I was reading the sorrows of the aged Hecuba with great enjoyment. I wish an immortal drama could be got out of my sorrows, that people might be the better for them two thousand years hence. But fog, east wind, and headache are not great dramatic motives.


Maggie’s death inaugurates the second phase of George Eliot’s career. The passage is marked in several interrelated ways: historical, geographical, aesthetic, psychological, and religious. While many critics note the change in tone and subject matter from early to middle works, the editors of George Eliot’s journals, Margaret Harris and Judith Johnston, acknowledge the importance of the geographical element, judging the Italian journey of 1860 as the crucial turning point that marks “the shift from the working out of childhood memories to more studied work on the past in relation to the present, both reading the past in relation to the present, and writing it.”¹ I would agree with this assessment but argue that what has been consistently overlooked is the way in which George Eliot’s shift in religious perspective undergirds and helps to explain the meaning of the change in her approach.

As I argued in the last chapter, George Eliot wrestles with Maggie in a Hegelian life-and-death struggle that results in the death of the character and the birth of the author, such that one could say that the character is the mother of the author. The next phase—to pursue the Freudian model for a moment—is the adolescent testing of this new authorial life. What George Eliot does next will determine the meaning and value of Maggie’s death and the very existence of the entity we have come to know as “George Eliot.” We could see Maggie’s sacrifice as the culmination of George Eliot’s novelistic initiation, and in these terms one can understand the peculiar intensity that charges the writing of the next decade, with the shadow of futility and failure hovering over them. One could also say that Maggie dies a martyr
to idealism in that her hopes and dreams can never be realized in the actual world of her experience. In this sense her struggle and defeat mark the next stage in George Eliot's lifelong effort to realize the ideal, to find a credible way to bring the ideal into her fiction and to model for readers the relation between the ideal and the actual in the world. While this could be said of any of George Eliot's works perhaps, this period is marked by a more deliberate exploration of the dark side of idealism.

This is the period of her two least-read novels, *Romola* and *Felix Holt, The Radical*, as well as her almost never-read long dramatic poem, *The Spanish Gypsy*. While scholars always find interest in these texts, they are typically judged as at best “transitional” works and at worst and by most as works of relative failure. George Eliot's journals and letters of the time confirm this period to be her deepest slough of despond; never a stranger to discouragement, she struggles during this time with serious depression and even despair over the worth of her work. In other words, she not only explores the disappointments of idealism in her fiction but she experiences them herself. What most distinguishes George Eliot's work at this time, however, is the way she turns despair and disillusionment to account by making failure her theme. In this chapter I will explore some of the ways in which George Eliot's experience with failure informed the development of the incarnational aesthetic that shapes and grounds her religious imagination.

**Geographical and Historical**

This period begins a phase in which, having moved beyond the religious terrain of her youth, George Eliot is seeking a new kind of holy ground for her imagination; this quest took geographical and historical shape. Beginning with the death of her father, she had always traveled extensively, but in this period she travels farther and more frequently and ventures more deliberately to push geographical boundaries. We might see her using her body to mimic her internal adventures, with her travels reflecting her religious and personal journeying. As a young woman she had visited Switzerland and Germany, as if, following her intense engagement with Strauss and Feuerbach, she meant physically to go over the terrain of Protestantism that would soon be the ground of her fiction. The new stage begins in 1860 when, following the completion of *The Mill on the Floss*, she and Lewes embark upon their first Italian journey. This is the first of several visits to Italy, followed by a truly adventurous and highly significant journey to Spain, the nations which, along with France, are most associated with Roman Catholicism. Spatial journeying is matched then with temporal journeying when *Romola* takes her imagination to pre-Reformation Renaissance Italy, and *The Spanish Gypsy* takes her to medieval Spain, and thereby to religious worlds that predate both the Victorian crisis of faith and her own.
During her travels, she is gathering material and models for her post-Evangelical aesthetic, for these journeys mark a break out of the provincial environment that had suffocated Maggie. *The Mill on the Floss* has already suggested the need for such religious questing. Two of the most important references to religion in Maggie’s life are her intense engagement with Thomas à Kempis and the futility of Dr. Kenn’s attempt to help her in the face of the unloving Christian community. But I want to draw attention to a moment in Maggie’s childhood when George Eliot points to a major flaw in the church. This occurs early in the novel when Mr. Stelling, Tom’s tutor, famously crushes the precocious Maggie’s spirit by granting her only the “superficial cleverness” of girls.  

In talking about the education Tom is receiving, the narrator makes a long disquisition on the human dependence on metaphors, a dependence which prevents Tom’s tutor from understanding the nature of his pupil’s mind and teaching him accordingly. This critique of Mr. Stelling is part of a larger critique of an education system that uses language to close, instead of open, children’s minds. But crucially this is also part of George Eliot’s critique of religion, for Mr. Stelling is also a cleric, trying to eke out a living to supply his wife with fashionable clothes and furnishings. In this context the narrator writes of Mr. Stelling:

> He thought religion was a very excellent thing, and Aristotle a great authority, and deaneries and prebends useful institutions, and Great Britain the providential bulwark of Protestantism, and faith in the unseen a great support to afflicted minds: he believed in all these things, as a Swiss hotel-keeper believes in the beauty of the scenery around him, and in the pleasures it gives to artistic visitors.

In the scathing image of England as a “providential bulwark of Protestantism,” George Eliot points here to the narrow, provincial, self-satisfied attitude of a church that defines God and the universe in its own limited terms. Here too she alludes to the cleric’s condescending attitude toward artists, who see more in the world around them than the hotel-keeper can imagine. And here too she points to the fundamental ingredient both of imagination and of religion: a faith in the unseen, which is guided by the senses and the reason but refuses to be limited by them.

One of the predominant tropes throughout George Eliot’s fiction is the narrow vs. wide view, and here she gives it explicitly geographical shape in representing the smallness of English Protestantism. This is important in signaling the literal sense that grounds the imaginative journeying she is promoting; for it is significant that George Eliot had recently made a return visit to Switzerland, the destination of her first expedition away from England, and I don’t think it is pushing the point too much to say that her analogy about the Swiss hotel-keeper gains imaginative power from its being based on actual experience. This analogy points vividly to a major
idea that underlies her fiction: imagination is the vital ingredient of faith that is lacking in the religious institutions of her time, and religion must be vitally constituted of imagination. George Eliot’s own experience manifested this need when she sought inspiration beyond the English Protestant “bulwark” in European countries of predominantly Roman Catholic cultural background.

George Eliot’s letters of the 1860s contain several significant references that mark out the religious terrain she is traversing at this time. In response to two friends’ interest in Roman Catholicism, she writes in December 1860 that while she adheres to the view that the “highest ‘calling and election’ is to do without opium,” she does not begrudge anyone else the “comfort” to be found in the “forms and ceremonies” of churchgoing. She goes so far as to say, “sympathetically, I enjoy them myself. But I have faith in the working-out of higher possibilities than the Catholic or any other church has presented.”

Earlier that month she had looked forward “with delight” to a performance of Messiah; and two Decembers later, after another Messiah, she sees in Handel’s “conception of the suffering Messiah” what must “surely” represent “the acme of poetry.” One of her strongest statements comes in a letter of a month earlier when she refutes any propensity on her part “to rob a man of his religious belief.” She asserts:

I have too profound a conviction of the efficacy that lies in sincere faith, and the spiritual blight that comes with No-faith, to have any negative propagandism in me. In fact, I have very little sympathy with Free-thinkers as a class, and 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.

It is this quest for the meaning in religion that takes her, if not to “the beginning,” at least far beyond her own space and time to Renaissance Italy and medieval Spain. Toward the end of the decade, in August 1868, having finished The Spanish Gypsy, she writes of her “yearning affection towards the great religions of the world which have reflected the struggles and needs of mankind, with a very different degree of completeness from the shifting compromise called ‘philosophical theism.’ ”

Aesthetic and Generic

As Harris and Johnston note, this period begins “a phase of experiment in GE’s career,” as this spatiotemporal movement provides the ground for a re-visioning in generic and aesthetic terms. This experimentation takes three related forms: a burgeoning interest in and use of other arts, particularly music and painting; the writing and publishing of her own poetical works,
with *The Spanish Gypsy* being the most ambitious of these; and significant discursive wrestling with the question of novelistic form.

To consider the first of these, the attention to other arts, it is evident that while she had always demonstrated a penchant for *ekphrasis* by writing about other art forms, *Romola* and *The Spanish Gypsy* are particularly marked by an experimentation with the thematic power of visual art and architecture. Further, *The Gypsy* features a self-reflexive exploration of the power of poetry and music, not only in its generic form but also in the songs and dances within it. In short, rather than being just a phase of experiment, this period points to an unending spirit of experimentation, and this quest for new generic forms of artistic expression is integrally related to the quest for “higher possibilities” in religion, partly because much of her understanding of “the great religions of the world” comes at this time through art.

George Eliot’s European journals are full of references to music and art. She and Lewes become personally acquainted with Liszt, dine with Mendelssohn, critique Wagner’s operas, and hear Clara Schumann play. They tramp through the churches and galleries of Dresden, Florence, Venice, Rome, and Madrid, among others, absorbing and assessing and comparing works of art. While she makes the most direct use of her exposure to classical and religious visual art in *Middlemarch*, it is also the source of her inspiration for *The Spanish Gypsy* and informs the themes of *Romola*, as I will discuss. But George Eliot’s passion for music is evident from her earliest work—in Caterina’s singing in “Mr. Gilfil’s Love Story” and in Maggie’s piano-playing and her susceptibility to beautiful singing in *The Mill on the Floss*—to her last, in the female singers in *Daniel Deronda*.

The second form of generic experimentation to highlight is George Eliot’s own poetry. George Eliot clearly showcases her interest in music in her fiction and uses it to explore themes such as passion and self-expression, but it is interesting that she writes several poems at this time that focus on musicians, thereby allowing herself to explore themes related to art and creativity outside of the constraints of novelistic realism. Her attention to music finds intriguing expression toward the end of this period in two substantial long dramatic poems, “The Legend of Jubal” and “Armgart” in 1870, and two slighter poems, “Arion” and “Stradivarius,” in 1873. In all of these, music is represented as a high spiritual calling inevitably linked to misunderstanding and failure. Jubal is the creator of music, who is glorified at a distance but then mocked, beaten, and left to die, a prophet without honor in his own land. Arion is a great musician who dramatically leaps to his death at the moment the men who would rob and kill him realize the power and worth of his music. Antonio Stradivari dedicates his life to trying to make the perfect instrument, caring nothing for his obscurity and the philistine attitude of his fellow artist. And Armgart—a brilliant, proud, successful singer—is felled by an illness that destroys her voice and results in her becoming a dedicated teacher and a better person. These poems are vital to the process of
developing George Eliot’s incarnational aesthetic. For poetry offers space for more fanciful glimpses than she permits herself in her fiction, allowing her to indulge in Romantic, indeed tragic, celebrations of the glorious, painful calling of the artist and to speculate on ways to reframe apparent failure as a sign of true art and its sacred, perhaps immortal, value.

While any of these poems merits fuller discussion—and I will discuss “Armgart” and “Jubal” in chapter 3—I will focus here on another long poem from 1865, entitled variously “A Minor Prophet” or “My Vegetarian Friend.” This poem is not a Romantic piece about music or art but instead treats the broader question of idealism and related issues of perfection and failure with a more sardonic eye. The poem explores the idea of human progress that preoccupied Victorian thinking in the wake of Darwinism and other challenges to the traditional understanding of a universe in which God is overseeing humanity’s advance toward an afterlife. It is framed as a playful debate between the titular Prophet and his friend the narrator. The Prophet, whose middle name is “Baptist,” adheres to his ancestors’ belief in a “Millennium” in which haberdashery uniformity has been achieved, “casual talk” is “as good as sermons” (“A Minor Prophet,” line 20), and the vegetarian diet has done away with any need for animals, with the result that human beings can fill up the whole “terraqueous globe” (line 75). The Prophet looks forward to a time when

All these rude products will have disappeared
Along with every faulty human type.
By dint of diet vegetarian
All will be harmony of hue and line,
Bodies and minds all perfect, limbs well-tuned,
And talk quite free from aught erroneous.

(“A Minor Prophet,” lines 128–33)

In response to this doctrine of perfectibility, his friend the narrator defends his own penchant for “nature’s blunders, evanescent types / Which sages banish from Utopia” (“A Minor Prophet,” lines 175–76). Echoing the narrator from chapter 17 of Adam Bede, with his celebration of women peeling carrots standing alongside angels and madonnas, the narrator here assures his interlocutor that he worships “with the rest” in beauty’s temple, but also that “by my hearth I keep a sacred nook” (lines 178–79) for “the dear imperfect things” (155), a practice which he calls his “piety” (182). Noting the “paradox” of his feelings (188), he expresses “pity” for “future men who will not know / A keen experience with pity blent” because perfection will have no need for “the pathos exquisite of lovely minds / Hid in harsh forms—” (189–92). In his perplexity the narrator expresses a paradox that pervades George Eliot’s whole career: her love for beauty—along with her longing for a better world in which “order, justice, love” (287) prevail—is counterbalanced
always by her conviction that it is the desire for good, dependent upon the
existence of its opposite, that constitutes the best of human nature. While like
this narrator she holds fast to the “high prophetic vision” that “beholds / The
paths of beauteous order” (278–80), she too deplores a perfect future that
leaves the sorry past behind.

While none of this is new to anyone familiar with George Eliot’s novels,
the sentiments expressed by the narrator of “A Minor Prophet” help explain
the peculiar intensity of the energy that pervades her works of the 1860s. As
suggested above, the narrator of the poem not only embraces George Eliot’s
religion of feeling but is self-conscious about its paradoxes. For he is aware of
the pleasure he takes in the pathos prompted by pain and castigates himself
for his “foolish” and even “wicked” unwillingness to witness the dawn of a
perfect world (“A Minor Prophet,” line 201). Also implied in his paradoxical
attitude is the awareness that inspiring the sympathy that constitutes the best
of human nature means that there must be people for whom we ought to feel
the “pity” that spells “piety.” In describing the “keen experience with pity
blent” that reaches out to “ungainly forms” (lines 190, 183), he uses a telling
analogy that illuminates George Eliot’s understanding of a human-centered
piety. Rather than “penetrating” these motley folks “like fire divine within
a common bush / Which glows transfigured by the heavenly guest, / So that
men put their shoes off,” this pity enables one to be

. . . engaged
Like a sweet child within some thick-walled cell,
Who leaps and fails to hold the window-bars,
But having shown a little dimpled hand
Is visited thenceforth by tender hearts
Whose eyes keep watch about the prison walls.
(“A Minor Prophet,” lines 192–200)

This analogy vividly illustrates that the sympathy George Eliot promotes
is not akin to a transfiguration—an encounter between human and divine
as two alien beings—but is rather a purely human interaction between “a
sweet child” who has somehow managed to get itself imprisoned and “ten-
der hearts” who cannot free it but can at least “keep watch” over its safety.
George Eliot is clearly not promoting the burning-bush piety of Moses but
rather the merciful compassion of Jesus: “I was in prison and you visited me.”
Further, the image is ambiguous or fluid enough that it is impossible to keep
the imprisoned child separate from the visitor, suggesting that all humans are
sweet children imprisoned behind impenetrable walls—“lovely minds / Hid
in harsh forms.”

Another familiar saying of Jesus—the poor you will always have with
you—comes to mind when the poem’s narrator goes on to describe “the
patched and plodding citizen” who exults “almost with a sob” in the coming
of “some victorious world-hero” (“A Minor Prophet,” lines 223–29) but then settles back into the “more easy fellowship” of his neighbors, acknowledging that “could he choose” he would turn time backwards, not forwards, in order to repeat the days of his hero-less childhood (lines 240, 256). But then, in a passage replete with George Eliot’s characteristic “and yet” and “but,” the narrator cries, “Yet no! the earth yields nothing more Divine / Than high prophetic vision—” (277–78). The poem resolves itself in a conclusion that accepts the paradox that the future must be the same but different: “Our finest hope is finest memory” (292).

The narrator further claims that “faith” is strengthened by the emotion that rises at the goodness evident in music, art, and “at noble and at gentle deeds” (“A Minor Prophet,” lines 277, 303). He has earlier opined: “Bitterly / I feel that every change upon this earth / Is bought with sacrifice” (lines 144–46). But here, near the end of the poem, he confronts the more perplexing problem of a sacrifice that achieves no change:

Even our failures are a prophecy,
Even our yearnings and our bitter tears
After that fair and true we cannot grasp;
As patriots who seem to die in vain
Make liberty more sacred by their pangs.

(“A Minor Prophet,” lines 311–15)

The poem beautifully illustrates the tension between the desire for perfection and the value of failure, and, while its focus is the question of human progress, the references to the value of art at the end also make explicit what is implicit throughout—George Eliot’s doubts concerning her own progress and possible failure as a writer. While the poem’s prophet is an ironic persona, George Eliot’s own “high prophetic vision” inspires her whole creative effort, and this poem ends by articulating with a striking absence of irony the hope that even what appears to be failure may be recognized as a sacrifice that has a consecrating effect.

Here I must invoke Maggie in The Mill on the Floss again, whose death George Eliot accomplished, as reported by her husband, with more “bitter tears” than accompanied any other work. Maggie’s death is so very provocative because it gathers into itself many of the words we have for violent death—murder, suicide, sacrifice, and martyrdom—and affirms them all. Indeed, Maggie may be interpreted in terms of the paradox explored by the Prophet as a woman who is too in love with the past to have a future. Yet in these same terms hers is not a death that could be called “vain,” for her death is also the birth of George Eliot, novelist. Had George Eliot stopped writing fiction at this point her novels would still be honored, but probably as pastoral, even nostalgic, accounts of the pre-industrial English Midlands. Instead, Maggie’s death is a failure that is also a prophecy of George Eliot’s
commitment to writing novels that are “double mirrors, making still / An endless vista of fair things before / Repeating things behind” (“A Minor Prophet,” lines 295–97). It is true of course that George Eliot had already achieved success before writing Maggie’s fictional life and death, but I would argue that without Maggie, she would never have crossed the “bridge” figured so elegantly in the first chapter of that novel that took her from literary success to artistic phenomenon.

In the evolution of George Eliot’s art that I am tracing, “A Minor Prophet” is itself a “double mirror” in the sense that it retrospectively illuminates Maggie’s importance as the first in the series of heroes and heroines through whom George Eliot explores questions related to the problem of appearing to die in vain and the equally heroic but more quotidian problem of appearing to live in vain. She highlights her attention to the first of these questions in another important text, “Leaves from a Note-Book” (undated), when she quotes her own Fedalma, the Spanish Gypsy: “The grandest death! to die in vain—” in the “Note” entitled by the editor “‘A Fine Excess. ’ Feeling Is Energy.” George Eliot reinforces her self-quote by saying, “I really believe and mean this—not as a rule of general action, but as a possible grand instance of determining energy in human sympathy, which even in particular cases, where it has only a magnificent futility, is more adorable, or as we say divine, than unpitying force, or than a prudent calculation of results.” While the self-sacrifice that achieves calculated results may indeed claim “the highest title to our veneration, and makes the supreme heroism,” she concedes, “the generous leap of impulse is needed too to swell the flood of sympathy in us beholders.” Feeling, in other words—indeed an “excess” of feeling—cannot come from calculation and is necessary to provide the “energy” that fuels the struggle for goodness in the world. We “beholders” of heroic action are moved to good actions by acts of “magnificent futility” more than by results.

Also in this “Note” George Eliot castigates any who would use hopelessness as a reason for inaction, arguing ultimately, as in “A Minor Prophet,” that apparently futile heroism energizes observers for good. To despair of the value of one’s own actions towards a good end “comes from that sapless kind of reasoning which is falsely taken for a sign of supreme mental activity, but is really due to languor, or incapability of that mental grasp which makes objects strongly present, and to a lack of sympathetic emotion.” It is telling to read this kind of judgment from the pen of the woman whose self-doubt is legendary, whose journals are riddled with questions about the value of her work. Yet these judgments, as well as her frequent words of encouragement about the importance of even the smallest good work, hold all the more weight when we know that they are motivated by her sense of her own failings. As I’ve said, this “Note” points to the major concerns that shape the themes and characters of the rest of her novels, but it is also important to recognize the metafictional element of such ideas. In this respect Maggie takes on further importance, as I suggested above, in that she might be seen
as a martyr not only to the cause of women and to “historical advance” but to the cause of George Eliot’s writing. The “futility” of Maggie’s death is “magnificent” indeed in its “fine excess” of feeling, which not only inspired generations of response but propelled George Eliot forward into a whole new stage of her career.

This brings us to the third element in the aesthetic revisioning of this time, the question of the form of the novel. As discussed in the last chapter, this rethinking of religious and aesthetic possibilities had everything to do with rethinking the idea of incarnation. To recall A. S. Byatt’s statement in her introduction to her edition of George Eliot’s writings: “The long nineteenth-century debate about the precise meaning, or lack of meaning, of the Christian concept of the Incarnation . . . is inextricably connected, consciously and unconsciously, to the development of the form of the novel.” While the theological notion of the incarnation of Christ is a question separate from the incarnation of ideas in fictional form, George Eliot’s intense attention at this time to the question of form, and specifically the problem of incarnating her ideas, certainly bears out Byatt’s claim. Interestingly, Rosemary Ashton articulates the common criticism of George Eliot’s works of this period in these very terms, stating that they “suffered from insufficient incarnation of ideas.” Indeed, though evidently quite different from each other, the three major works of this period have in common this manifestation of George Eliot’s aesthetic experimentation with the question of, as she puts it in a letter of 1866, “how to make certain ideas thoroughly incarnate.” While George Eliot has written before about this question— notably in chapter 17 of Adam Bede— during this period she is unusually forthcoming about her struggles, partly because she is aware of embarking on untried ground.

This awareness of a new stage applies even to her writing of Felix Holt, despite its being set in familiar territory and based on a remembered incident. When she takes the unusual step of consulting an expert, lawyer Frederic Harrison, their correspondence following its publication illuminates the nature of George Eliot’s aesthetic preoccupations at this time. Harrison, who has glimpsed in Felix Holt possibilities for a Positivist utopian novel, tries to persuade George Eliot that her “destiny” is “to produce a poem— . . . a drama,” that gives form to the philosophy of Positivism. Somewhat sympathetic to Positivist ideas and already engaged in writing The Spanish Gypsy, George Eliot expresses her mistrust of didactic utopias but tells him that she has “gone through again and again the severe effort of trying to make certain ideas thoroughly incarnate, as if they had revealed themselves to me in the flesh and not in the spirit.” She makes clear that she is not interested in writing utopian fictions, because “they do not pretend to work on the emotions,” which is always her primary goal. Imagine, she goes on, “the sort of agonizing labour to an English-fed imagination to make art a sufficiently real back-ground, for the desired picture, to get breathing, individual forms, and group them in the needful relations, so that the presentation will lay hold on
the emotions as human experience.” Relying on historical documents rather than primarily on personal memory for the writing of *Romola*, she tells him, cost her “unspeakable pains.” Such is the interrelation of the three texts that here we see her, while engaged in writing *The Spanish Gypsy*, using her experience with *Romola* to explain her ideas about aesthetic form to someone who has helped her with *Felix Holt*.

**Psychological**

The “unspeakable pains” George Eliot mentions are in fact literal—physical and psychological—and written of frequently in her journals. While her writing is always a painful process, this period, as mentioned above, is one of unprecedented suffering, and her journals are riddled with references to debilitating “headache and sickness” and “feebleness of head and body,” frequently “producing terrible depression.” George Eliot’s experience of suffering actually provides the crucial link between the incarnation as religious concept and incarnation as an aim of her fiction. For it is in experiencing the pain involved in investing her creations with life as “breathing, individual forms,” I want to argue, that she experiences the power of incarnation as a divine force.

George Eliot goes so far as to use the term “incarnation” to describe her writing difficulties at this time, and the new problems she experiences in writing *The Spanish Gypsy* serve to articulate the issues involved. So troublesome was the writing of this text that her husband had prevailed upon her to “put aside” the work more than two years before “because,” as she confides to Harrison, “it was in that stage of Creation or ‘Werden,’ in which the idea of the characters predominates over the incarnation.” The drama—later to become, as a result of her struggles with form, a dramatic poem—presented a more serious challenge even than *Romola*: without the source of “a grand myth or an Italian novel” and instead writing only “under the inspiration of an idea,” with her source “in the spirit,” she feels “anything but omnipotent.” Six months later, still engrossed in this work, she confides to her publisher, John Blackwood, that she is writing “—prepare your fortitude—a poem,” reiterating the distinction that “the plot was wrought out entirely as an incorporation of my own ideas.” In writing *The Spanish Gypsy*, then, George Eliot has the new experience of seeming to create out of nothing, a process that takes her to a deeper understanding of the incarnational nature of artistic creation.

Crucial to this process is her abiding but ever-deepening engagement with the topic of suffering, including her own. From the beginning, as no one familiar with her work needs to be reminded, George Eliot is convinced that her task as a writer is actually a vocation that charges her with an ethical responsibility to arouse sympathy in her readers for the sufferings and
shortcomings of their fellow mortals. And from the beginning she takes as her model the suffering Christ. “No wonder [man] needs a suffering God,” the narrator of Adam Bede had said, and that whole novel is built on the struggle to believe in the transformative power of suffering and to show what it means to enter into the sorrows of others. In this context Maggie’s death is also enormously significant in that it raises the question of the meaning of individual suffering. It is this question that energizes the works of the decade that follows, for in writing Maggie’s death George Eliot’s aesthetic undergoes a crucial change: from talking about the suffering of others in her fiction and talking about her own suffering to herself in her journal and to a few friends in letters, The Mill on the Floss has her integrating the two. For in this novel she participates in the sufferings of her characters, making them her own in a way that might be seen as masochistic or narcissistic—as we see in her intense grieving over Maggie’s terrible and necessary death. But in this she is coming to a new understanding of the relation between writing and suffering.

This process takes her model of sympathy beyond the level of ethics and aesthetics so that, without being her own story, the text is constituted of her own suffering. The next stage is the one she works through in the terribly painful process of writing Romola, for, though the writing of the two works that follow it is also a painfully arduous process, she is in them coming gradually to a new state of awareness. By the end of this decade of sorrows, I believe, she has begun to understand, or more consciously to acknowledge, that rather than accomplishing her writing in spite of her suffering, she is suffering for her writing and writing out of her suffering. This is tricky ground because, as she herself is aware and as some critics have explored, there could be seen to be a morbid or superstitious element, carried over from her evangelical experience perhaps, whereby she is permitted to achieve success only by suffering, thereby paying for her happiness as all sinners must do. As Byatt notes, George Eliot passionately hated the “doctrine of Compensation,” the cheap idea that one’s sorrows will be compensated by future reward or an improvement of character. She is aware of the danger that in seeming to preach about the redeeming power of suffering the writer risks minimizing the suffering and giving it a “meaning” that is insulting both to the sufferer and to any presumed god. This is such tricky ground in fact that except in occasional passing hints George Eliot defers conscious acknowledgment—some would say represses her knowledge—that her own suffering has served the purpose of shaping not only her writing but her very self, until she has finished with fiction. It is only in retrospect and in the form of a poem, “Self and Life,” that she embraces this idea, and even then it is through a dialogue that separates her self from her life. This elegant, little-known poem has Life schooling Self on the reason for all of its grief. Self learns that growth entails pain: the hard-won insight she achieves that “life is justified by love” requires accepting the truth that “half man’s truth must hidden lie / If unlit by Sorrow’s eye.”
This separation between self and life was an essential survival tactic throughout George Eliot’s writing life. The obvious manifestation of this split is of course in her self-naming, primarily in her pseudonym but as well in the abundance of names she had for herself. George Eliot’s self-naming was a fructifying force for her writing, but it is also an element of the self-construction which Paul Ricoeur claims is vital to the “narrative identity” that all humans need to create for themselves. Ricoeur argues that selfhood is a matter of “narrative interpretation,” a practice which teaches us “the figural nature of the character by which the self, narratively interpreted, turns out to be a figured self—which imagines itself . . . in this or that way.” In these terms, we see Marian Evans Lewes engaged in constructing her writing self by creating fictional narratives and concurrently creating a “narrative identity” to write that self, or even by simply imagining herself as that writing self. This dual self-construction has been brilliantly analyzed by Harris and Johnston in their edition of George Eliot’s journals, in which they show how she tried to keep a kind of textual division in her writing life by writing from both ends of her diary, often simultaneously, recording in the front mainly quotidian activities and concerns, and, in the back, events related to her writing and her travels. In fact then, this was a double doubleness, in that not only did she maintain two writing selves—one to write fiction, the other to write the diary—but the latter self was subdivided into two separate voices.

One of the early installments in the back of the “Journal,” “How I came to write fiction,” serves to illuminate the importance of the self-division to George Eliot’s creativity. In this famous account, George Eliot writes of how, having long nurtured “a vague dream” of writing a novel, she was finally compelled to try when one morning she was “lying in bed . . . thinking” of what she might write, and her thoughts “merged . . . into a dreamy doze,” until, she says, “I imagined myself writing a story of which the title was—‘The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton.’” This entry is intriguing in many respects: for one thing, dated December 6, 1857, it was written just over a year after she finished “Amos Barton” and when she is just two months into the writing of her first full novel. In other words, though she has only just started, she is already aware that she has begun what she calls “a new era in my life”; rather than gaining this sense of significance in retrospect, as we might expect, she already knows that this is the beginning of something significant enough to write about and essential to the construction of what Ricoeur would call her “narrative identity.”

George Eliot’s construction of this event is a prime instance of the narrative habit of mind that is signaled in her propensity to construct her own life in retrospect as a succession of narrative moments. As discussed above, her journal of the 1860s is a kind of litany of sorrows, and it is crucial to her writing life both that she constructs such a text and that she then rereads it, for it is in the process of interpretation that the sorrows become an energizing force. This returns us to “A Minor Prophet” and the “Note” on feeling,
with their notion that an observer—in this case her self—is energized to work for good by the display of “a fine excess” of “feeling” represented in an act of “magnificent futility.” In rereading her journal, George Eliot is frequently an observer, in that she encounters a suffering self that she has forgotten. In this regard it is interesting to note that despite her unconventional lifestyle, George Eliot’s novels became a source of moral guidance and spiritual consolation to readers, some of whom—to add a further generic spin—were known to have “copied passages from [Romola] into their New Testaments.”

This only happened because George Eliot modeled that behavior by rereading her journals in search of reassurance and consolation.

This practice continued even into the next decade, when she had emerged from the depths of the pit of despond (although she was still inhabiting its outskirts). In May 1870, for example, when she is beginning Middlemarch, George Eliot resumes writing in her diary after a lapse of seven months, and finds there references to earlier periods of “headache and depression” that reassure her that her present anguish “is not unprecedented.” Later, with Middlemarch a huge success, she is similarly struggling over Daniel Deronda and is reassured in turn by references in her diary confirming “that I really was in worse health and suffered equal depression about Romola—and so far as I have recorded, the same thing seems to be true of Middlemarch.”

Later, having recorded in her diary some heartening responses to Deronda, she writes: “I record these signs, that I may look back on them if they come to be confirmed.”

This reconfiguring of her own words (and those of others) into “signs” reflects the crucial reinterpretation that established George Eliot’s narrative identity. For, while her journals and letters are riddled with references to her own suffering, her understanding of the meaning of this suffering changes. Whereas she begins by seeing her ailments of body and mind primarily as inhibiting her writing, she later comes to see them as a sign of the value of her work and even as its substance. It is crucial to the power of this symbiosis, however, that the source of her energy remain hidden from herself: her suffering must retain the tenor of “futility” in order to produce the energy of excess. The quotation I use as my epigraph rather humorously captures this situation.

Fog, east wind, and headache: there is my week’s history. But this morning, when your letter came to me, I had got up well, and was reading the sorrows of the aged Hecuba with great enjoyment. I wish an immortal drama could be got out of my sorrows, that people might be the better for them two thousand years hence. But fog, east wind, and headache are not great dramatic motives.

This first paragraph of a letter George Eliot wrote to Mrs. Peter Alfred Taylor in March 1864 exemplifies such a beautiful rhetorical flourish that it is difficult to believe that its writer is unconscious of the “enjoyment” future readers
were to derive from her “dramatic motives.” Nonetheless it is just this sort of blindness to self that facilitates her writing life.

George Eliot’s journals and letters, particularly those of the young Mary Anne Evans, have always been subject to the charge of self-dramatization. Many have commented as well on the self-image she constructs in later letters: the suffering artist rescued from herself and a condemning world by the supportive spouse. While this pattern may indeed smack of self-dramatization—as she herself came to suspect—it is vital to her narrative identity. And crucial to this pattern is the fact that the woeful accounts of her struggles and sufferings are alleviated by occasional glimpses of her sense of a special calling. In a letter of 1857 she writes of her hope that “the terrible pain I have gone through in the past years . . . has probably been for some special work”; and in a journal entry summing up that year she records her gratitude that “the long sad years of youth were worth living for the sake of middle age.” Notwithstanding this realization, however, this pain, as we have seen, is even more terrible with Romola, partly for the reasons mentioned above, and because she continues to be attracted to the Romantic aesthetic—that true art is the product of suffering—and to the Christian view that suffering is redemptive. In exulting in a letter to a friend over her triumph with Adam Bede and her happiness with Lewes, for example, George Eliot feels compelled to include her concurrent sadness over “the much work that remains,” as if she is not allowed unalloyed happiness. But in a significant aside she acknowledges her “blessed” state in having “all this reason for being glad that I have lived, in spite of my sins and sorrows—or rather, by reason of my sins and sorrows.” This shift from “in spite of” to “by reason of” speaks volumes, not least because in refusing to appropriate it fully she keeps alive the tension that she almost superstitiously believes is essential to her narrative identity.

Ricoeur argues that “we never cease to interpret the narrative identity that constitutes us, in light of the narratives proposed to us by our culture.” For Marian Evans, the cultural narrative that deemed her a common-law wife living in sin with another woman’s husband had to be urgently resisted by a counter-narrative, which she built upon the “figured self” of novelist. Subverting the cultural codes, she claims “Marian Evans Lewes” as her true name, and the other self-naming, “George Eliot,” actualizes that claim, reinscribing it with each novel. Harris and Johnston have compared her pseudonym to a “second name, exactly like the one a religious assumes upon taking orders,” an important gesture of self-anointing that proclaims the sense of vocation mentioned earlier.

It is tempting to say that George Eliot learned how to endure and at the same time to profit from her suffering by making Maggie a martyr for the cause of her writing. But The Mill on the Floss is more accurately seen as a kind of culminating and turning point: it is in writing this novel that George Eliot learns how to bring her life into her work without killing her self. Her
earlier works had drawn heavily on memory, yet she was so unconscious of this dependence that she was genuinely surprised to find people identifying her characters with actual people. The ensuing battle over her identity and that of her characters is dramatic enough to have earned much critical attention, with the most interesting element being her telling silence when it becomes evident that she has been found out. Her own surprise is the most interesting aspect of this, in that it smacks of the astonishment that comes from having kept her knowledge even from herself. The anguish involved in having to fight for her authorial identity gives her a better understanding of the intimacy between her work and her life. And it is this that empowers her to write Maggie and to kill her, as she enacts the painfully paradoxical experience of embracing her past and separating herself from it forever. The Mill on the Floss thus represents a point of intersection between her self and her life, which she had until now determined to keep separate.

It is difficult to imagine a gesture more expressive of excess of feeling than Maggie’s very literal “generous leap of impulse” into the raging Floss. Within the text it illustrates the futility that defines the magnificence of such gestures in that, had they waited, Maggie and Tom would have been rescued; outside of the confines of the text it also raises the question of futility in that the novel has sparked endless debate as to its success and meaning. In the context of my argument, this is interesting in that it focuses the discussion of suffering on George Eliot’s experience of success and failure, whose terms are radically changed for her during this period of rethinking her aesthetic. It is certainly true, as discussed above, that she continued to agonize over her writing process and the value of her work, but I believe there is also a significant shift in her own sense of her work, a shift that is impelled by Maggie’s death and then worked through in Romola. One of the reasons for this is the fact that with Romola she became financially secure. But equally material was the fact that in moving into new territory—geographically, historically, generically, emotionally, and professionally (in changing publishers for this one novel)—she frees herself, and in this way benefits from the heroic gesture of a martyr who has “[made] liberty more sacred by [her] pangs.”

George Eliot’s changing attitude to her work is signaled in two unusual responses: first, when she consults experts—a lawyer to help with the legal morass involved in Felix Holt, and an artist who is illustrating Romola—and, second, when she discusses the merits of her work in correspondence. As she did with the lawyer Frederic Harrison, as mentioned earlier, she engages in a kind of collaboration with the illustrator of Romola, Frederic Leighton, as part of the process of working out her ideas about aesthetic and generic form. Learning of the “impossibility of producing perfect correspondence between my intention and the illustrations,” as she says in a letter in 1862, is crucial to the way in which she wrestles with the meaning of incarnation for her work.

The second significant change relates to her opening herself to criticism in a new way in this period. Midway in the serial publication of Romola she
replies to her friend Sara Sophia Hennell’s interest by warning that the book is different from previous ones in not being “intended” to be popular (her emphasis). Her reference here to freedom is telling: “If one is to have freedom to write out one’s own varying unfolding self, and not be a machine always grinding out the same material or spinning the same sort of web, one cannot always write for the same public.” Since her publisher is in agreement with this idea, she says, she is “acquitted of all scruple or anxiety except the grand anxiety of doing my work worthily. Alas, I want to do something very much better than I ever can do it—if fasting and scourging oneself would make one a fit organ, there would be more positive comfort.”

Two more letters will help to further this point. After Romola has been published, George Eliot takes the unusual step of replying to Richard Holt Hutton’s detailed and judicious critique, in which he says that this novel “will never be George Eliot’s most popular book” but is in his view “the greatest she has yet produced.” George Eliot responds that she understands his “disatisfaction with Romola herself,” noting that “I have failed to bring out my conception with adequate fullness.” She goes on to expand on the aesthetic problem, which to her is a religious one:

> With regard to that and to my whole book, my predominant feeling is—not that I have achieved anything, but—that great, great facts have struggled to find a voice through me, and have only been able to speak brokenly. That consciousness makes me cherish the more any proof that my work has been seen to have some true significance by minds prepared not simply by instruction, but by that religious and moral sympathy with the historical life of man which is the larger half of culture.

In a similar vein a few weeks later, she affirms Sara Sophia Hennell’s critique of Romola as “ideal” (rather than convincingly real) and similarly merges her explanation for this perceived flaw with an explanation of her religious aim: “I feel it acutely in the reproof my own soul is constantly getting from the image it has made. My own books scourge me.”

George Eliot’s response to the reception of The Spanish Gypsy when it was finally published in 1868 reflects a similar insouciance about its popularity. She reports to a friend of being grateful for the public’s “kindly” response to the work and describes herself as “serene, because I only expected the unfavourable.” While it would be easy enough to argue that this apparent acquiescence to these judgments constitutes a clever self-defense—and while it is certainly true that these positive responses are admixed with her usual consciousness of failure—I would argue rather that her responses are genuine. Perhaps her aversion to reading criticism of her earlier works had as much to do with her conviction that whatever anyone else said, she was only writing what she knew, whereas here she is making a whole new world. We would
do better to take these comments as an index of her growing sense that she is engaged in a transition into another aesthetic realm, which is concurrently another religious realm, her interest in which develops out of that previously quoted “yearning affection towards the great religions of the world.”\(^{56}\) Central to all of this is the recognition that emerges in “A Minor Prophet” and her “Note” on feeling, cited above, that what is seen as failure is subject to interpretation and may from another perspective be seen as triumph.

**Religious**

The fact that Richard Holt Hutton was a Roman Catholic perhaps explains George Eliot’s ability to articulate her feeling of being used as a kind of flawed vehicle through which ideas are being expressed. Here we may see a religious sense of herself as being chosen to convey, however imperfectly, what she calls in *Adam Bede* “the divine beauty of form.” This experience and confession of failure to incarnate her ideas are essential to the development of her mature, post-Evangelical aesthetic. For, although the three main texts of this period feature a martyr or para-martyr figure, there is no longer a Maggie to die for George Eliot’s art. What I believe happens here is that George Eliot’s own aesthetic practice teaches her a deeper understanding of the Christian incarnation; in other words, while she is taking “unspeakable pains” to incarnate her ideas, she comes to see that the creative process is itself an incarnational activity by which something changes in her. While we might therefore see her labor pains as a sign of neurosis, we may equally see them as a sign of kenosis, the idea of self-emptying that underlies the Christian understanding of incarnation.

**Romola: The Failure of Art, the Art of Failure**

Central to the change I have been analyzing is a shift in George Eliot’s understanding of the relation between the sacred and the secular. For while from the beginning of her fiction writing she had thought of her work as part of her religion, it is in this period that she is consciously working out the implications of this claim.\(^{57}\) George Eliot continues to explore her favorite themes—the conflict between duty and passion, particularly for daughters, and the imperative of sympathetic suffering—but in *Romola* she formulates these themes in explicitly religious terms. The primary way in which she explores these ideas is through the figure of the martyr and the concomitant issues of sacrifice and belief. The letter quoted above contains what I have come to think of as George Eliot’s definition of religion: “The contemplation of whatever is great is itself religion and lifts us out of our egotism.”\(^{58}\) *Romola* represents her most ambitious attempt to date to animate this idea. In it she dramatizes the contest during the Renaissance between secular humanism
and institutional Roman Catholicism, embodying the former primarily in Romola’s father and the latter mainly in Savonarola. But both these fathers are judged as wanting in George Eliot’s religious terms by the extent to which their respective beliefs—in classical learning and in the Christian system—are tainted by their own egotism. And the novel’s most fascinating character, Tito, is characterized as consumed by ego, a believer in nothing.

Like Maggie, Romola is subject to the will of several powerful men, all of them obsessed with their own desires and intent upon shaping hers to their own. Her father and brother, though ideological opposites, are similar in each being consumed by passion for a vision—for Dino, a vision of Christ’s crucifixion, for Bardo, a vision of the classical wisdom of the past—that sets them apart from the world. Their allegiance to death blinds Romola to the falsity of the charming Tito’s liveliness, and George Eliot uses his character to explore the possibility of a conscience-free egotism. One could imagine Tito’s mocking response to Maggie’s sacrifice, since he knows the meaning of sacrifice only insofar as he can sacrifice the needs and even the lives of others to his own desires. The narrator wonders, “could any philosophy prove to him that he was bound to care for another’s suffering more than for his own?” In the terms of George Eliot’s religious philosophy, Tito’s “contempt for the tales of priests” is continuous with his contempt for social laws and duties. And she characterizes his lack of a “terror of the unseen” as a sign not of refreshing rationality but of his scorn for the “guardianship” such fear provides for “a moral law restraining desire.” In George Eliot’s terms, Tito’s lack of sympathetic feeling is a lack of morality. In a different way, Dino the monk also rejects the relation between human feeling and divine meaning. “What is this religion of yours,” Romola asks him in exasperation, “that places visions before natural duties?” Whereas Tito rejects all duty except that to his own pleasure, Dino, in his search for “wisdom,” replaces human bonds with a religious one, not recognizing that in rejecting “human sympathies,” as the narrator makes sure to tell us, he is rejecting “the very life and substance of our wisdom.”

Married to a man of no faith and yet unable to embrace the absolutism of her brother, Romola seeks to understand suffering in terms of the promise of transcendent meaning.

What thought could reconcile that worn anguish in her brother’s face—that straining after something invisible—with [Tito’s] satisfied strength and beauty, and make it intelligible that they belonged to the same world? Or was there never any reconciling of them—but only a blind worship of clashing deities, first in mad joy and then in wailing?

In a brilliant figure, George Eliot has Tito try to force Romola to accept art as the means to “reconcile” beauty and suffering by commissioning the painting
of a triptych of the two of them posing as classical lovers and using it to cover Dino’s crucifix. Tito’s transparent effort to cover “sadness” with art (and artfulness) paradoxically reveals the power of art, in that the painting, instead of keeping sadness “hidden,” becomes a mirror that reveals the truth of his deception and betrayal.65 This is a fascinating image because rather than entertain the Romantic idea of art becoming a kind of religion, George Eliot makes her villain a man whose lack of belief extends along a continuous line that includes social duty, religious faith, and art, characterizing his egotism as a comprehensive failure of “imagination.”66

As a young wife to a faithless husband, Romola is susceptible to the absolute faith claims of Savonarola, and what stirs her to the point of physical “sensation” and “thrill” when she hears him speak is his invocation of “martyrdom.” Though a “transient emotion,” she experiences the feeling as like “being possessed,”67 and it is this idea of self-sacrifice, so foreign to her husband, that ultimately draws her to Savonarola, even though this call has the unwanted application of compelling her to return to her duty as a faithful wife. The narrator characterizes Romola’s “tenderness and keen fellow-feeling for the near and loved” as her “religion”; in Romola’s recoil from Tito’s anti-religiousness and Dino’s anti-humanity George Eliot strives to represent her heroine as seeking to sanctify her religion of feeling. In this respect it is interesting that Savonarola identifies her calling as reconciling the claims of humanity and divinity in what Ashton calls “a kind of respiritualised secular humanism.”69

George Eliot carefully delineates the process by which Romola chooses to leave her husband, having her don a religious habit to represent the holiness of her deliberation. Yet she makes clear too that her choice is a human one: “In those times, as now, there were human beings who never saw angels or heard perfectly clear messages. Such truth as came to them was brought confusedly in the voices and deeds of men not at all like the seraphs of unfailing wing and piercing vision.”70 Still, though George Eliot explicitly refuses to represent Romola’s experience as supernatural, she also seems to want to cast a more than natural aura around the occasion. She describes the beauty of the dawn in which Romola “for the first time in her life” makes a free choice as casting a light that she feels “as a divine presence.” This inspires “a certain awe,” which Romola feels, not as something new, but as “a more conscious element in [her] feeling”71 and a truer illuminator of her own path. Here George Eliot strives to create an image of the relation between the sacred and the secular, the human and the divine, as continuous, not oppositional. And in her effort to represent a human kind of sanctity George Eliot is careful not to mention faith; instead she offers her heroine a choice between “the path of reliance and action which is the path of life” and its opposite, the “loneliness and disbelief, which is no path, but the arrest of inaction and death.”72

Decidedly human too is the stern monk Savonarola, who turns Romola back on this path through “nothing transcendent in [his] face”73 but instead
through his words, words that merely confirm what she already believes. Savonarola voices her own belief in the “fellowship with suffering” as the highest calling and sanctifies her suffering by linking it with the suffering represented in “the religion of the cross.” He holds out the cross to her as a means whereby she can take “a share in the divine life which quenches the sense of suffering Self in the ardours of an ever-growing love.” In opposition to Tito’s artful offer of art, then, Savonarola offers the cross, not to hide sadness but to reconcile and integrate Romola’s own sadness with the universal sadness embodied in the sacrifice of Christ. And in the ultimate word of integration (and incarnation) he urges her not to go away in search of a holy calling but to return home: “Instead of taking a long exciting journey, she was to sit down in her usual place.”

George Eliot reiterates a central idea from *The Mill on the Floss* twice in *Romola*. After Maggie’s elopement, the narrator had pontificated on the virtue of what we would call situational ethics:

> The great problem of the shifting relation between passion and duty is clear to no man who is capable of apprehending it: the question whether the moment has come in which a man has fallen below the possibility of a renunciation that will carry any efficacy, and must accept the sway of a passion against which he had struggled as a trespass, is one for which we have no master key to fit all cases.

In *Romola* she is taking this great problem to another level by framing it in terms of a historical figure who suffered cruel torture and execution at the hands of the church: she sums it up as “the question where the duty of obedience ends, and the duty of resistance begins.” But more telling is the second iteration of this dilemma as a measure of Romola’s growth of consciousness; for in deliberating on her decision to sever herself from her bigamist husband, Romola recognizes that she faces the same problem as her spiritual mentor—“the problem where the sacredness of obedience ended and where the sacredness of rebellion began.” This realization is crucial within the text and also in George Eliot’s career. For Romola herself this awareness is a sign of maturity, as she realizes that despite her disillusionment with Savonarola, his “inspiring consciousness” that “had exalted even the minor details of obligation into religion” had been nonetheless genuine, and that, further, she is herself capable of undergoing the same kind of spiritual struggle as her mentor.

For George Eliot’s own work this statement is equally important in that she not only makes a point of rejecting the claim that Savonarola is a martyr, she also aims to humanize the meaning of his suffering and death by explicitly emphasizing the point that he did not see himself as a martyr. R. H. Hutton notes that she rejects the last words with which historians credit Savonarola—his declaration that he cannot be cast out of “the Church
triumphant.” Instead, George Eliot wants to convince readers of the more complex point that seeing himself as a martyr in this way would actually detract from Savonarola’s greater merit—the merit of doubting one’s own worthiness and dying not in triumph but in “resignation.” Thus in refusing to accept Savonarola’s official status as martyr, she attempts to enroll him in a more select group—heroes who have died in what seems “magnificent futility.” Her aim is to make of him a human, flawed hero, rather than the purified saint of official church history. She then ends the novel—in what Hutton deplores as a “somewhat feeble and womanish chapter”—by returning to Romola, thereby affirming as the last word in holiness the saintly blessedness of a woman who dedicates her life to the other wife and the children of her bigamist husband and enshrines the memory of the dubious martyr who has taught her the sanctity of duty.

This strategy has an ironic effect in that the novel, as mentioned above, is widely faulted, even by George Eliot herself, for the unbelievable goodness of its heroine, who is dubbed by Sara Sophia Hennell, for example, a saint rather than a woman. George Eliot seems to be unable to resist the compulsion to create an ideal woman, while at the same time insisting—to the point of emphatic italics—on the worthiness of a flawed hero, whose very worthiness lies in his sense of failure and unworthiness. The narrator claims that harder to bear than martyrdom is “the lowest depth of resignation . . . to be found when we have covered our heads in silence and felt, ‘I am not worthy to be a martyr: the Truth shall prosper, but not by me.’ ” Later George Eliot is more emphatic and even allows her narration to turn polemical: “There is no jot of worthy evidence that from the time of his imprisonment to the supreme moment, Savonarola spoke of himself as a martyr.” This glorious idea had been succeeded by the inglorious one of “resignation,” the narrator asserts. “But therefore he may the more fitly be called a martyr by his fellow-men to all time.” Seemingly then, in trying to show the sanctity of ordinary life, George Eliot ends up merely transferring the halo from within the institutional church to another religious domain of her own construction where Saint Romola presides, thereby confirming the separation of secular and sacred instead of demonstrating their reconciliation in the human.

The Spanish Gypsy: Annunciation as Renunciation

George Eliot continues to tackle this problem of voicing “great, great facts” in human form in subsequent works. It proves so daunting in The Spanish Gypsy that she abandons the text, then comes at the problem from the opposite direction in Felix Holt, and afterwards returns to rework and complete the poetic piece. But it is vital in all of this that George Eliot is sufficiently self-critical that she can articulate her difficulties with Romola in terms of a failure to incarnate her ideas. As she says in her letter to Hennell quoted above, she is trying to do something better than she has done before, and
such an effort entails failing. Shifting her expectations to this level of uncertainty by venturing into unknown territory means inviting failure; and yet, as with Savonarola, there is something glorious in being able to say “the Truth shall prosper, but not by me.” It is just at this time that she sees in Italy what she will later identify as the inspiration for The Spanish Gypsy: a painting on the subject of the Annunciation, “said to be by Titian.” As she later writes in her “Notes on The Spanish Gypsy and Tragedy,” she saw in the idea of a young woman preparing for “ordinary womanhood” and learning “suddenly” that she is instead “chosen to fulfil a great destiny” the potential for a “great dramatic motive.”

It is not difficult to see why the woman who senses a destiny to incarnate ideas in a new way would be inspired by the story of the girl who is destined to be the vehicle of Christ’s incarnation. Yet it is curious to see what she did with this inspiration: the young Jewish woman living under Roman rule becomes the model for a young Gypsy woman living as a Christian in a Christian realm in which Jews have been forced to convert, Moors are the enemy, and Gypsies are the most reviled of all. It is clear that the racial mix fascinates George Eliot and, as many commentators note, race is the lowest common denominator that determines Fedalma’s choice and her lover Silva’s “slow misery.” Commentators from the beginning have critiqued the implausibility of the heroine’s choice and its implications, even calling it unethical for her to choose to follow a father and a racial group with whom she has no history and turn her back on the people with whom she has lived most of her life. Readers all see in the heroine’s dilemma a replaying of the dilemma of Maggie and of Romola, and the reiterated idea quoted above—“the great problem of the shifting relation between passion and duty”—suggests that George Eliot was quite aware of the vexatious nature of the question she was exploring.

In her “Notes on The Spanish Gypsy and Tragedy” George Eliot makes clear that what she aims to do in The Gypsy is to cast the heroine’s dilemma in classically tragic terms. She speaks in these “Notes” of finding in each individual lot “the same story” involving “some grand collision . . . between the individual and the general.” While her whole career consists of illuminating the grand tragedies of ordinary human “renunciations,” these works of the 1860s see her working out more consciously the meaning of the tragedy of renunciation by focusing more particularly on the figure of the martyr—here moving from the officially proclaimed Savonarola to the ordinary martyrdom of a young woman who “must walk an unslain sacrifice.” Her aim could not perhaps be made clearer than by her transformation of the story of the Annunciation into another tale of renunciation. In The Spanish Gypsy she translates the inspiration she receives from Titian’s picture of the angel Gabriel appearing to Mary into a secular myth wherein the daughter Fedalma renounces her love for, as George Eliot puts it, “what we call duty.” Her aim, as these “Notes” suggest, is to translate what have traditionally
been seen as divinely inspired acts into acts taking place within socially and naturally imposed structures wherein individuals make choices—choices that are constrained or even dictated by “the dire necessities of our lot, partly as to our natural constitution, partly as sharers of life with our fellow-beings”—that shape character and destiny.94

George Eliot’s next move in this 1860s trajectory is to produce in Felix Holt a secular saint, the opposite of Savonarola in his lack of religious adherence but the famous martyr’s equal, within his own provincial sphere, in charisma and influence. Felix Holt earns her the same charge as had Romola, in being too ideal for credulity, but George Eliot’s ascription to him of the Miltonic (or perhaps more aptly Blakean) “human face divine”95 points to her desire to exceed the limits of realism to outline a new kind of hero, the kind she points to in her “Note” on feeling, who inspires others by his very failure.

The Martyrdom of Ordinary Life

As noted above, no one is more aware than George Eliot herself of her failure at this time to “incarnate” her ideas. Neither is anyone more capable of articulating her own difficulties or of articulating her way out of those difficulties in and through her own works. In her “Notes on The Spanish Gypsy and Tragedy” she reminds readers that “rational reflection” will not allow anyone to make their peace with “inherited misfortunes.” “Happily,” she goes on, “we are not left to that.

Love, pity, constituting sympathy, and generous joy with regard to the lot of our fellowmen comes in—has been growing since the beginning—enormously enhanced by wider visions of results—by an imagination actively interested in the lot of mankind generally; and these feelings become piety—i.e., loving, willing submission, and heroic Promethean effort towards high possibilities, which may result from our individual life.96

This statement could serve as a fine summation of George Eliot’s aesthetic, and I want to pay particular attention to the understanding of imagination she expresses here. This imagination “enormously enhance[s]” feelings of love by finding grounds for hope for the future, by extending these feelings beyond ourselves to humankind in general, and by at the same time giving us models of “heroic” action that demonstrate the value of “individual life.” By this process, the imagination turns feelings into piety. It is this kind of religious imagination that George Eliot does demonstrate in her greatest works, and she makes her way to the most masterful of them, Middlemarch, by working out her incarnational aesthetic during this period.
An important element of the experiments she was conducting at this time consisted in an exploration of the nature of religion in different contexts. First she has Romola conduct her own experiment in institutional religion, from which she emerges with a sense that her personal, noninstitutional kind of religion is holy. Then George Eliot considers religion in the cultural context of medieval Granada, in which Silva’s uncle and Fedalma’s father construct race as religion, promoting a faith in one’s own people. In this context she lingers over the possibility of no religion, both in the Gypsies and in her Christian hero. When he abandons his own culture, Silva has the uncomfortable sense of being naked without a creed: unlike the Gypsies, “He could not grasp / Night’s black blank mystery / And wear it for a spiritual garb / Creed-proof.”

In contrast, Zarca claims that “the Zincali exult in having no god,” that theirs “is a faith / Taught by no priest, but by their beating hearts: / Faith to each other”; the Gypsies “call our Holy Place / The hearth that binds us in one family.” Still, Zarca’s claim seems romantic and egotistical in that he goes so far as to credit himself with bearing “the power divine that chooses them and saves.” In the end both Zarca and Silva seem doomed, however, with Silva ending his days as a pilgrim doing eternal penance and seeking forgiveness from the pope, and the Gypsies aiming in vain to construct a nation based on Zarca’s inspiration and memory. After working in this medieval melting pot of religious and cultural difference, George Eliot experiments further in *Felix Holt* with the idea of a religion-less hero as she moves back home to the England of her youth and to a secular hero, who makes a religion out of his devotion to the oppressed workers of his community.

In the terms of my discussion, we might think of this period of the 1860s as the beginning of George Eliot’s own return to the fraught landscape of her youth, equipped with a sense of the wider range of imaginative and religious possibilities that she has gleaned from her excursions into foreign spheres. She emerges from this experience of the art in which saints, angels, and madonnas abound with a sense, not of a god who is dead, but of what Richard Kearney calls “a God who may be.” Kearney’s understanding of the poetic imagination helps to explain this development; he speaks of its three-fold ethical powers—the utopian, the testimonial, and the empathic—in a way that resonates with George Eliot’s practice. Among the aspects of imagination that Kearney identifies and George Eliot explores are “a priority of moral testament over moral theory,” “the imaginative power of sympathy” as “a *sine qua non* of all ethics,” and the “redemptive power” of imagination. To recall George Eliot’s “Notes” on tragedy, she speaks there of how her own love and joy in her fellow humans have been “growing since the beginning—enormously enhanced by wider visions of results—by an imagination actively interested in the lot of mankind generally.” And she has deepened her understanding of the “piety” that is grounded in “loving, willing submission” and “heroic . . . effort towards high possibilities, which may result from individual life.”
One can only imagine what Tito’s son could be thinking of Romola’s response to his statement that he would like to grow up to be “great” and “happy,” and have “a good deal of pleasure.” His “Mamma Romola” replies:

We can only have the highest happiness, such as goes along with being a great man, by having wide thoughts, and much feeling for the rest of the world, as well as ourselves; and this sort of happiness often brings so much pain with it, that we can only tell it from pain by its being what we would choose before everything else, because our souls see it is good.  

George Eliot defines here, in this goal of a happiness that is only morally distinguishable from pain, a kind of martyrdom of ordinary life. While the statement may easily be seen as sanctimonious and morbid, it is also inspiring because it is spoken in the voice of a woman who has learned in much sorrow the lesson she is passing on: “If you mean to act nobly and seek to know the best things God has put within reach of men, you must learn to fix your mind on that end, and not on what will happen to you because of it.” It seems to me that George Eliot experiences, in trying to incarnate her ideas in this period, the pains and failures that lend credibility to the sufferings of the ordinary martyr.

Again it is one of her poems, “O May I Join the Choir Invisible,” written a year before The Spanish Gypsy was finally published, that most poignantly expresses the consolation she derives from this experience. The editors of the Standard Edition of George Eliot’s Essays and Poems, published in New York (n.d.), strategically situate this poem at the end of their text, while at the same time noting that it was originally published a year before The Spanish Gypsy, which is situated as the first poem in this American edition. Perhaps the editors seek a kind of closure in the poet’s prayer to join the invisible choir of “immortal dead who live again” in others who live better than she herself has been able to do. She calls such a membership “heaven,” in its legacy of “that sweet purity / For which we struggled, failed, and agonized / With widening retrospect that bred despair.” While the poet does not call herself a martyr, she does find consolation in the hope that “martyred men” give for a future life after the end of “human Time.” And she expresses a wish or prayer to be, like them, the inspirational “cup of strength” for others who follow her. My aim in this chapter has been to show George Eliot’s triumph in failure and to demonstrate the necessarily religious tenor of this paradox. In these works of the 1860s, she learns what she could not have learned through obvious successes, and the works that follow will show how fruitful this experience would be.