Transformation of Rage
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Conclusion

At the end of 1877, the year of Blackwood’s publication of the “Cabinet Edition” of George Eliot’s works, Eliot wrote in her journal:

Today I say a final farewell to this little book which is the only record I have made of my personal life for sixteen years and more. I have often been helped by looking back in it to compare former with actual states of despondency from bad health or other apparent causes. In this way a past despondency has turned to present hopefulness. But of course as the years advance there is a new rational ground for the expectation that my life may become less fruitful. The difficulty is, to decide how far resolution should set in the direction of activity rather than in the acceptance of a more negative state. Many conceptions of works to be carried out present themselves, but confidence in my own fitness to complete them worthily is all the more wanting because it is reasonable to argue that I must have already done my best. In fact, my mind is embarrassed by the number and wide variety of subjects that attract me, and the enlarging vista that each brings with it [Letters 6:440].

By June 1878, Eliot was writing Impressions of Theophrastus Such, a collection of eighteen essays on a variety of subjects, “connected only through the fictitious narrator,” as Haight explains it (Biography 521). Upon reading the first chapter of the manuscript received in November, Blackwood was “delighted with it. . . . It is so readable, and clear as profound” (Biography 7:79–80). By this time, however, Lewes was seriously ill. His death followed soon, on November 30. Grief-stricken, Eliot decided to delay the publication of the essays; as she wrote Blackwood in January, “To me now the writing seems all trivial stuff.” She agreed to correct the proofs, however, and have them “laid by for a future time” (93).

During the period immediately following Lewes’s death, Eliot would not see anyone except their son Charles. After a week of reading for consolation, she set herself the task of completing Lewes’s Problems of
Life and Mind, by “revising and putting in order for the press such portions of his manuscript as are at all in a state for publication” (7:115); it was published before the end of the year. By April she had also begun her plan to establish a studentship in Lewes’s name “to supply an income to a young man who is qualified and eager to carry on physiological research and would not otherwise have the means of doing so. . . . I have been determined in my choice of the Studentship by the idea of what would be a sort of prolongation of His life. That there should always, in consequence of his having lived, be a young man working in the way he would have liked to work, is a memorial of him that comes nearest to my feeling” (128). Meanwhile, at Blackwood’s urging, Theophrastus was to be published in May. By July, he wrote that “the splendid success of Theophrastus has been a most satisfactory thing to watch” (181). It had taken about six months before Eliot was able to resume interest in her own life. Yet she marked the first anniversary of Lewes’s death by recording in her journal for the date November 29: “Reckoning by the days of the week, it was this day last year my loneliness began. I spent the day in the room where I passed through the first three months [after his death]. I read his letters, and packed them together, to be buried with me. Perhaps that will happen before next November” (7:227).

During the year following Lewes’s death, Eliot’s friendship with the twenty-years-younger John Cross, who had been a close family friend and financial advisor, had blossomed. Cross himself wrote later that beginning in April 1879: “I saw George Eliot constantly. My mother had died in the beginning of the previous December—a week after Mr. Lewes; and as my life had been very much bound up with hers, I was trying to find some fresh interest in taking up a new pursuit. Knowing very little Italian, I began Dante’s ‘Inferno’ with Carlyle’s translation.” When Eliot learned of his interest, she offered to read with him, and they proceeded through the “Inferno” and the “Purgatorio” together. “The divine poet took us into a new world,” Cross wrote. “It was a renovation of life” (7:139). By April 1880, the two had decided to marry. Although Eliot, fearing the disapproval of relatives and friends, had waited until close to the wedding date (May 6) to inform them, the response was entirely warm and enthusiastic. Even her brother Isaac wrote, “I have much pleasure in availing myself of the present opportunity to break the long silence which has existed between us, by offering
our united and sincere congratulations" (280). Eliot responded, “It was a
great joy to me to have your kind words of sympathy, for our long
silence has never broken the affection for you which began when we
were little ones” (287).

Although Eliot was well during their wedding trip to the continent,
the occasion was marred by Cross’s illness on June 16 in Venice, where
he was reported to have jumped from the balcony of their hotel into the
Grand Canal. Cross himself ascribed the cause to “this continual bad air,
and the complete and sudden deprivation of all bodily exercise,” al-
though Haight concludes that his illness (from which he soon recovered)
was “an acute mental depression” (Biography 544). Following their re-
turn to England in early August, Eliot wrote Charles by the end of the
month that “Johnnie gets a little better every day, and so each day is
more enjoyable. But I am decidedly less well than I was when abroad.
There is something languorous in this climate or rather in its effects”
(Letters 7:318). She became ill in September. Her health deteriorated
quickly, and she died on December 22, “from failure of the powers of
the heart supervening on a bad cold,” as Cross wrote that night (350).

On the wedding trip Eliot had written her good friend Barbara Bod-
ichon of her marriage as “a wonderful blessing falling to me beyond my
share after I had thought that my life was ended. . . . Deep down below
there is a hidden river of sadness but this must always be with those who
have lived long—and I am able to enjoy my newly re-opened life”
(7:291). Although judging from the tone of this and other letters, she
was delighted with the love and companionship afforded by her new
marriage, her life in England after the wedding trip was taken up with
social visits and moving—activities which she had never enjoyed. There
is no sign of any further plans for writing. The timing of her death,
shortly after her sixty-first birthday, and shortly after the second anni-
versary of Lewes’s death, suggests the extent of her identification with
Lewes, who was also sixty-one when he died. Her sense of completion
after the writing of Daniel Deronda, and her prophetic remark about her
burial, “Perhaps that will happen before next November,” also suggest
her readiness for death. Her fiction writing career had coincided with
her life of “dual solitude” with Lewes.

In the preceding chapters I have focused on some of the ways in which
aggression is portrayed in George Eliot’s novels. In Adam Bede, the
interconnecting characters in the village of Hayslope express aggression indirectly in their victimization of Hetty; the individuals' sense of inadequacy is transformed into the group manifestation of narcissistic rage. In *The Mill on the Floss*, Maggie's narcissistic rage, which derives from her sense that she is devalued by her family and society, is transformed into her misuse of sexual power in her relationships with males when she becomes a young adult. In *Silas Marner*, the protagonist's compulsive weaving and hoarding contain the rage that is the reaction to his sense of loss. In *Romola*, extreme forms of aggression appear in Tito's treachery, Baldassarre's revenge, and Savonarola's visions of doom. In *Felix Holt*, the protagonist's political conservatism reflects his fear of the possibility of acting on his own aggressive impulses. In *Middlemarch*, Laure, Rosamond, and Bulstrode, each in a different way, act out their murderous impulses. In *Daniel Deronda*, Gwendolen's rage is evident in the incapacitating fear that is the source of her sexual inhibitions. I have argued that the author's denial of aggression in the idealized characters in the novels is an aspect of the defensive process of psychic splitting that is the human response to trauma. I have also argued that George Eliot's creative work was her constructive response to the trauma of loss.

On the basis of Mahler's studies of separation-individuation and Bowlby's studies of attachment, separation, and loss, I have suggested that Eliot's mother, suffering from her own loss of her twin infants in March 1821, was unable thereafter to focus adequate attention on the needs of her toddler, the young Mary Anne Evans. As I explained in the chapter on *Silas Marner*, there is no evidence either of Mary Anne's early interactions with her mother, or of her later memories of her; the correspondence from the two years following her death is missing, and Eliot rarely mentioned her mother in the years following. The patterns in the fiction, however, taken together with the facts of her biography, suggest an early sense of disconnection from her mother that was associated in her mind with the deaths of the twins, and later, with the deaths of each of her parents. Her early sense of disconnection also seems to have established in her behavior a self-reinforcing tendency to alienate herself from the rest of her family, and from her society.

Although Mary Anne's early childhood close attachment to her brother Isaac and her affectionate relationship with her father apparently served to compensate for the loss of closeness to her mother, her reaction to the experience of being sent away from the family to boarding school
at age five was, as suggested by Bowlby’s findings on the cumulative effects of childhood separations (2:52), no doubt exacerbated by her earlier experience. At the end of her life she still remembered the time at the boarding school as marking the beginning of her “low general state of health,” her “fears at night,” and the “liability to have ‘all her soul become a quivering fear,’ which remained with her afterwards [and] had been one of the supremely important influences dominating at times her future life” (Cross 8–9). Her remarks suggest that her early childhood separations contributed to a chronic state of anxiety from which she never fully recovered. That her early emotional separation from her mother was linked with the deaths of the twins also suggests that Eliot’s own mourning over the loss of siblings, as well as her inevitable guilt, and her anxieties about the possibility of her own death, were combined with her separation anxiety. On the basis of Bowlby’s studies of the effects of family loss on children, then, one could say that every time there was a new death in the family, the old state of mourning would be revived and intensified (3:160). Eliot’s unresolved mourning for lost family members appeared in the form of the “intense sadness,” for example, that marked the period of her life when she was struggling to begin writing Romola; her attempt to resolve her sense of loss is evident in Silas Marner, the story which intruded on her at that time.

Although Eliot’s early emotional separation from her mother undoubtedly influenced the course of her later development, this circumstance of her life should be seen in the context of her experience of her whole family, as well as her experience of her society, as Kohut’s theory would suggest, and as Eliot herself presents human development in her novels. The post-Freudian emphasis in psychoanalytic theory on the preoedipal period of development, and therefore on the important role of the primary attachment figure in the child’s developing sense of identity, has resulted at times in what is now recognized to be unwarranted “mother-blaming.” To blame Eliot’s later problems, including her anxiety and depressions, on her mother’s apparent depression in her early life would be a distortion of the realities of the complexity of human development; to do so would ignore, for example, the role of inborn traits that may have shaped her response to her environment. That Eliot subsequently identified with her father more than her mother was actually beneficial to her in a society which generally withheld educational and vocational opportunities from women; her sister Chrissey, who was
said to be her mother's favorite of the two girls, and who had apparently identified with her mother, died young, after fulfilling the expected female role of marriage and child-bearing. Eliot's observation of her mother's and her sister's experience no doubt contributed to her skepticism about marriage and motherhood; her experiences with the Brays and the Chapmans contributed further to the development of her unconventional ideas. Yet, although she apparently had no desire to have children herself (Haight, Biography 205, 533; Eliot, Letters 5:52), she took pride in middle age in her role as step-mother to Lewes's children, and she seemed to be warmly attached to them, just as she remained deeply attached to Lewes, who became her lifelong partner, even though he was not able to become her husband.

Rose has observed that fictional characters "represent aspects of the self, split off and displaced to the outside world" (21). I would add that fictional characters may also represent images of others, which may be confused with images of the self. While a novel is a projection of its author's psychological state, the projection can be seen in more ways than one. In Adam Bede, for example, the idealized Dinah expresses interest in Hetty, but disappears until it is too late to help her. Besides reflecting in the two characters the author's conflicting images of herself, the novel, which was begun only a few months after Eliot's estrangement from her family, may also reflect the image of her relationship with her sister Chrissey, the beautiful daughter who had married a year after their mother died, leaving Mary Ann with the job of taking care of her father's household. Mary Ann had described Chrissey early in her marriage, as her troubles began to accumulate, as "meek and passive," perhaps in contrast to herself. Later, after her own life as a fiction writer had begun, Eliot continued to express concern for Chrissey, but (by informing the family of her relationship with Lewes) precipitated her own banishment (or disappearance) from Chrissey's life close to the date of her wedding anniversary, and just as the condition of her health was becoming serious.

Images of Chrissey also appear in The Mill on the Floss, in the beautiful, favored cousin Lucy, whose fiancé Maggie steals, and in Mrs. Moss, Mr. Tulliver's sister, "a patient, loosely-hung, child-producing woman," who in her brother's view had "quite thrown herself away in marriage and had crowned her mistakes by having an eighth baby" (Mill 139, 136). In Middlemarch, more positive memories of Chrissey take form in
Celia, Dorothea's level-headed (but by implication, more ordinary) sister. Images of Eliot's brother Isaac take shape not only in Tom in *The Mill on the Floss*, but also in the domineering best friend William Dane in *Silas Marner*, who betrays Silas by stealing his fiancée and causing his banishment from their religious community. In *Romola*, feelings toward Isaac are suggested in the character of the longed-for, dying brother Dino, who has been free to pursue his vocation as a friar, while the long-suffering *Romola* has taken full responsibility for their aging father. Dino dies early in the story, as *Romola*, the stronger of the two, eventually finds a way to live her life without a brother or a father.

Memories of Eliot's father, recalled from her early childhood, appear in the idealized carpenter, Adam Bede; images of the aging, dying father appear in the demanding Mr. Tulliver in *The Mill on the Floss* and in Bardo and, in much more distorted form, in Baldassarre in *Romola*. Images of Eliot's mother seem to be rare. As Haight observes, “Of Eliot’s feeling for her mother one can gather little. Inferences drawn from the mothers in her novels are dangerous [because of the lack of evidence about Eliot’s relationship with her]” (*Biography* 6). Although we cannot draw conclusions about the details of her early interactions with her mother, the author’s experience of her mother’s incapacitating sense of loss following the twins’ deaths when she was a toddler is suggested by little Eppie’s experience of the mother who is too incapacitated by her addiction to care for her young child; the author’s experience is also suggested by the narrator’s direct comment in *Felix Holt* about the “blank discontented face” remembered from early childhood that “found it hard to smile.” More frequently, the author’s longing for the lost mother is evident in the excessive idealizations of some of the heroines, like Dinah, Romola, and Dorothea, which suggest, in the light of Fenichel’s explanation of the effects of missing parents on children, Bowlby’s evidence of the effects of parental death on adolescents, and Kernberg’s object relations theory of pathological narcissism, the author’s fusion of her idealized self-image with the idealized image of the mother. The less extreme idealizations of the working men *Adam Bede* and *Felix Holt* also suggest the author’s identification with the lost father.

Both George H. Pollock and David Aberbach stress the fact that Freud began writing *The Interpretation of Dreams*, in which he recounts his
discovery of the Oedipus complex, in response to the death of his father in 1896. As Freud himself wrote, the book was “a portion of my own self-analysis, my reaction to my father's death—that is to say, to the most important event, the most poignant loss, of a man's life” (qtd. in Aberbach 44). Freud wrote much later, in 1931, that the work contains “even according to my present-day judgment, the most valuable of all the discoveries it has been my good fortune to make. Insight such as this falls to one's lot but once in a lifetime” (Brill 181). Pollock observes that it was about a year after his father's death that “Freud announced two elements of the Oedipus complex, the love for one parent and jealous hostility to the other” (115). Pollock suggests that “we see here in dramatic fashion a superb illustration of my hypothesis that the successful completion of the mourning process results in a creative outcome” (116). He also suggests that the creative works of individuals in a variety of fields, including the arts, may represent not only resolutions, but also “aspects of the mourning process itself” (127).

George Eliot's creative works reflect aspects of her own mourning process. A study of her life in relation to her fiction reveals a network of anniversary manifestations that reflect the organizing effect on her behavior of the repetition-compulsion in reaction to associated traumas. I have concluded that her decision to write fiction in 1856, twenty years after her mother's death, signified the beginning of her release from mourning—the point at which she was able to resume the psychological growth that had been interrupted by her unmourned traumatic losses. I also believe that the publication of Daniel Deronda in 1876, twenty years later, signified, if not the completion of the mourning process, then at least the fulfillment of her identity as an artist.

In her novels, Eliot repeatedly tells the story of a young, idealized heroine, typically about seventeen years old, who struggles to grow into adulthood, and whose success in doing so is contrasted with the failure of an extremely immature and/or villainous character. I would argue that this repeating pattern reflects the author's own attempts to grow beyond her fixation on the scene of her mother's death, which had occurred when she was sixteen. That Eliot began her life of dual solitude with Lewes at about age thirty-four also suggests the repetition in the author's life of seventeen-year cycles as part of her attempt to master the trauma of maternal loss. In another seventeen years, following Thornie's death, Eliot would conceive out of two separate works “one great novel of
Concluding provincial life,” *Middlemarch*, which became her masterpiece, and which, through the stories of its interconnecting characters, including Lydgate, who could not escape the scene of his father’s death, reflected her mind’s attempt to integrate emotions and events.

I would argue that *Romola*, which Eliot conceived in 1860 and began to write in 1861, reenacts not only the period in Eliot’s life following her move to London after her father’s death, when she became infatuated by turns with Chapman, Spencer, and Lewes (1851–53), but also the period following Isaac’s marriage and the move from the family home at Griff to Coventry in 1841. During that time, the expression of rebellion against her family that had been directed primarily at Isaac (in the form of her somber Calvinism) shifted to her father, when Mary Ann made the apparently sudden decision to reject Christianity altogether. Mary Ann’s shifting infatuations, from her evangelical friend Maria Lewis to her free-thinking friend Charles Bray, beginning in 1841, and for the scholarly Dr. Brabant in November 1843, reflected her sense of dislocation, as well as her attempts to find replacements for her brother and her father. The move from Griff on March 17, 1841, was also very close to the twentieth anniversary of the births of Eliot’s twin siblings on March 16, 1821. The household move and the loss of Isaac to marriage would thus be associated with the loss of the newborn twins and the painful separation from the mother that had followed. The associated traumas were relived again in the form of Marian’s banishment from Chapman’s household in London on March 24, 1851. Eliot completed *Silas Marner*, through which she reenacted the loss of parents and siblings, in March 1861. She returned to her research for *Romola*, which reenacts her sense of disconnection and loss, in April 1861. In writing these novels, Eliot was demonstrating that she had learned to attempt mastery of her traumas by creating works of fiction, rather than by repeatedly acting them out in her personal life, as she had done ten and twenty years earlier.

Marian’s affair with Lewes in 1853 began about ten years after the incident with Dr. Brabant in 1843, when Brabant’s wife and sister had sent Mary Ann away from their household. The banishment from Victorian society that resulted from her choice of Lewes was the culmination of a long-term pattern of banishments: from the Chapman’s household, from the Brabant’s household, from her father’s household during their “Holy War”—all of which I believe echoed her sense of banishment from her mother’s company following the twins’ deaths. The significance
for the author of the dates and numbers used in *Felix Holt*, which tells the story of an election riot that she had witnessed at age thirteen, and which, as a symbol of “radicalism,” she apparently associated with her elopement with Lewes (thirteen years prior to the novel’s publication date), suggests her guilt over her choice of a married man, the traumatic effects of her subsequent banishment from family and society, and, judging from her emphasis on Felix’s capacity to control his rage through the use of words, her determination to stop “acting out the evil within” (*Deronda* 746).

Writing of his early observation of anniversary reactions, Freud describes a woman who had sick-nursed her husband (and other loved ones before him) until his death, and who afterward “celebrated annual festivals of remembrance at the period of her various catastrophes, and on these occasions her vivid visual reproduction and expressions of feeling kept to the date precisely” (2:163). Explaining her delayed reactions, Freud writes that besides the effects on the body of self-neglect and constant worry during the nursing period, there are the effects of “suppressing every sign of [her] own emotion.” If the sick person dies, “and the period of mourning sets in . . . these impressions that have not yet been dealt with come into the picture as well” (162). Eliot had helped with nursing her mother as she was dying, and she had been wholly responsible for the care of her dying father. She was also at Thornie’s bedside during the last months of his life. My analysis of *Middlemarch*, the work conceived shortly after Thornie’s death (and twenty years after her father’s death), suggests that the predominance of oedipal dramas in the novel follows from the intensity of the author’s reaction to her revived sense of loss. Her preoccupation with murderous wishes in her characters reflects her fear, as portrayed in Bulstrode, of the possibility of acting on the powerful impulses that comprise the reaction to the loss of loved ones. Freud explains in his essay on anxiety that the human mind associates the infant’s anxiety over separation and loss with the young child’s (castration) anxiety of the oedipal period (20:138). By way of extending Freud’s argument, I would add that the anxiety that accompanies the later loss of a loved one is also accompanied by a revival of oedipal fantasies, and moreover, that losses that occur before the oedipal period are associated with oedipal fantasies retroactively. Freud’s own experience after his father’s death, when he discovered the Oedipus complex as he analyzed his own dream material, is an example of how
the mind associates loss with the oedipal drama. The conflicting love-hate (or longing and anger) impulses that are aroused in response to the adult’s renewed sense of the child’s loss of love take the form in the imagination of the oedipal fantasy: in response to the trauma of loss, the overwhelming love-hate impulses are split between the two parents and disguised as a drama in dreams and creative works.

Eliot’s shifting infatuations in 1841 and 1851 reenacted the inner conflicts of her childhood; her novels dramatize them. In *The Mill on the Floss*, Maggie’s shifting involvements with men reflect her attempts to grow beyond her intense childhood attachment to her brother, who had served as a substitute for both her parents. In *Romola*, the motherless title character leaves her marriage to Tito (her brother’s replacement) at the same time that she grows out of her subjection to Savonarola (her father’s replacement) to become the head of a family herself. In *Daniel Deronda*, Gwendolen reworks, in the transference with Deronda, the missing elements in her experience of her parents. The reward for her acceptance of the reality of her loss of Deronda is her sense of a separate self, gained through a process of “transmuted internalization.” Eliot’s novels thus illustrate Kohut’s idea that the resolution of the Oedipus complex should be seen in the context of the development of a firm sense of self.

The young Mary Anne Evans’s shaky sense of identity is suggested both by her name changes and their timing. If it is true that she changed the spelling of her name to Mary Ann on the day of her sister’s wedding, then the timing would suggest a sense of dislocation brought on by her sister’s departure from the household. The next change in the spelling of her name, to Marian, also suggests a connection to her sense of dislocation following her move to London in the spring of 1851, which was also the tenth anniversary of the move to Coventry before Isaac’s marriage. Finally, the choice of the pseudonym, George Eliot, was made in 1856, the anniversary of her mother’s death, and suggests her new sense of identification with Lewes. As she explained later to Cross, she chose the name because “George was Mr. Lewes’s Christian name, and Eliot was a good mouth-filling, easily pronounced word” (Haight, Biography 220).

The timing of major events in the Evans family also suggests the possibility that each individual’s anniversary reactions reflected a shared sense of loss among family members. Isaac married in the spring of 1841, the twentieth anniversary of the twins’ deaths. Mr. Evans’s decision to
move with Mary Ann to Coventry on March 17, close to the day of the births on March 16, taken together with the timing of Isaac’s decision to marry, suggests the possibility of the family’s shared reaction to the earlier loss. Mr. Evans died on May 31, 1849, close to the date of the twelfth anniversary of Chrissey’s wedding on May 30, 1837. Chrissey died on March 15, 1859, close to the day of the twins’ births, the year of the tenth anniversary of her father’s death, and as she was approaching the age of her mother when she died; thus the date of her death apparently combined reactions to three earlier family losses. Eliot’s family pattern of interacting reactions to loss was perpetuated in her life with Lewes, whose background of family loss mirrored hers. Moreover, the pattern was reinforced when their son Thornie died soon after the twentieth anniversary of Mr. Evans’s death. Eliot herself died close to the anniversary of Lewes’s death, and at the same age. Her sense of loss was also shared by her husband John Cross, who had lost his mother close to the time when Eliot had lost Lewes. I would argue that Eliot’s perception of the network of reactions to loss among family members is projected onto the web of interconnections among the characters in the world of Middlemarch, whose shared sense of loss is reflected in their network of oedipal dramas. Eliot’s marriage to Cross, which can be seen as a reenactment of her own oedipal drama in response to Lewes’s death, suggests an incomplete resolution of her lifelong psychological dilemma. However, a study of her life in relation to her fiction also shows how creative work provides a vehicle for mastery of trauma, even if the results are incomplete.

In Bowlby’s view, anger is bound up with the anxiety reaction to loss and/or separation from attachment figures. In Kohut’s terms, rage is the response to narcissistic injury, or to any experience that the mind interprets as loss of love. Kohut also believed that the rage will disappear as the structures of the self are completed by the process of “transmuted internalization.” Eliot’s sense of completion after the writing of Deronda, along with the disappearance of her symptoms of depression, suggest that she achieved through her creative work the strengthening of the sense of self that Kohut describes. The body of Eliot’s fiction as a whole enacts her vision of the human potential for growth that she attempted to portray in her novel Felix Holt. The rapid artistic, intellectual, and personal growth that is evident in the progress of her novels leaves the reader with the sense of “life releasing itself from integu-
ment"—a feeling that reflects the psychological reality of the process of the author's gradual release from her state of mourning. Although we cannot know with certainty how completely Eliot ultimately resolved her sense of loss, it is apparent that in the attempt she achieved her position as an eminent English novelist, as well as her own clear sense of personal fulfillment. Her life, by any measure, was a personal and professional success.