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RHETORIC AND REALISM IN
NINETEENTH-CENTURY FICTION:
HYPERBOLE IN *THE MILL ON THE FLOSS*

BY JONATHAN ARAC

My title does not signal a contrast between rhetoric, taken as empty and deceitful words, and realism, taken as the novelist's attempt to present life "as it really was." Rather, it suggests the cooperation of rhetorical self-consciousness in making the modern western tradition of prose fiction. Our age of French newer criticism seems no more willing than was that of American new criticism to recognize the energetic duplicities of language that activate nineteenth-century novels fully as much as they do more recent experimental writing. Despite Frank Kermode's attempts to demonstrate in "pre-modern," "readerly" works the textual plurality and heterogeneity that Roland Barthes has characterized as modern, as "writerly,"¹ nineteenth-century fiction remains a straw man in some of the most outstanding recent work on the criticism of narrative. It is taken as willfully naive and blind to the fictionality of literature, wishing instead to assert the reality of what it represents.² I find, however, that the naive faith charged against the major nineteenth-century novelists quickly dissolves into theoretical and textual complexity.

In beginning to demonstrate this contention through reading an early novel of George Eliot, I have drawn from that work a rhetorical term as my tool for analysis in order to insist upon the self-consciousness in and about the language of the work. My figure of hyperbole bears the same name as a geometrical figure defining a shape generated from dual foci but from no center, suggesting the complexity and instability I wish to emphasize.³ Furthermore, I find useful the arbitrary excess of such a geometrical metaphor for the "form" of a literary work; as a term it is so alien, falls so far short of our usual critical metaphors, that its tentativity and purely exploratory value remains always in view. Such an analogy is much less likely to mislead us into false consequences than the organic, architectural, or textile metaphors that are more common. The barrenness may be fruitful as fresh provocation.

Such side-stepping of conventional linguistic models marks the realistic tradition in our fiction since its starting-point in Cervantes' *Don Quixote*.⁴ Realistic novelists aim at the truth of life not by a direct and necessarily failed attempt at representing it, but through indirection, through exposure and criticism of alternative claims and strategies whose failures are exposed, leaving a residual sense of unstated truth. Cervantes does not tell us that the reality of Spain in his days was inns and windmills; instead he shows us the consequences of Quixote's trying to live in a world of castles and giants. We come to know the reality of Quixote's world as what exceeds and contradicts his model of romantic chivalry. So in the Quixotic tradition of the realistic novel, "reality" is what escapes all rules and models.⁵ The novel does not directly take on reality, and it carries along inside it the false models that must be overcome. If literature in general is a criticism of life, realism is that part of literature that begins through criticism of art, including its own.

The parodic presence of discarded models of action, expression, judgment, and feeling within a novel poses special problems for its critics, for "viewed from a distance," a novel will look like a romance. This power of distance to romanticize motivates the constant new production of realistic works. The last word never lasts; an exposé of the follies of an age comes to seem itself one of the follies of that age. Thus the temporal distance that separated the romantics from Cervantes permitted their new interpretations that ennobled Quixote.⁶ A similarly distanced reading may encourage us to find in *The Mill on the Floss* a perfect romantic spiral journey of circuitous return.⁷ For the book moves from an initial unity of "Boy and Girl" (title of Book First of the novel) through the alienation of "Downfall" (Book Third) to the reunion of the "Final Rescue" (Book Seventh), which raises the initial union to a higher plane through the dignity of the final Biblical epigraph (identical to that on the title page). Not on such a broad pattern, but only in the intimacy of local interplay, can the realistic challenge to cultural models be read effectively. Only close reading preserves the critical dimension that Friedrich Schlegel demanded of modern literature and found typified in the novel.⁸

From a work like Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis* our age has all too easily taken only the emphasis on socio-historical particularity, the documentary aspect, and neglected the stylistic observations that define the recurrent problematic of the work.⁹ Auerbach devotes his own major concern, however, to the break in linguistic princi-

ples of literary decorum. A social level appears that would once have demanded the "low style" but now exists in language of "tragic seriousness." The "mixture of styles" that permits the entrance of seriousness into "everyday reality" is the real novelty in the realistic novel. A new freedom of language charges with the most moving significance a scene that previously "would have been conceivable as literature only as part of a comic tale, an idyl, or a satire."¹⁰ The position of such a scene within the system and hierarchy of literature makes it truly revolutionary. Auerbach's sensitivity to "levels" in the immediate texture of language allows him also to discriminate "levels" in the narrative technique. The narrator has a power of linguistic formulation that exceeds the characters'. This discrepancy between different ways of forming the world in words shapes novelistic form. Such splits between the book's norms and the norms of traditional literature, between the narrator's norms and those of the characters, between the chief character's norms and those of the world in which she lives, all create a heterogeneous texture in the book's prose and a complexity in the book's structure. It becomes difficult to grasp by what principle the work is to be integrated, unless we are willing to accept a definition of the clashes and demand nothing more definitive.

Himself aware of such splits, Henry James insisted on the artist's need for a "geometry of his own" by which to "draw . . . the circle" that shall "happily appear" to contain the relations established within the work.¹¹ Yet James recognized as well that such appearances would not hold, that for the writer the "inveterate displacement of his general centre" demands the production of "specious and spurious centres . . . to make up for the failure of the true."¹² As critics no less than as novelists we desire formal clarity, and we realize nonetheless that to impose such clarity in reading falsifies and omits much of what is most important. Let us begin with a harmonious reading of *The Mill on the Floss* in relation to a center and then attend to the waywardnesses that undo the pattern the geometrical eye has defined. Our path will lead out from a central fullness into increasing alienation and discrepancy, until finally a return to the center reveals the splits that had already from the start fractured it, making it "specious and spurious."

I

One of the most striking patterns woven into *The Mill on the Floss* presents a world of astonishing harmony and completeness,

in which intuitions that we usually consider primitive are justified by the modern developments of science. The breadth of vision that encompasses all aspects of this world removes the terror of the disruptive. Not the extraordinary “proverbial feather” and its terrifying ability to break a camel’s back should concern us, but the “previous weight of feathers” that has already placed the poor beast in imminent jeopardy.¹³ The “cumulative effect” of “everyday things” (69), the “apparently trivial coincidences” and subtly nuanced “incalculable states of mind” which are “the favourite machinery of Fact,” rule the world, not the “terrible dramatic scenes” (295) which haunt our fearful imagination. If it is “unaccountable” (55) within the Dodson circle that Lucy should look so much as if she were a child of Mrs. Tulliver’s, while Maggie looks like no Dodson at all, the mystery is resolved when we remember that a child has two parents and that Maggie will grow up into the image of Mr. Tulliver’s mother (233). The quest of science for “a unity which shall bind the smallest things with the greatest” (239) makes the world comprehensible as our home. Even in our little towns by our own hearths the principles and developments of nature and history are “represented” (239) as surely as within the Elizabethan microcosm. The reductive methods of scientific analysis (the “Mill” of Enlightenment as seen by Carlyle and Novalis) combine with the flow and flux of nature (the “Floss”) in a familiar order.

Continuous development from a “traceable origin” (63) marks this world, whether in the historical and political sphere of the British Constitution or the astronomical, of the solar system and fixed stars. Whatever certain idealists may claim about the mind’s capacity to transcend its environment, one finds that “the Basset mind was in strict keeping with its circumstances” (70). The word-play that joins in the name “Basset” a technical geological term and a familiar hunting dog suggests the complete interrelation of levels, just as do the book’s innumerable comparisons between human actions and characteristics and those of animal nature. If it is “humiliating” (36) that Tom and Maggie Tulliver as they take together their sacrament of cake resemble “two friendly ponies,” it is also a bringing back to earth that renews their vitality.¹⁴ Social developments may sometimes make people “out of keeping with the earth on which they live” (238), but this disproportion can be cured by a return to the privileged “spot” where our childhood sight of nature in its “sweet monotony” of the “same” fixed forever

for us the “mother tongue” of our “imagination” (37-38). Through fidelity to such a past, and only through it, can Maggie be sure in life of a ground “firm beneath [her] feet” (420).

The description of the Mill at the book’s opening adumbrates this pattern of unity in the processes of man and nature as it evokes the “dwelling-house . . . old as the elms” and the coincidence of perspective that unites the “masts” of “distant ships . . . close among the branches of the spreading ash” (7). Language itself appears to testify to this relation in the sentences describing the Ripple. It first is “lively” in its current and “lovely” to see, and then at once it seems “living” and its sound like the voice of a “loving” person.

In the description of St. Ogg’s this pattern emerges most compactly as a mass. St. Ogg’s is “one of those old, old towns which impress one as a continuation and outgrowth of nature, as much as the nests of the bower-birds or the winding galleries of the white ants: a town which carries the traces of its long growth and history like a millennial tree, and has sprung up and developed in the same spot between the river and the low hill” (104) since Roman times. Echoing a phrase from Wordsworth’s *Excursion* that describes the Wanderer’s growth among the presences of Nature, Eliot summarizes the town as “familiar with forgotten years.”¹⁵ This family intimacy, based on the bonds of the physical, yet affecting as well every other aspect of human life, links that life to nature, and to its own past as the source of sustenance and value.

This pattern emphasizes the fundamental importance of childhood experience in the development of our mature selves and thus protects the book against the charge of excessive attention to nursery trivialities with which some contemporary reviewers greeted it.¹⁶ It provides as well, however, the basis for expectations of stability and continuity and of an emphasis upon the small and subtle, and many readers have seen the latter portion of the book as a deviation from this basis into excess of emotion and action alike. This discrepancy is attributed to extra-textual causes, whether a psychological over-identification with Maggie that destroys control, or the author’s necessity of finishing within the canonical three-volume size after having already lavished upon the earlier portions an “epic breadth” that could not be maintained.¹⁷

Within *The Mill on the Floss*, however, even within the first two-thirds of it, another pattern can be found that has no priority over the pattern that I have just defined, but is different from it and

incommensurable with it. One can see in this second pattern “romantic” excess contrasted to the “realistic” fine-grain of the first, or one may see the first as a compensatory, romantic myth of order, built up by the mind’s attempt to defend itself against the real violence of the second. I call this second pattern the hyperbolic. It breaks up the smooth continuity of linkages we have been examining. It is hard to regulate a force that breaks order, but I shall try to specify the hyperbolic in three stages. First, I explore the most literal, “grammatical” cases of hyperbole, the inappropriately excessive word that disrupts the continuity of perception and expression. This involves primarily the language of the characters—both in their speech and thought—and the narrator’s relation to that language. Next, I analyze the place of the hyperbolic in the narrator’s deeper investigation of human psychology and of our attitudes toward character. This involves primarily the narrator’s language and its relation to the language of the audience. Finally, I emphasize the philosophical implications of the hyperbolic as a force disfiguring the harmonious notions of origin, cause, and truth.

II

The narrator introduces the notion of “hyperbole” early in the book during Bob Jakin’s quarrel with Tom Tulliver: “To throw one’s pocket-knife after an implacable friend is clearly in every sense a hyperbole, or throwing beyond the mark” (48). This comment is itself an instance of rhetorical hyperbole, for it overstates the case. As Maggie insists, “Almost every word . . . may mean several things” (129). “Throwing beyond the mark” is not a hyperbole in “every sense” for there are in the *OED* three other senses of “Hyperbole”: the rhetorical, “a figure of speech consisting in exaggerated or extravagant statement, used to express strong feeling or to produce a strong impression, and not intended to be understood literally”; a rare general sense, “excess, extravagance”; and an obsolete geometrical sense, “hyperbola.” Indeed, so far is Eliot’s usage from being “clearly” the sense, that it is not even recorded in the *OED*. It is evidently a nonce-usage, derived etymologically from the Greek *hyperbolé*, for “throwing beyond,” “overshooting” is the primary sense given in Liddell and Scott, which then gives further meanings that parallel the usual English senses. There is one more Greek sense that is especially noteworthy, for it suggests a strange split within the word; it is one of those words that seem to mean almost opposite things, for it also means

“deferring, delay,” an undershooting as well as an overshooting, inhibition as well as excess. It is finally worth remarking that the verb *hyperbállo*, from which the noun derives, has a specialized sense with regard to water, “to run over, overflow.” The Floss and its floods make an important part in the hyperbolic pattern of the book.

This narrative foregrounding of the term, naming, defining, and exemplifying it all in one sentence, in itself calls our attention to the term’s significance. This setting of learned word-play in close proximity to the movement of Bob Jakin’s unlearned mind exemplifies one of the book’s major techniques, the exploitation of a discrepancy between narrator and characters, presenting characters’ minds in words that they would never themselves use, offering an interpretation of their world unlike any that they could make. The narrator regularly hyperbolizes in going beyond the bounds of the characters’ intellectual limitations. This gap established between the world and powers of the narrator and those of the characters contradicts our harmonious reading of Dorlcote Mill in the narrator’s dream, in which there had seemed to be a smooth continuity between that past world, so available to memory, and the present standpoint of retrospection. There is then a danger of violence, of forcing, in the narrator’s relation to the represented world of the book.

The etymological play of superiority in this “hyperbole” passage clearly relates it to the discussion of metaphor that occurs in the course of Tom’s schooling. In trying to teach Tom etymology, Stelling is guided himself by an etymological pun, taken seriously as a paradigm for action. He considers the cultivation of Tom’s mind like the “culture” of fields, and thus the resistant mind, like impervious earth, must be “ploughed and harrowed” all the more by the means it resists. The violence here is evident, all the more so as the narrator compares the situation to making Tom eat cheese “in order to remedy a gastric weakness which prevented him from digesting it.” Reflecting on this new analogy, the narrator observes, “It is astonishing what a different result one gets by changing the metaphor!” This change in the model for thought totally reverses the obvious course of remedy. The narrator concludes by lamenting “that we can so seldom declare what a thing is, except by saying it is something else” (124).¹⁸ When we aim our words at a thing, we’re always off the mark. All language contains a hyperbolic potential.

The geometric figure of the hyperbola condenses into an emblem

many of the most important aspects of the hyperbolic pattern of the book and its difference from the first pattern of centered wholeness that I described. The hyperbola is a discontinuous function; it is not a closed figure but open, and split into two parts; it is a set of points related not to a single origin but to two given points (the foci), and the defining relation is a constant difference.

Linguistic hyperbole demands attention at many points in the book beyond the place where it is named. Bob Jakin admires Tom's control of his speech, "His tongue doesn't overshoot him as mine does" (340). This comment establishes the same contrast between Bob and Tom that marked the earlier scene of their quarrel, but more frequently Maggie is contrasted with Tom in this respect. In "The Family Council" at the time of the Tulliver "Downfall," Tom behaves with earnest restraint, "like a man." In contrast, Maggie suddenly "burst[s] out" like a "young lioness" and in a "mad outbreak" (190) denounces her relatives. In these instances the hyperbolic marks its user as belonging to the wrong class or sex, as falling outside the charmed circle of respectability and masculinity, though Tom is himself caught up at other moments in the hyperbolic pattern. Just as the first pattern follows the emphasis of Maggie's wishes for the firm ground of the sacred spot and its memories, so in the hyperbolic pattern Maggie's wish for "*more*" (250) predominates.

Maggie's unfamiliarity with the heights of provincial society makes her "throw" "excessive feeling" into "trivial incidents" (329). Maggie's imagination leads her also into perceptual hyperbole, an atmospheric heightening that melodramatically colors a scene of no outer significance. As she is led back from the gypsies to home, she is "more terrified" than Bürger's Leonore, and for her, "The red light of the setting sun seemed to have a portentous meaning, with which the alarming bray of the second donkey with the log on its foot must surely have some connection" (102). This deluded, obsessively precise, and symbolic view of the world here is deflated by the pattern of stability and everyday causality; elsewhere in the book, however, it is not always canceled but may also prevail.

Bob and Maggie are not the only hyperbolists. The whole speech-community of St. Ogg's agrees in calling "the 'Hill'" what the narrator tells us is only "an insignificant rise of ground," a "mere bank" (260) walling off the Red Deeps, where Philip had Maggie have their clandestine meetings. Just as Aunt Pullet had

earlier “unconsciously us[ed] an impressive figure of rhetoric” (52) in substituting “gone” for “dead,” so her unconscious hyperbole, in what the narrator calls a “wide statement” (297), triggers the revelation to Tom of Maggie’s meetings with Philip. The narrator describes Tom’s consequent state of mind in terms that relate it to Maggie’s as she returned from the gypsies. He was “in that watchful state of mind which turns the most ordinary course of things into pregnant coincidences” (298). The tone of irony in this statement works only against any reader trustful enough in the stability of things to believe that the “ordinary course” will prevail. For a comment of Bob’s about Philip sends Tom off to intercept Maggie and to accompany her to the Red Deeps, there to denounce Philip.

In that terrible scene of humiliation, Maggie’s imagination, “always rushing extravagantly beyond an immediate impression” (301-02), superadds a phantasm of “her tall strong brother grasping the feeble Philip bodily, crushing him and trampling on him.” This further heightening of the original “terrible dramatic . . . scene” of confrontation that had “most completely symbolised” (295) her fear still does not prepare Maggie for the repetition soon thereafter, in which father Tulliver flogs father Wakem until Maggie, as if in compensation for the helplessness that she suffered in the earlier scene, rescues both men. In such moments life again knows “those wild, uncontrollable passions which create the dark shadows of misery and crime” (238), those “giant forces” that used to “shake the souls of men” as they “used to shake the earth” (106). Uniformitarianism has not wholly removed the possibility of catastrophe.

This possibility exists within the force of language as it exists within the forces of nature. In considering Mr. Stelling’s violent metaphor of “culture,” humor held the dangers in control, but our superior amusement at Mr. Tulliver’s entanglement in language dwindles as we realize that words are the immobilizing net that binds him for the kill. The narrator notes the dangers to life inherent within the necessary excesses of language as he summarizes the situation after Philip and Maggie have begun to declare their love in the Red Deeps: “It was one of those dangerous moments when speech is at once sincere and deceptive—when feeling, rising high above its average depth, leaves flood-marks which are never reached again” (294). The duplicity of speech emerges clearly, and the resemblance of this duplicity to the vagaries and discontinuities of the river. This example might suggest a polarization of place in the novel, the Red Deeps being the “place of excess,” set against

the central scene. But the language here resonates with Maggie's being "Borne along by the Tide" (401) with Stephen and swept along the flood with Tom at the end. There is no special place of excess in the book. Like a field of force, a force of displacement, the hyperbolic traverses the whole world of the book, wherever the "fluctuations" of a "moral conflict" reveal a "doubleness," wherever "inward strife" wishes to "flow" (380) into release. The "demon forces for ever in collision with beauty, virtue, and the gentle uses of life" are not restricted to the bygone days of the "robber-barons" (237) on the Rhine.

Is it possible for a "secret longing" of which we are not "distinctly conscious" and "running counter" to all our conscious intentions to "impel" our actions? The narrator urges us, "Watch your own speech, and notice how it is guided by your less conscious purposes, and you will understand that contradiction" (402-03). We must double ourselves into an actor and observer in order to achieve the full, if transient, self-consciousness necessary to allow us to judge the splits within others. Even being "thoroughly sincere" does not protect Maggie from duplicity in her conversation with Lucy; for by revealing her love-history with Philip, Maggie unwittingly tempts Lucy to see nothing of significance in the strange vibrations between Maggie and Stephen: "Confidences are sometimes blinding, even when they are sincere" (338). In a book that has invoked Oedipus (117) and that broods on the Oedipal contrast between the "earth-born" and those out of harmony "with the earth on which they live" (237-38), such an observation suggests a relationship between the force of words here and the literally blinding consequence for Oedipus of the words that reveal his ancestry.¹⁹

In a similar way, Semele is invoked humorously early in the book (153), with Tom in her place and Poulter like Jove withholding his immediate glory by not showing his sword. But Maggie's "perpetual yearning" with "its root deeper than all change" to have "no cloud between herself and Tom" (398) proves like Semele's to find full immediacy only in the permanent embrace of death. Conflict is the stuff of human life, for "all yielding is attended with a less vivid consciousness than resistance" (410). Only in the state of strife, of duality, of hyperbolically saying more than we mean, though not all that we mean, do we remain human. What are the other possibilities? The silence and unconsciousness of death, the total yielding to the flow of unconsciousness in madness, or the purity of

sainthood. In the book's only perfect act of communication, Ogg names the force and source of the Virgin's wish, "It is enough that thy heart needs it," and she accepts as complete his definition of her "heart's need" (104-05).²⁰

III

Yet what place has a saint's legend in this story of provincial mediocrity? The narrator recognizes that any suggested elevation, whether beatific or tragic, jars with the chosen level of milieu and action (in ways like those that Auerbach investigates). The narrator must therefore try to come to terms with this discrepancy between the world evoked and the world represented, this hyperbolic tendency of comparison. The narrator must find ways of mediating between the characters' psychologies and the audience's psychological expectations and levels of sympathy. One strategy uses the principle of the everyday, stable, and continuous. It reduces the hyperbole by devaluing the excessive term. Thus at one point the narrator compares the "unwept, hidden . . . tragedy" of Mr. Tulliver and "other insignificant people" to the "conspicuous, far-echoing tragedy" (173-4) of the royal. The fundamental base of comparison, however, is not greatness but weakness: "Mr. Tulliver . . . though nothing more than a superior miller and maltster, was as proud and obstinate as if he had been a very lofty personage." The vices of pride and obstinacy join low and high in moral equality that negates distinctions of status. Eliot adds a further element to the comparison. The tragedy of high life "sweeps the stage in regal robes," while we pass obscure tragedy "unnoticingly on the road every day." High tragedy is obvious, showy, in fact is only art, while to appreciate everyday tragedy shows our discernment of reality. Thus the hyperbole is erased; everyday suffering is realer and deeper than that of the exceptional monster; we are back within the domestic circle of continuity and security, even within suffering.

Quite different is another moment in which the narrator begins with hyperbole and then transforms it by estranging us from the familiar term. Rhetorical hyperbole, in which an excessive term is contrasted with one of common measure, yields to a vision of a hyperbolic world, in which everything exceeds common measure. After Maggie has cut off her hair, the narrator hyperbolically compares her sitting "helpless and despairing among her black locks" to "Ajax among the slaughtered sheep" (59). Recognizing that Mag-

gie's "anguish" may seem "very trivial" to adults,²¹ the narrator suggests that it may be "even more bitter . . . than what we are fond of calling antithetically the real troubles of mature life." Rather than simply exploiting the antithesis of imagination and real life, the narrator calls it into question, even suggests that there may be no reality except that arbitrarily created by drawing a bar of antithesis. Without the axial coordinates we could not say that one branch of a hyperbola is positive and one negative. Furthermore, the narrator goes on, the discontinuity which establishes reality in the world of value may correspond to a necessary developmental discontinuity within the growth of the individual to maturity:

We have all of us sobbed so piteously, standing with tiny bare legs above our little socks, when we lost sight of our mother or nurse in some strange place; but we can no longer recall the poignancy of that moment and weep over it. . . . Every one of those keen moments has left its trace, and lives in us still, but such traces have blent themselves irrecoverably with the firmer texture of our youth and manhood; and so it comes that we can look on at the troubles of our children with a smiling disbelief in the reality of their pain. Is there any one who can recover the experience of his childhood, not merely with a memory of what he did and what happened to him . . . but with an intimate penetration, a revived consciousness of what he felt then? . . . Surely if we could recall . . . the strangely perspectiveless conception of life that gave the bitterness its intensity, we should not pooh-pooh the griefs of our children.

(59-60)

The significance of this passage in relation to Wordsworth, Freud, and Proust is beyond the scope of my present discussion. I want only to emphasize that the project of recovering the past is set under the sign of impossibility. We usually read that impossibility as a modest irony, disclaiming the narrator's actual achievement of this goal. Even so, we must recognize that just as a psychoanalytic cure requires "transference," so here too there is a necessary displacement. Only through George Eliot can Marian Evans recover her past, and only through Maggie Tulliver can we recover ours.

In contrast to the analysis of Mr. Tulliver's tragic status, the discrimination of two states here is made not through contrasting life and art, but rather through comparing two kinds of art, our adult art of perspective and the "perspectiveless" primitive art of children. The flatness of this original art hides from us the "intensity" within it. Thus a radical challenge is posed to both our sense of reality and our canons of representation. In perspectiveless art no single point

organizes the whole into a continuum, and the process of maturation forces us to lose consciousness of the continuity of our present feelings with our past. Nonetheless, Eliot's art is not itself perspectiveless; perhaps most clearly in such moments of circumspection and direct appeal, her art keeps its distance. To speak of childhood's sense of the "measureless" space from summer to summer, one must be capable of measurement.

IV

From the grammatical to the psychological to the more largely philosophical the force of hyperbole pervades the book, leaving intact none of the certainties with which we were familiar in the first pattern. Thus, the hyperbolic description of Maggie moves beyond the bounds of rhetorical hyperbole to show the hyperbolic principle at work in the realm of cause, effect, and intention. In the sequence in which she pushed Lucy into the mud, Maggie is twice compared to a "Medusa" (88, 91), a disproportion all the more exaggerated because Maggie's hair is cut, depriving her of the primary Medusan attribute. The narrator justifies the comparison: "There were passions at war in Maggie at that moment to have made a tragedy, if tragedies were made by passion only; but the essential *τι μέγεθος* which was present in the passion was wanting to the action" (90). The book's first pattern showed a regular harmony between cause and effect, circumstance and mind, but the hyperbolic pattern constantly signals discrepancy. Any possible explanations to flatten out these discrepancies are unknown or incomprehensible, and this "mystery of the human lot" drives men to the consolations of "superstition" (238).

Maggie's tremendous childhood passion can express itself only in trivial actions, and the same gap between spirit and world prevails elsewhere. Some of the results that she most laments arise from no conscious intention. She "never *meant*" (33) Tom's rabbits to die from neglect, any more than she "really . . . mean[t] it" (78) when she toppled Tom's "wonderful pagoda" of cards.²² This disproportion holds in the adult world as well. We "spoil the lives of our neighbours" unintentionally, and the "sagacity" that seeks to reduce these results to causes in "distinct motives" and "consciously proposed end[s]" is in fact hyperbolic, "widely misleading," for such proportions hold only in the "world of the dramatist" (23). The same tactic of setting life against art that reduced the hyperbolic

relation between royal and domestic tragedy here insists upon the excess of suffering over aim. The stable, continuous world is a fiction.

In the same way, “small, unimpassioned revenges” have an “enormous effect in life, running through all degrees of pleasant infliction, blocking the fit men out of places, and blackening characters.” Since there is no appreciable source of agency, we surmise that “Providence, or some other prince of this world . . . has undertaken the task of retribution for us” (223). If we wish to avoid such superstitious metaphors, then we may think of “apparently trivial coincidences and incalculable states of mind” as the “machinery of Fact” (295) rather than of fate, but the metaphor of machinery only gives us the illusion of comprehensibility. We still have no way of calculating the results.

The narrator tries to demystify the “hypothesis of a very active diabolical agency” that Mr. Tulliver requires to explain his “entanglements” by changing the metaphor and proposing that Wakem was “not more guilty” towards Tulliver “than an ingenious machine, which performs its work with much regularity, is guilty towards the rash man who, venturing too near it, is caught up by some fly-wheel or other, and suddenly converted into unexpected mincemeat” (218-19). We laugh at this analogy, and thus laugh at Mr. Tulliver, but the comedy depends precisely upon the disproportion, the sudden excess of the result, postponed until the end, which we could never have expected. How are we to know when is “too near,” and does the reference to “some fly-wheel or other” indicate any more real knowledge of the process than Mr. Tulliver has? Indeed, the very phrase “ingenious machine” carries paradoxically animistic overtones. At the end of the book “some wooden machinery” appears as the agency of Tom and Maggie’s drowning, but the narrator cannot resist transforming it into an active agent, “huge fragments, clinging together in fatal fellowship” that overwhelm the boat and then are seen “hurrying on in hideous triumph” (456). The hyperbolic pattern escapes our analogies, which are rooted in the will for a natural continuity that this pattern denies, and which demonstrate the pattern in failing to master it.

Even our most cherished cultural institutions work hyperbolically: “Allocators, filing of bills in Chancery, decrees of sale, are legal chain-shot or bomb-shells that can never hit a solitary mark, but must fall with widespread shattering” (215). Thus it is no real amelioration of human life that the “floods” of old have yielded to “fluctuations of trade” (106) as the cause of uncertainty. For “so

inevitably diffusive is human suffering, that even justice makes its victims, and we can conceive no retribution that does not spread beyond its mark in pulsations of unmerited pain" (215). Justice itself is unjust, as indifferent as the river is to the excess in what it sweeps away. Our machinery does not serve our purposes. The very idea "which we call truth," the finest tool of our cultural creation, crumbles into a "complex, fragmentary, doubt-provoking knowledge." Truth can no longer be the satisfying goal of our inquiry but will only further provoke us, and it is not even at one with itself, any more than is our memory of our past. Only "prejudice" is the "natural food" of our "tendencies" (400) toward wholeness and uniformity. If earlier we saw Enlightenment and nature reconciled, here we recall the hyperboles of Burke's polemic intransigence.

v

Now we may return to the familiar, family world of living and loving together at the Mill on the Floss, which formed the basis for our sketch of the book's pattern of harmony. But those figures of harmony are now disfigured, while in a new reversal the force of hyperbole proves productive as well as disruptive. The split between truth and prejudice that we have just noted echoes that between Tom and Maggie, the once-united "Boy and Girl." Tom is the man of prejudice, while to Philip, Maggie "was truth itself" (409), although he is unaware of the terrible revelation that awaits him of what truth is really like. Tom is "a character at unity with itself" (271), while Maggie must fear, yet constantly find herself in, "doubleness" (265). While Tom is "concentrating" (242) himself on recovering his father's position in life and matching his father's "concentration" (243) on the same purpose, the two of them are falling into a "perpetually repeated round" (245) of mechanical recurrence. Maggie in contrast feels "the strong tide of pitying love almost as an inspiration" (243). Thus the harmony of the Mill and the Floss that marks the first pattern of the book is contradicted by a contrast of the "mill-like monotony" (166) of deadening singleness with the dangerously double eddies of passionate fluxes and refluxes. The "habitual . . . deepening . . . central fold" (299) in Tom's brow is the disfiguring mark of his commitment, his attachment to his place. Maggie's dream on her way back after floating away with Stephen shows the profound wish for a wholeness to unite the Mill and the Floss, for in it she capsizes her boat in reaching out after

Tom, but as she begins to sink, she becomes “a child again in the parlour at evening twilight, and Tom was not really angry” (413). But the book’s ending grants such wholeness only in death.

The “parlour” itself, if it were as available to the full, “intimate penetration” of Maggie’s memory as it is to the reader’s, has been from the beginning a scene of conflict and discontinuity. There Mr. Tulliver conceives the book’s initially disruptive act of overreaching, his hyperbolic “plan” for Tom which Mrs. Glegg defines as “bringin’ him up above his fortin’ ” (64). Mr. Tulliver explains his intention in terms of that fundamental paternal ambivalence that to modern readers is the most striking link between him and Oedipus: “I don’t *mean* Tom to be a miller. . . . [H]e’d be expectin’ to take to the mill an’ the land, an’ a-hinting at me as it was time for me to lay by an’ think o’ my latter end. . . . I shall give Tom an eddication an’ put him to a business, as he may make a nest for himself, and not want to push me out o’ mine” (15). Thus the principle of generational continuity is split at its center; the “nest” has no place for two and therefore demands displacement.

Tom himself manifests similar ambivalence toward his father. Even while working to redeem his father’s credit, he keeps his efforts secret from a “strange mixture of opposite feelings . . . that family repulsion which spoils the most sacred relations” (283). Maggie also suffers from this split within Tom, for he feels a “repulsion” towards her that “derived its very intensity from their early childish love” (437). She finds that he always “checked her . . . by some thwarting difference” (252). This split within family feelings echoes the opening description of the “loving tide,” which with its “impetuous embrace” does not welcome the Floss but rather “checks” (7) it. There is a split in the very source of love, for the loved one’s difference from us makes a “fear spring . . . in us” (422). Maggie, then, is terrified at the “anger and hatred” against her family that “would flow out . . . like a lava stream” (252) within her. From such contradictions proceeds “that partial, divided action of our nature which makes half the tragedy of the human lot” (439). But the book makes clear also that the other half of the tragedy comes from the concentrated singleness that seems the only alternative.

If both wholeness and division make life tragic, each also makes life livable. The pattern of orderly growth and causation is not the only source of positive value. Dr. Kenn may seem to speak with the authority of the whole book when he laments the present tendency “towards the relaxation of ties—towards the substitution of way-

ward choice for the adherence to obligation, which has its roots in the past" (433). But his own relation to Maggie has begun through a chance encounter at the charity-bazaar, "one of those moments of implicit revelation which will sometimes happen even between people who meet quite transiently. . . . There is always this possibility of a word or look from a stranger to keep alive the sense of human brotherhood" (381-82). This brief confluence between him and Maggie echoes the kindness shown her in her need by Mrs. Stelling, who was not generally a loving woman and "whom she had never liked." In kissing Mrs. Stelling, Maggie first feels a "new sense" of "that susceptibility to the bare offices of humanity which raises them into a bond of loving fellowship" (170). An extravagant comparison marks the point: "To haggard men among the icebergs the mere presence of an ordinary comrade stirs the deep fountains of affection." Thus the wayward and the transient has the same potential for enriching and sustaining life as do long-established ties and deep roots. "Brotherhood" is a matter of contiguity as well as of genealogical continuity, something people may find, or make, for themselves as well as receive from nature. Such a hyperbolic pattern is not, however, easy to grasp. Tom finds Maggie's life a "planless riddle" (343), and in despair he can only expect that in her life one "perverse resolve" will "metamorphose itself . . . into something equally perverse but entirely different" (400). From that metamorphic point of discontinuity, the hyperbolic springs as a constant source of difference, of change, in contrast to the orderly growth of the same from a fixed and presently revisitable center.

This wayward, hyperbolic energy ensures that all the literary types that help to structure the book are different in their return, whether Oedipus or Semele or St. Ogg, or Saul and Jonathan, the father and son whose memorial lament serves as epitaph for brother and sister. If one pattern of the book depends on the recurrence of the "same flowers . . . the same hips and haws . . . the same red-breasts" and is best fixed in a landscape description of a town "familiar with forgotten years," another landscape best carries the hyperbolic pattern: "Nature repairs her ravages—but not all. The uptorn trees are not rooted again; the parted hills are left scarred: if there is a new growth, the trees are not the same as the old, and the hills underneath their green vesture bear the marks of past rending. To the eyes that have dwelt on the past, there is no thorough repair" (457). I have used the tag quotation from Wordsworth ("familiar with forgotten years") to recall the first pattern of the book, which

in many ways corresponds to what we call the Wordsworthian in George Eliot and in nineteenth-century culture generally, but within Wordsworth's text itself the same kinds of conflict and contradiction occur. In its context the quoted phrase also evokes hills "scarred" from "past rending." In describing the youth of the Wanderer, as he turned his eyes from the books he was reading to the book of nature, Wordsworth says he saw:

some peak
Familiar with forgotten years, that shows
Inscribed upon its visionary sides,
The history of many a winter storm,
Or obscure records of the path of fire.²³

Such violence sets in action the conflict between contrasting linguistic registers (and associated forms of experience and action) that makes *The Mill on the Floss* realistic in its attempt to unsettle cultural complacencies yet allows it as well to avoid the merely prosaic and routine. Eliot's awareness of this conflict makes her book an active clash between the hope of a fitting language and the recognition that language is never at one with reality, any more than the world is at one with itself. Rather than trying to heal such splits through formulas of artistic integration that weld the book into a specious wholeness, or trying to naturalize such splits by inserting them into a biographical interpretation of George Eliot, I find it most fruitful to grasp the complexities of *The Mill on the Floss* within the larger history of the realistic novel, which takes its beginning and elaborates its practice from just such splits.

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FOOTNOTES

¹ Frank Kermode, *The Classic* (New York: Viking, 1975), pp. 130ff., and Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (Paris: Seuil, 1970). See also Fredric Jameson, "The Ideology of the Text," *Salmagundi*, 31-32 (Fall 1975-Winter 1976), 232-33.

² See for example Northrop Frye, *The Secular Scripture* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1976), p. 46 (Nineteenth-century realism is based on the "naive confidence that words have an unlimited ability to represent things outside themselves."); Jonathan Culler, *Flaubert* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1974), p. 80 ("The basic enabling convention of the novel as a genre" is "confidence in the transparent and representative power of language."); Paul de Man, "The Rhetoric of Temporality," in *Interpretation*, ed. Charles Singleton (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1969), p. 204 (The nineteenth-century "regression in critical insight" finds "its historical equivalent in the regression from the eighteenth-century ironic novel . . . to realism.").

³ See comments on "dual-focus form" by Peter K. Garrett, "Double Plot and

Dialogical Form in Victorian Fiction," *NCF*, 32 (1977), 1-17; and the "double-reading" of *Daniel Deronda* by Cynthia Chase, "The Decomposition of the Elephants," *PMLA*, 93 (1978), 215-27. Both examine works, however, in which double plots make textual duality more naturalistically manageable.

⁴ See Harry Levin, "The Example of Cervantes," in *Contexts of Criticism* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1957), pp. 79-96; and José Ortega y Gasset, *Meditations on Quixote* (1914), trans. Evelyn Rugg and Diego Marín (New York: Norton, 1961).

⁵ On the absence of "reality" from direct representation see Margaret Homans, "Repression and Sublimation of Nature in *Wuthering Heights*," *PMLA*, 93 (1978), 9-19. Cf. also J. Hillis Miller, "Nature and the Linguistic Moment," in *Nature and the Victorian Imagination*, ed. U. C. Knoepfelmacher and G. B. Tennyson (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1977), esp. pp. 440, 444-45.

⁶ See Anthony Close, *The Romantic Approach to "Don Quixote"* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1978), esp. pp. 29-67.

⁷ On this pattern see M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism* (New York: Norton, 1971), *passim*. Abrams I think overestimates romantic confidence in this pattern, just as many readers do Eliot's.

⁸ See the famous fragment on "romantische Poesie" (that is, both "modern" and "novelistic" literature), *Charakteristiken und Kritiken*, I (1796-1801), ed. Hans Eichner (Munich: Schönningh, 1967), pp. 182-83.

⁹ See for example David Carroll, "Mimesis Reconsidered," *Diacritics*, 5 (Summer 1975), 5-12.

¹⁰ Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis* (1946), trans. Willard Trask (1953; rpt. New York: Doubleday, 1957), p. 430.

¹¹ Henry James, *The Art of the Novel* (New York: Scribner, 1934), p. 5.

¹² *The Art of the Novel*, pp. 302, 86. See also J. Hillis Miller, *The Form of Victorian Fiction* (Notre Dame: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1968), pp. 29-30.

¹³ George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, ed. Gordon S. Haight (1860; Boston: Houghton, 1961), p. 140. All subsequent references to this edition are given parenthetically.

¹⁴ "Humiliate" is derived from Latin *humus*, "earth." *Humus* and "human" are etymologically related, which may reinforce our sense that what is "humiliating" by one standard is humanizing by another. On the social and stylistic transgressions committed by Christian *sermo humilis* in bringing the highest meanings into everyday life and language, see Erich Auerbach, *Literary Language and its Public in Late Latin Antiquity and in the Middle Ages* (1958), trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: Random, 1965), pp. 25-66.

¹⁵ Eliot uses this same phrase to characterize the qualities of a "resonant language" that will "express life" and give a "fitful shimmer of many-hued significance" because it is historically rooted rather than scientifically transparent and "de-odorized." See "The Natural History of German Life" (1856), in *Essays of George Eliot*, ed. Thomas Pinney (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1963), pp. 287-88.

¹⁶ See for example the *Dublin University Magazine* review (1861), in *George Eliot: The Critical Heritage*, ed. David Carroll (New York: Barnes, 1971), p. 147.

¹⁷ On psychology, see F. R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition* (1948; rpt. New York: Doubleday, 1954), p. 58; on "epic breadth," *The George Eliot Letters*, ed. Gordon S. Haight (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1954-55), III, 317 (July 9, 1860).

¹⁸ J. Hillis Miller relates this passage to speaking "parabolically." See "Optic and Semiotic in *Middlemarch*," in *The Worlds of Victorian Fiction*, ed. Jerome H. Buckley (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1975), p. 144.

¹⁹ On Oedipus and autochthony (a form of "humiliation") see Claude Lévi-Strauss, "The Structural Study of Myth," in *Myth: A Symposium*, ed. Thomas A. Sebeok (1955; rpt. Bloomington and London: Indiana Univ. Press, 1965), pp. 91-92. On Eliot's pervasive references to Greek tragedy see Vernon Rendall, "George Eliot

and the Classics" (1947-48), in *A Century of George Eliot Criticism*, ed. Gordon S. Haight (1965; rpt. London: Methuen, 1966), pp. 215-21.

²⁰ Eliot saw tragedy arising from the "dramatic collision," the "conflict" between "valid claims" that will continually renew itself until the "outer life of man" achieves "harmony with his inward needs." ("The Antigone and its Moral," 1856, in *Essays of George Eliot*, pp. 263-64.) Eliot's own tangled language and troubled plots belong to a world that lacks this perfect correspondence of "heart's need" to language and action. For more on Eliot's theory of tragedy see U. C. Knoepfelmacher, *George Eliot's Early Novels* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1968), pp. 171-74.

²¹ In Eliot's frequent loaded use of "trivial" may we recall the intersection of three roads where Oedipus met Laius?

²² On this pattern of spoiling see Lynne Tidaback Roberts, "Perfect Pyramids: *The Mill on the Floss*," *TSSL*, 13 (1971), 111-24.

²³ *The Excursion*, Book I, ll. 275-79, in *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. Ernest de Selincourt and Helen Darbishire (Oxford: Clarendon, 1940-49), V, 17.