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**ROMOLA AS A PSYCHOLOGICAL NOVEL
– A STUDY OF MORAL DEGENERATION**

Critics and biographers of George Eliot indicate several 19th century theologians and philosophers whose work shaped her attitude to religion – Strauss, Bray, Hennell, and above all, Comte and Feuerbach. The “religion of humanity” preached by the French philosopher and Feuerbach’s antropomorphisation of religious belief are clearly reflected in the novelist’s work. In his study *Religious Humanism and the Victorian Novel* U. C. Knoepfelmacher says:

The negative implications of her subsequent break with her father’s faith, her despair over “leathery Strauss”, her typical refuge in the pantheism of Spinoza and Wordsworth, and, finally, her confrontation with the anti-theological theology of Feuerbach have all been analyzed so scrupulously and so well, that it is often forgotten that, much as the “Higher Critics” helped to undermine George Eliot’s belief, they also provided her with substitute values and ideals she incorporated in her novels¹.

The values and ideals are evident in the drama of “ardent souls” – Maggie, Romola and Dorothea. While Maggie dies before she has been able to reach full self-realization through moral choice the latter two characters find the meaning of existence in self-sacrifice, in making “the world a better place to live in” through their “incalculable diffusive influence” over those around them: potential St. Therasas who live a hidden life and rest in unvisited tombs. But George Eliot remains also vividly aware of the human depravity the source of which she sees in egoism. In most of her novels she focusses her attention on egocentricity, as the vice which destroys human interrelations. The American critic observes in another place:

¹ *Religious Humanism and the Victorian Novel, George Eliot, Walter Pater and Samuel Butler*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1970, p. 44.

The close introspection of her early Puritanism, with its meticulous dissection of the hidden motives which prompted men to selfish actions, its deep sense of human depravity, and concomitant belief in self-denial found outlets in the new emphasis on a mancentred order. Metaphysics had been dissolved into psychology and Victorian psychologists such as Lewes believed that their main task consisted in careful differentiation of man's faculties from those of the animals with which he shared a basic instinct of self-preservation and self-gratification. Man's animality, however, his innate egoism, could be tempered by a stoic acceptance of the natural order and his willingness to annul the self in the general advancement of his fellow-men (31-32).

Yet, however important was Lewes's influence on George Eliot's opinions, in her novels metaphysics has not been entirely dissolved into psychology. The metaphysical dimension arises from the main theme of *Romola*, it is present in *Middlemarch* and in *Daniel Deronda*. Most of Eliot's novels offer excellent studies of egoists analyzed by eminent critics². In *Romola* the character of Tito Melema and the process of his moral deterioration presents an interesting example of George Eliot's essentially religious view of the moral drama in spite of her agnosticism.

The fundamental relationship in which the destructive working of an egoistic character reveals itself in a most striking way is marriage. In three of her great novels – *Romola*, *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda* George Eliot presents studies of ill-matched unions. In each case we follow a process of the deterioration of marital life – the result of the wrong choice of the partner by both parties. In each case we have to do with egoists who bring disaster to the woman they choose and ultimately to themselves. In *Middlemarch* Dorothea marries an elderly man in spite of the objections and warnings of her sister and friends. To her naive and idealistic vision he appears as a sage, a scholar and a philosopher. Everyday life reveals to her a narrow, selfish man, pedantic and mediocre in his scholarly work, mean towards his wife and nephew, intolerant of criticism. The incompatibility of characters brings complete estrangement; on his death Dorothea feels nothing but contempt for him. Gwendolen marries for money and position, because she cannot face a life of privation. She wants to shine in society and naively expects that she will impose her will on her husband. But Grandcourt is evil and despotic, though his brutality is well masked by polished manners. His aim is not so much to possess her body and soul as to break her spirit and bring her to complete subjection. Gwendolen's opposition and rebellion lead to a growing hatred between them which ends with Grandcourt's death. Gwendolen remains with a tormenting sense of guilt to the end of her life; she feels responsible for what had happened: the fraction of a second when she hesitated before reaching help to her husband when he was drowning actually decided about his death.

² Cf. B. Hardy, *The Novels of George Eliot*, Oxford University Press, New York 1967.

The story of Romola and Tito is different from those of Dorothea-Casaubon and Gwendolen-Grandcourt. Romola marries Tito for love. He seems to bring happiness to her after a long period of sadness and self-denial. He seems to be a personification of beauty and joy, brilliance of mind and delicacy of feelings. Tito, too, falls in love with Romola. She appeals to his aesthetic sense as a beautiful woman. With his personal charm and intellectual gifts he might have married one of the rich Florentine ladies, yet he chooses Romola, the daughter of a lonely, blind scholar. This choice outwardly seems to testify to a nobility of feelings. In fact it is the choice of a hedonist and egoist, while the work for Bardo Bardi is a step upward in his further career. Mutual disappointment, as in the case of the other two couples in George Eliot's later novels, is fatal to both partners as far as their union is concerned, but while Romola reaches moral maturity through profound disillusionment and suffering, Tito's story unfolds as the drama of betrayal which ends in his death. Casaubon and Grandcourt enter the stage as well-formed characters; the former is in his fifties, the latter in the prime of his life, still young. Marriage brings out those features of their characters which are well concealed from their partners though not unknown to other persons. The pedantry and meanness of one, the corruption, brutality and despotism of the other are fully brought out in the relationship with the women of their choice, in response to their rebellious reaction. Tito on the contrary, begins his career as a young man who, so far, has not revealed any perverse features. His character seems smooth and easy-going, his potential for good and for evil is not known to anyone. Tito's story, more than any other in George Eliot's novels, has a metaphysical dimension: it is the universal drama of the fall of man. Through pleasure-seeking a handsome, talented young man dedicates himself to evil. We follow the process of his degradation step by step until, at the end, he becomes the incarnation of evil itself. His death is the inevitable consequence of his choice.

The psychological analysis of this process of self-destruction is carried out by George Eliot in a masterful way. The author-narrator reveals her subtle relentless penetration of hidden and contradictory motives of human behaviour. Tito's character unfolds in action. Critical stages in his degradation are accompanied by the commentary of the narrator – a philosopher and a sage. At the beginning of the action Tito appears as a young man who attracts attention and sympathy by his beauty and charm. Tessa calls him "as beautiful as those who go to Paradise"; Romola associates his beauty with goodness. Nello the hairdresser, gives him a haircut free of charge and introduces him to Florentine scholars. The fact that he was rescued from shipwreck can only heighten friendly interest in his person. Tito's mind and conscience are at the beginning in a state of inertia, his potential,

both for good and for evil, seems to be at balance. Yet, Piero di Cosimo with the insight of an artist, penetrates the inclinations dormant in Tito and calls him "a perfect model for a traitor":

Young man, I am painting the picture of Sinon deceiving old Priam, and I should be glad of your face for my Sinon, if you'd give me a sitting³.

Tito looks at him "with a pale astonishment as if at a sudden accusation", and the painter is unaware that he had hit the vulnerable spot: Tito will indeed abandon and deny his adopted father, he will be false to his wife; involved in politics as a secret agent he will betray Bernardo del Nero and Savonarola and die a violent death. In the moment when Piero di Cosimo asks him to give him a sitting the idea of abandoning his father has not yet crystallized in his consciousness; Piero's remark makes him aware of the deeply hidden but not yet formulated intention. At this stage his conscience is still alive. During the meeting with the Bardis, enchanted with Romola's beauty, he makes his first move: he speaks about his lost father as if he were dead. Thus begins the stage of concealment. Tito conceals the fact that his father is alive, in Turkish slavery, and that he expects help from him. The moment when he sells the gems and obtains a large sum of money equal to "a man's ransom" or more and makes his decision about locating the money at a good profit, is the "generating incident" from which, as in classical drama, all further action proceeds. So far, however, the first act which launches Tito's moral deterioration is known only to himself. Very soon it is accompanied by ill-wishes towards those who become inconvenient or dangerous to him: Tito wishes his father dead, then he extends this wish to Romola's brother who brings the message from Baldassare. Yet, even at this stage, when he has already embarked on the course of pleasure-seeking through betrayal, Tito still has a conscience. The narrator very subtly suggests that a change of heart might still be possible. Tito reacts to allusions which are understood only by himself, while the speakers are unaware of the double meaning of the words they have uttered. Thus he looks "with pale astonishment" at the painter, he is shocked by Bardi's evaluation of the sum he got for his gems, he is afraid that he will lose Romola when she has learned from Dino that he had failed to answer the message delivered by her brother. His conscience, however, acts now in self-defense to signal the danger to his egoistic plans, not to warn him that by submitting to a life of pleasure he gradually destroys himself as a human being.

The process of Tito's moral degeneration is presented in three relationships, perfectly interconnected: his relationship to Baldassare, to the two women

³ G. Eliot, *Romola*, ed. and introd. A. Sanders, Penguin Books, London 1980, p. 87. All subsequent quotations are from this edition.

he deceives – his wife and Tessa; and his political game in which he sinks from the position of an esteemed citizen of Florence to the status of a triple agent eventually forced to escape from this city. The chapter *A Man's Ransom* is an excellent analysis of Tito's inner struggle, "his first real colloquy with himself". Apparently the scene which presents a young man deep in thought in his small room, in Renaissance Florence, is very far from the extreme situation of Conrad's characters: Jim on board the *Patna*, listening to the shouts "Jump!, George, jump!" or Heyst facing the three gangsters invading his lonely island. Yet in the moral sense it is also one of the extreme situations in which a man make his choice – the choice which will determine the rest of his life:

[...] This was his first real colloquy with himself: he had gone on following the impulses of the moment, and one of those impulses had been to conceal half the fact; he had never considered this part of his conduct long enough to face the consciousness of his motives for the concealment. What was the use of telling the whole? (149)

[...] Do I not owe something to myself? – said Tito inwardly [...] Am I to spend my life in a wandering search? I believe he is dead. Cennini was right about my florins: I will place them in his hands to – morrow (150-151).

The narrator analyzes the moral implications of Tito's decisions:

When the next morning, Tito put his determination into act he had chosen his colour in the game, and had given an inevitable bent to his wishes. He had made it impossible that he should not from henceforth desire it to be the truth that his father was dead; impossible that he should not be tempted to baseness rather than that the precise facts of his conduct should not remain for ever concealed.

Under every guilty secret there is a hidden brood of guilty wishes, whose unwholesome infecting life is cherished by the darkness. The contaminating effect of deeds often lies less in the commission than in the consequent adjustment of our desires – the enlistment of our self-interest on the side of falsity; [...] Besides, in this first distinct colloquy with himself the ideas which had previously been scattered and interrupted had now concentrated themselves; the little rills of selfishness had united and made a channel, so that they could never again meet with the same resistance (151).

Thus Tito becomes a "son of darkness" – he leads a life of falsehood and intrigue which ultimately brings him to cynicism and nihilism.

On the surface he is the incarnation of beauty, joy and youth. He is called jokingly "Messer Endymion", compared to Bacchus or Apollo; the wedding gift he makes to Romola representing Bacchus crowning Ariadne contains his self-portrait and that of his wife. The inner reality, the truth about his inner self, is suspected by two people: Bernardo del Nero, who mistrusts him from the beginning and latter calls him a "demon", and Piero di Cosimo, who intuitively sees in him a model for a traitor and later discovers a secret fear haunting the young man. With the moral insight of an artist he sees under the surface of things. His statement: "That young man has seen a ghost" – sums up Tito's moral predicament after he has denied Baldassare.

In her minute analysis of Tito's deterioration the narrator shows how "his talent for concealment develops fast" in every new situation. The imagery used by the narrator suggests destruction and death; it is taken from scientific observation, very characteristic of George Eliot's interest in contemporary science, or is poetic and allegorical containing Biblical allusions. Thus Tito's thought "showed itself as active as a virulent acid eating its rapid way through all the tissues of sentiment" (168). Fra Luca's vision, on the other hand, is a poetical commentary on Romola's disastrous choice. It contains all the traditional elements of the imagery of evil – the desert, drought, barrenness of the place where the Devil lives. The blank face of Romola's husband which finally takes the features of the Great Tempter himself, is in agreement with the intuitive assessment of Tito's character by Piero di Cosimo and it confirms the epithet "demon" with which Bernardo del Nero later refers to Romola's husband, – a traitor's face, whose moral ugliness will be revealed at the end of the drama. It is *mutatis mutandis* – an anticipation of the motif of *Dorian Gray*: the beautiful surface opposed to a hideous inner reality. Fra Luca's vision, very successful from the artistic point of view, is in agreement with the theological image of Evil, associated with and symbolized by wasteland.

The narrator maintains a critical distance from Tito, which the reader shares with her. She shows Tito successful in his falsehood, and unaware of the extent of his subjection to evil; the contradictions in his thoughts and motives reveal the contradictions in human nature morally weak, tempted by pleasure:

[...] He was not out of love with goodness, or prepared to plunge into vice: he was in his fresh youth, with soft pulses for all charm and loveliness; he had still a healthy appetite for ordinary human joys, and the poison could only work by degrees. He had sold himself to evil, but at present life seemed so nearly the same to him that he was not conscious of the bond (170).

He is still capable to speak self-critically to Romola, to judge himself in terms of good and evil and thus, paradoxically and perversely, maintain his good reputation: "You are right, Romola, except in thinking too well of me" (190).

In his first public denial of Baldassare Tito acts spontaneously – he rejects his adopted father as "some madman". From this he proceeds to a calculated falsehood, a deliberate lie involving also a great risk, in Rucellai Gardens, but which ends with his success; the imprisonment of Baldassare and his confinement to a mental asylum. Yet, the first rejection, though on the spur of the moment, is in the narrator's assessment, only apparently unpremeditated. Tito's first public denial of Baldassare, is actually the result of a long moral process:

He hardly knew how the words had come to his lips: there are moments when our passions speak and decide for us, and we seem to stand by and wonder. They carry in them the inspiration of crime, that in one instant does the work of long premeditation (284).

The evil which grows on the conscious and subconscious level crystallizes into a deed which defines the stage of betrayal Tito has reached and determines the further course of his action. "Tito was experiencing that inexorable law of human souls, that we prepare ourselves for sudden deeds by the reiterated choice of good and evil which gradually determines character" (287). The act of public denial brings in a new factor in Tito's life – it is fear which the painter again instinctively discovers and expresses in his picture of Bacchus. The fear of being discovered and unmasked, the fear of being killed by Baldassare prompts Tito to take a new course. He is on the defence, in the sense that he does not want to kill anybody, but he defends himself by the lie which becomes the natural atmosphere in which he breathes, and which kills love. The denial in Rucellai Gardens is a premeditated act in which Tito, at the height of social success, defeats the man who is weak, unprotected, mentally disarranged, obsessed with the idea of unmasking his adopted son who had betrayed him. Fear brings Tito to moral and mental slavery "as if he had been smitten with a blighting disease" (287). But even at this stage Tito "winces under the sense that he was deliberately inflicting suffering on his father". These contradictory feelings make him attempt to conciliate Baldassare in Tessa's home, which is another proof of his desire to live a comfortable life while acting false to those who trust him. "Tito longed to have his world once again completely cushioned with goodwill" (376). It is not so much remorse that he feels but he is not pleased with the final denial of Baldassare and the open war which now lies ahead of him. Throughout his false game against Baldassare, Romola and the politicians he does not want to recognise the fact that "he had borrowed from the terrible usurer Falsehood [...] till he belonged to the usurer, body and soul" (425). Consequently the drama of betrayal finds its solution in Tito's death. The final stage of Tito's career is an illustration of "the price of treachery": Tito falls into the trap he has prepared for himself. As with Arthur Donnithorne and later in the story of Bulstrode or Gwendolen Harleth the consequences of the past cannot be avoided.

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Tito's relation to Romola seems to begin like a lyrical love story – a gift of kindly fate to both young people. So it seems to the external world, too. The irony lies in Romola's total ignorance of Tito's potential for

betrayal. Tito's beauty is for Romola "part of the finished language by which goodness speaks" (251). The image of Bacchus and Ariadne, Tito's wedding gift, seems to be the image of their own happiness. Romola reads her own thoughts and nobility of mind in Tito's eyes, and Dino's vision, though disturbing and enigmatic, has for her no connection with her union with Tito. It is interesting that this love story is highly idealized and lacks the eroticism of Maggie-Stephen relationship. The narrator uses music similes and light imagery in presenting the atmosphere of their meetings:

[...] When she was near him [...] he was subdued by a delicious influence as strong and inevitable as those musical vibrations which take possession of us with a rhythmic empire [...] (170).

[...] Romola's deep calm happiness encompassed Tito like the rich but quiet evening light which dissipates all unrest (174).

She appeals to his hedonistic and pagan nature, she is compared to a pagan beauty, her hair to the gold of Pactolus, yet she will soon reveal the character of Antigone rather than that of a pagan goddess.

Romola's disillusionment in the man she loves, her discovery of Tito's baseness and treachery come gradually, marked by dramatic moments of the conflict between husband and wife: the selling of the library by Tito, the first trap laid by him for Savonarola and unexpectedly thwarted by Romola, her meeting with Baldassare, her discovery of Tessa and of Tito's children, del Nero's death. Romola's discovery of truth proceeds as in a Jamesian novel – it is a step by step revelation of the mystery of the past with its inevitably disastrous consequences in the present. The meaning of Dino's vision gradually unfolds itself, the blank face which, in the dream, takes the features of the Eternal Tempter, becomes the face of her husband.

Romola's experience brings her to the fundamental question of the meaning of life. In no other novel did Eliot present the search for God in the search for truth and the meaning of existence, so dramatically and poignantly as in this one. Romola's story, in contrast to that of Tito, presents a progress upward in the moral and spiritual sense. It is no exaggeration to say that in *Romola* George Eliot creates – without realising it – the character of a modern Christian saint, a lay person dedicated to good.

The love story changes gradually to the drama of the deterioration of marriage. As it was said, Tito marries Romola for love; yet he loves her for himself and wants to subject her to his plans and decisions. Since he meets with opposition the rift between them gradually widens to end in total estrangement and mutual hostility. The first conflict caused by his selling of Bardi library makes Tito aware of Romola's unforgiving attitude once she discovers his capability for intrigue and betrayal. Since that moment they live a life apart side by side, not together with each other.

Few novelists can compare with George Eliot in revealing the process of the deterioration of marriage through minute details – slight gestures, trifles which “make epochs in married life”. When Tito sends Romola away on the afternoon he sells the library to the French he “is rather disgusted with himself that he had not been able to look up at Romola”. He shrinks from her not so much because he has scruples, but rather because he is not yet used perfectly to being false towards her:

He would have chosen, if he could, to be even more than usually kind; but he could not, on a sudden, master an involuntary shrinking from her, which, by a subtle relation, depended on those very characteristics in him that made him desire not to fail in his marks of affection. He was about to take a step which he knew would arouse her deep indignation; he would have to encounter much that was unpleasant before he could win her forgiveness. And Tito could never find it easy to face displeasure and anger; his nature was one of those most remote from defiance or impudence, and all his inclinations leaned towards preserving Romola’s tenderness. He was not tormented by sentimental scruples which, as he had demonstrated to himself by a very rapid course of argument had no relation to solid utility; but his freedom from scruples did not release him from the dread of what was disagreeable (344).

Thus when the conflict about the library breaks out “he winced under her judgment”, she is still “the wife of his love”; “he would have been equal to any sacrifice that was not unpleasant” (345). In the process of the deterioration of marriage Romola’s nobility of mind gradually becomes inconvenient for him. He rejects “a standard disagreeably rigorous”, which becomes a menace to him, hence the sense of growing repulsion on his part. His relationship with Tessa, apart from sensual attraction, is very well motivated psychologically: Tessa is a “refuge” from the norms imposed by Romola and rejected by Tito, she is also the person who, in her naive simplicity, admires and adores Tito – and this is what he needs. In her ignorance she creates a false image of Tito – “a San Michele”, “a saint from Paradise”. Throughout his double relationship with Romola and Tessa Tito becomes a split personality. Tessa brings out the soft and tender side of his nature, he is, in his own way, fond of her and when he is planning his escape from Florence he wants to abandon Romola, but it never occurs to him to abandon Tessa and the children. Paradoxically Romola’s intellectual powers, her dignity, honesty and firmness of mind which he at first admires, challenge his resistance and only harden his nature. When Romola thwarts his first plot against Savonarola he sees her as an “on-coming deadly force” and he becomes afraid of her. In the last stage of their relationship he feels no longer any tenderness for his wife:

The good-humoured, tolerant Tito, incapable of hatred, incapable almost of impatience, disposed always to be gentle toward the rest of the world, felt himself becoming strangely hard towards his wife whose presence had once been the strongest influence he had

known. [...] Romola had an energy of her own which thwarted his, and no man, who is not exceptionally feeble, will endure being thwarted by his wife. Marriage must be either a relation of sympathy or of conquest (492).

When he finds out that she knows the truth about Baldassare he maintains his lies, but he hardens towards her still more and the politeness of his manners and speech gives way to a sarcastic tone.

The clash of opposed wills, with Romola's growing horror as she discovers the extent of Tito's treachery, comes to a climax with Bernardo del Nero's arrestation. It is a double climax, the intensity of which derives from Romola's double discovery: she has been outraged as a woman on finding out Tito's relationship with Tessa and she has every reason to suspect that Tito is instrumental in the imprisonment of her godfather, Bernardo del Nero. Significantly it is the third father betrayed by Tito. There is now open war between them, though carefully masked by Tito before the world. It ends in Romola's flight from Florence and Tito's death at the hands of Baldassare. Tito, at the beginning compared to pagan gods because of his beauty and charm, is now gradually presented through the demon imagery. Bernardo del Nero, as mentioned before, is the first to call him to Romola "one of the demoni", who are "of no particular country" (252); Romola, on discovering that he wears the coat of mail, says that it seems to her "as if some malignant fiend had changed" his "sensitive skin into a hard shell" (316). For Baldassare Tito's words sound "like the mocking of a glib defying demon" (342).

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The historical-political theme of the novel is a subject for a separate study. In the present paper we will confine ourselves to the moral aspect of Tito's political activity. We watch the struggle for a career and for immediate pleasure which is within the grasp of an egocentric individual. Tito is a man without origin, *un déraciné*, ready to sell his services without any sense of allegiance to any cause. His career, however, is shown within a clearly defined political context. George Eliot approached her subject equipped with a thorough knowledge of the political and historical events centring round the figure of Savonarola, and, as in the analysis of the moral drama, she relentlessly pursues the mechanism of the struggle for power. The narrator shows the cynicism of the politicians and the meanness of their agents with the cool objectivity of a modern political observer – we are almost tempted to say – "war correspondent". She is devoid of the romantic touch which can be found in the works of a realist she admired so much – Walter Scott. In the chapter, *Why Tito Was Safe*, the analysis

of Tito's political involvement is inevitably intertwined with the psychological and moral assessment of his motives and the secret springs of the political game are ironically presented:

It was easy to him to keep up this triple game. The principle of duplicity admitted by the Mediceans on their own behalf deprived them of any standard by which they could measure the trustworthiness of a colleague who had not, like themselves, hereditary interests, alliances and prejudices, which were intensely Medicean. In their minds to deceive the opposite party was a fair stratagem; to deceive their own party was a baseness to which they felt no temptation; and in using Tito's facile ability, they were not keenly awake to the fact that the absence of traditional attachments which made him a convenient agent was also the absence of what among themselves was the chief guarantee of mutual honour. Again, the Roman and Milanese friends of the aristocratic party of Arrabbiati, who were the bitterest enemies of Savonarola, carried on a system of underhand correspondence and espionage in which the deepest hypocrisy was the best service, and demanded the heaviest pay; so that to suspect an agent because he played a part strongly would have been an absurd want of logic (556).

Tito's falsehood leads him to a blind alley since he wants to play a treacherous game and still have a good reputation in the world:

For Tito himself, he was not unaware that he had sunk a little in the estimate of the men who had accepted his services. He had that degree of self-contemplation which necessarily accompanies the habit of acting on well-considered reasons, of whatever quality; and if he could have chosen, he would have declined to see himself disapproved by men of the world. He had never meant to be disapproved; he had meant always to conduct himself so ably that if he acted in opposition to the standard of other men they should not be aware of it; and the barrier between himself and Romola had been raised by the impossibility of such concealment with her. He shrank from condemnatory judgement as from a climate to which he could not adapt himself (560).

On the other hand the Florentines who chose Tito as their agent "silently concluded that this ingenious and serviceable Greek was in future rather to be used for public needs than for private intimacy". And the author comments ironically:

Unprincipled men were useful, enabling those who had more scruples to keep their hands tolerably clean in a world where there was much dirty work to be done. Indeed, it was not clear to respectable Florentine brains, unless they had the Frate's extravagant belief in a possible purity and loftiness to be striven for on this earth, how life was to be carried on in any department without human instruments whom it would not be unbecoming to kick or to spit upon in the act of handing them their wages (559-560).

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Fourteen years after the publication of *Romola* George Eliot wrote to John Blackwood, her publisher, after rereading her novel:

[...] There is no book of mine about which I more thoroughly feel that I swear by every sentence as having been written with my best blood [...] and with the most ardent care for veracity of which my nature is capable⁴.

Her "best blood and ardent care" are evident also in the artistic devices perfectly subordinated to her moral vision.

The structure of the novel relies on contrast and irony – very traditional devices used skilfully on several levels. Contrast runs throughout the plot in the motif of appearance and reality, illusion and disappointment – the clash between what Tito seems and what he really is. The contrast operates on the level of characters – apart from the two protagonists, there are two fathers, Baldassare and Bardi; two sons – Tito and Dino; the sons and the fathers are sharply opposed to each another. There is a dramatic contrast between two women – Romola and Tessa, which determines the plot; and in the background stands the great figure of Savonarola with his condemnation of the perverse Renaissance world of Florence and contemporary Italy while ascetic life is offered as a remedy against the immorality of the age.

Contrast is explored in the imagery of beauty and joy – Bacchus and Ariadne, Endymion, images of opulence and profusion of nature and art – against the image of the desert, stones and the Eternal Tempter from Dino's vision; the wedding of Tito and Romola is immediately followed by the Mask of Death; the image of "poison in flowers" (531) which comes to Romola's mind, invites a comparison with Isabel Archer who thinks of Osmond's egoism hidden "like a serpent in a bank of flowers".

It is no exaggeration to say that Romola belongs to the most ironic novels in English literature to be compared with *Bleak House* and *Nostromo*. In the first part the reader shares the narrator's knowledge of Tito's concealment of truth and then his falsehood is juxtaposed with Romola's enchantment and Bardi's friendliness and appreciation of the young man. Romola sees Tito as "a wreath of spring", he seems to bring to her life all that has been denied to her. Tito's admiration of Romola, however, is "that of a fleet soft coated dark-eyed animal", which looks "as if he loved you". Thus Tito's hedonism is suggested, as well as his inability to love (as if he loved you). In the first meeting between Tito and the Bardis the narrator introduces ironic parallels: Bardi, a father abandoned by his son, and Tito – a son who abandons his adopted father; Bardi's blindness has a symbolic meaning: he denies his son, a noble character, because Dino refuses to accept his values. With his worship of the pagan world he considers Dino's vocation an eccentric fanatic choice and a breach of trust towards himself. Tito, pagan at heart, rejects Christian norms and renounces

⁴ J. W. Cross, *George Eliot's Life as Related in her Letters and Journals*, Vol. 2, ed. W. Blackwood and Sons, Edinburgh-London 1910, p. 439.

his filial duty: instead of rescuing Baldassare with the money obtained for his gems – the value of which is more than “a man’s ransom” – he places the money with a Florentine banker and becomes Bardi’s secretary. Bardi, in his blindness both spiritual and physical, adopts a false man as a son in place of a true son he rejected. The conversation between the three characters, Bardi–Tito–Romola, is highly dramatic in its double meaning; the descriptive details of Tito’s appearance anticipate the future vision of the Eternal Tempter:

[...] I have no need to add proofs and arguments in confirmation of my word to Bartolommeo. And I doubt not that this young man’s presence is in accord with the tones of his voice, so that, the door being once opened, he will be his own best advocate.

[...] But before you go – here the old man, in spite of himself, fell into a more faltering tone – you will perhaps permit me to touch your hand? It is long since I touched the hand of a young man [...] Bardo stretched out his aged white hand, and Tito immediately placed his dark but delicate and supple fingers within it. Bardo’s cramped fingers closed over them, and he held them for a few minutes in silence. Then he said –

– “Romola, has this young man the same complexion as thy brother – fair and pale?”

“No, father – Romola answered, with determined composure though her heart began to beat violently with mingled emotions”.

“The hair of Messere is dark – his complexion is dark”⁵ Inwardly she said, “will he mind it? will it be disagreeable? No, he looks so gentle and good-natured”. Then aloud again – “Would Messere permit my father to touch his hair and face?”

And when Tito readily assents, Bardo passes his hand over his head and face and says:

“Ah [...] He must be very unlike thy brother, Romola: and it is the better. You see no visions, I trust, my young friend?” (118–119).

Tito indeed is very unlike Dino and Bardi is totally unaware of the double meaning of his own words.

There are several dramatic dialogues, deeply ironic, between Romola and Tito as the conflict between them mounts up to the climax. Tito is deliberately ironic, even sarcastic, as eg. in the dialogue after Romola thwarted his attempt to lead Savonarola into a trap; Tito does not yet know how much Romola knows about his past and he will never know that she has discovered the truth about Tessa. His weapon against Romola is the threat to Bernardo del Nero. The final critical dialogue between them is to an extent a “struggle in the darkness” since each of them only suspects the other without knowing the whole truth. Thus the dramatic suspense is both in the situation and in the dialogue which results from it. One of the high points in the narrator’s uses of irony both situational and conversational, is Romola’s unexpected discovery of Tessa who, in her naivete and ignorance, reveals the truth to her. The point of identification is Tessa’s story of Naldo, her husband. Tessa shows Romola a curl she had cut from Tito’s hair:

⁵ Underscoring mine.

"It is a beautiful curl", Romola said, resisting the impulse to withdraw her hand. "Lillo's curls will be like it, perhaps, for his cheek, too, is dark. And you never know where your husband goes to when he leaves you?" "No", said Tessa, putting back her treasures out of the childrens way. "But I know Messer San Michele takes care of him for he gave him a beautiful coat, all made of little chains; and if he puts it on, nobody can kill him. And pershaps, if" – Tessa hesitated a little, under a recurrence of that original dreamy wonder about Romola which had been expelled by chatting contact – "if you were a saint, you would take care of him, too, because you have taken care of me and Lillo" (548).

We have mentioned already Romola's shrinking from Tito when she discovers that he is wearing the coat of mail. The juxtaposition of these two scenes, ignorance and naivete against knowledge, the shock of discovery experienced by Romola are among George Eliot's high artistic achievements.

Irony is heightened by the device of coincidence which plays an essential role in the structural pattern of the novel. Only Hardy could have used this motif with so much emphasis. Yet, the reader does not feel, as he sometimes does reading Hardy's novels, that coincidence has been handled in an arbitrary way, or that credibility has been strained. In *Romola* coincidence and inevitability are very subtly interconnected. It is pure chance that Baldassare should appear in the *cortège* of prisoners during the ceremony of welcoming the French king in Florence; it is coincidence that Romola and Baldassare meet; or that Romola meets Tessa and later discovers Tito's other family. It is coincidence that Baldassare is at the spot where Tito escapes from the pursuit of the rabble, ready to kill him, just at the moment when he seems to be past danger. But while Hardy presents the tragedy of man defeated by powers above him, Eliot, the moralist who reveals the drama of conscience, shows Fate operating through man. There is no escape from the consequences of the moral choice made by man. The city of 15th Century Florence is a confined world – no less than London in *Bleak House* – people are brought together by common interests, political events in which they participate, they cross and recross the paths of one another. It is therefore quite probable and possible that Romola should meet Baldassare and Tessa on her way. Throughout the action the reader has the sense of the inevitability of the disaster caused by Tito's falsehood and betrayal. He tries hard to kill his conscience, and yet Baldassare is present in his life from the moment he denied him until the moment of his death. If he rejects remorse he cannot free himself from fear. Meeting Baldassare when he seems to have escaped danger in his flight from Florence has almost a symbolic meaning; it sums up the total significance of his moral defeat: he stands face to face with his conscience. There is no escape from the consequences of his choice. The moment of death becomes the ultimate revelation of truth.

Thus the career of the promising young man we see at the beginning has run its full course – it ends in a calamity he has brought on himself. At the end of the novel, in her conversation with Lillo, Romola sums up the meaning of Tito's defeat, and suggests the irrevocability of a wasted life:

[...] Lillo, if you mean to act nobly and seek to know the best things God has put within the reach of men, you must learn to fix your mind on that end, and not on what will happen to you because of it. And remember, if you were to choose something lower, and make it the rule of your life to seek your own pleasure and escape from what is disagreeable, calamity might come just the same; and it would be calamity falling on a base mind which is the one form of sorrow which has no balm in it, and that may well make a man say, – "It would have been better for me if I had never been born" (675).

The words may seem to verge on sheer didacticism, yet the narrator-artist once again gives a pointed ironic meaning to the whole scene: Lillo listens to Romola astonished by what she says, ignorant of the fact that the portrait she presents to him is that of his own father.

George Eliot did not intend to write a "religious" novel in the sense that Mauriac or Bernanos are considered "Catholic" writers. Yet the moral drama of Tito is presented in agreement with the theological vision of evil. The narrator also uses religious symbolism in the presentation of Tito's moral deterioration – it is introduced in the Biblical allusion of Dino's vision and in the commentary of the narrator, notably in the epithet "demon" applied to Tito by different persons, in the allegorical figures of the Eternal Tempter, Great Usurer Falsehood, in the imagery of darkness and death. Andrew Sanders calls "Romola George Eliot's "most achieved, meditative novel"⁶. Her meditation on religious and moral problems is also reflected in an interesting way in her correspondence. Several years before *Romola* was written, after the publication of *Adam Bede*, George Eliot wrote to M. d'Albert, a Swiss friend of hers:

I think I hardly ever spoke to you of the strong hold evangelical Christianity had on me from the age of fifteen to two and twenty, and of the abundant intercourse I had had with earnest people of various religious sects. When I was at Geneva, I had not yet lost the attitude of antagonism which belongs to the renunciation of any belief; also I was very unhappy, and in a state of rebellion and discord towards my own lot. Ten years of experience have wrought great changes in that inward self. I have no longer any antagonism towards any faith in which human sorrow and human longing for purity have expressed themselves; on the contrary, I have a sympathy with it that predominates over all argumentative tendencies. I have not returned to dogmatic Christianity – to the acceptance of any set of doctrines as a creed – a superhuman revelation of the unseen – but I see in it the highest expression of the religious sentiment that has yet found its place in the history of mankind, and I have the profoundest interest in the inward life of sincere Christians of all ages. Many things that I should have argued against ten years ago, I now feel myself too ignorant, and too limited in moral sensibility, to speak of

⁶ *Introduction*, [in:] G. Eliot, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

with confident disapprobation. On that question of our future existence to which you allude, I have undergone the sort of change I have just indicated, although my most rooted conviction is that the immediate object and the proper sphere of all our highest emotions are our struggling fellow-men in their earthly existence⁷.

Thus her agnosticism seems open to reevaluation and consequently the author herself – to spiritual evolution.

In *Romola* "the human longing for purity" is represented by Romola herself who finds self-fulfillment in her dedication to her fellow beings and discovers the meaning of existence in love. Faithful to the ideas of her age, in particular to the positivist philosophy of Comte and his idea of the "religion of humanity" the author makes Romola, to a great extent, the exponent of her own faith. Yet the universal meaning of the novel comes out fully in the contrast between Romola's search for truth and the "mystery of iniquity" represented in Tito's drama. It is the study of the darker side of human nature that intensifies the metaphysical dimension of George Eliot's work.

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**ROMOLA GEORGE ELIOT JAKO POWIEŚĆ PSYCHOLOGICZNA
– STUDIUM DEGRADACJI MORALNEJ**

Tematem artykułu jest powieść psychologiczna i historyczna George Eliot, w której znalazła wyraz filozofia moralna pisarki i jej zainteresowania problematyką zła. Filozofia George Eliot ukształtowana przez filozofów angielskich XIX w. oraz w dużym stopniu przez pozytywizm Augusta Comte'a ma swoje źródło również w jej purytańsko-protestanckim rodowodzie. Wybitny wpływ na jej poglądy wywarli także teologowie i filozofowie niemieccy, których dzieła tłumaczyła: Strauss – *The Life of Jesus* i Feuerbach – *The Essence of Christianity*. Mimo krytycznej postawy wobec objawionej religii Eliot stawia w centrum swoich powieści zagadnienie odpowiedzialności moralnej i walki między dobrem a złem. W wizji Eliot postęp ludzkości jest uzależniony od postępu jednostki, toteż w powieściach jej występuje często postać ofiarnej entuzjastki, „żarliwej duszy”, gotowej do wyrzeczeń w działaniu dla dobra ludzkości. Są to często kobiety i one to stanowią o tym, że „świat staje się lepszym miejscem do życia”. Z drugiej strony, autorka przeciwstawia im postaci egoistów, którzy hamują postęp niszcząc otoczenie i siebie samych, w bezwzględnym dążeniu do własnych celów. Ilustracją tego procesu destrukcji jest historia Tita Melemy, męża Romoli, w analizowanej powieści. Jest to dramat upadku moralnego i śmierci hedonisty, który dążąc do osiągnięcia sukcesu i przyjemności staje się ofiarą własnych intryg i zakłamania. Eliot przedstawia tę postać w potrójnej relacji – do

⁷ J. W. Cross, *op. cit.*, Vol. 1, p. 518.

przybranego ojca, którego Tito opuszcza i zdradza; do dwóch kobiet – Romoli i Tessy, nieślubnej matki jego dzieci, i w politycznej grze w burzliwych czasach działalności Savonaroli. Dramatycznej akcji, w której główna postać dokonuje konsekwentnie wyboru na coraz to nowym etapie zdrady, towarzyszy komentarz autora-narratora, moralisty i filozofa, analizującego potencjał zła w człowieku. Potencjał ten, raz wyzwolony i ukierunkowany, prowadzi nieuchronnie do samodestrukcji. Z drugiej strony, postać tytułowa, Romola, osiąga pełną dojrzałość moralną w cierpieniu i oddaniu się ludziom.

Konstrukcja *Romoli* sięga do tradycji dramatu: autorka wprowadziła ścisłą zależność przyczynową w akcji, antytetyczność postaw moralnych, którą można wyprowadzić wręcz z tradycji moralitetu; posługuje się ironią zarówno w sytuacjach, w dialogu, jak i w komentarzu narratorskim; wprowadza czynnik przypadkowości (*coincidence*) umiejętnie przeplatając go z nieuchronną koniecznością wynikającą z logiki raz dokonanego wyboru.

W konkluzji autorka podkreśla chrześcijańskie źródła poglądów pisarki mimo jej agnostycyzmu. Problematyka wyboru moralnego i jego konsekwencji przedstawiona w twórczości George Eliot znajduje swych znakomitych kontynuatorów w XX w., w powieści Josepha Conrada, Grahama Greena i Williama Goldinga.