attitude of inwardness. This same interrelation of incarnation, inwardness, and imagination, I have been arguing, constitutes the basis of the aesthetic of George Eliot’s early fiction. Maggie’s death is the most important moment in George Eliot’s career, for it is only by killing her young self that she creates her authorial self. This is crucial not only for George Eliot’s career but in the larger scope of literary history, because it figures, not what Barthes famously called the death
of the author that followed on the death of God, but instead what Foucault in response called “the coming into being of the notion of ‘author’ [that] constitutes the privileged moment of individualization.” The italics are Foucault’s, but they could be mine, both because George Eliot’s conviction that the individual is the site of belief and value is crucial to her incarnational aesthetic and because Maggie’s death heralds the birth in her creator of a new understanding of incarnation and its relation to narrative.

It is interesting that shortly after the publication of *The Mill on the Floss* George Eliot began what would become regular visits to Italy and traveled once to Spain, where she viewed sites and artworks of religious significance from the pre-Reformation world. This geographical and religious movement is the sign of an imaginative shift beyond the Evangelical religious terrain of her early inspiration; it is part of her quest “to know,” as she says in a letter of this time, “if possible, the lasting meaning that lies in all religious doctrine from the beginning till now.” This continuing quest is the subject of the following chapters, but if readers experience in George Eliot’s later, post-Evangelical fiction—as they surely do—what Richard Kearney calls the “redemptive power” of narrative imagination, it is because she has herself learned of this mysterious, indeed mystical, power in the writing of these early stories.