

The Art of Hunger in *The Mill on the Floss*

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[Summary: While feminist critics have read George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* as a tragedy of victimised womanhood, it may be rather that the female characters are ultimately having their own way. The novel consists of an intricate criss-crossing of demands and counter-demands that frustrate the characters' desires and ensnare them into tragic consequences, and these manipulations could be seen as something characteristic to the Dodson sisters. Maggie is a faithful successor of this, and with her this logic is designated especially through references to food and eating, which suggests a desire that is analogous to anorexia. The same logic is also found in the ménage-à-quatre towards the end, where she frustrates the satisfactions of everybody including herself. Furthermore, the novel itself seems to invite the reader's emotional investment in Maggie through the same tactics of intensifying desire through its deliberate frustration.]

The overall tone of *The Mill on the Floss* is a very heavy one, which would make the reader feel some gladness to come across the comic relief, in which Bob Jakin handles Mrs Glegg who is otherwise hard to deal with: Bob successfully talks her into buying his cloth by putting on a show of reluctance to sell it, while Mr Glegg and Tom are most probably suppressing their laughter (Book Fifth, Chapter 2)¹.

This exceptionally cheerful interlude is significant for the reason that it presents the basic structure of the intricate criss-crosses of demands and counter-demands that abound in this tale, which often result in tangled stalemates and ironical consequences. For instance, Mrs Tulliver, with 'a facility of saying things which drove [Mr Tulliver] in the opposite direction to the one she desired' (p. 134), pleads him not to go to law with Wakem, which effectively breaks the camel's back and confirms his decision to do so (pp. 228-9). She also prompts him to write a cutting letter to Mrs Glegg by prematurely telling him of the prospect of mollifying her regarding the loan (p. 196). Her blundering facility is effective with other people as well: most importantly, she secretly goes to Wakem and begs him not to bid for Dorlcote Mill, which occasions him to make the purchase out of 'benevolent vengeance' (p. 341).

This complication of demands seems to be a talent peculiar to the Dodsons, among whom Mrs Glegg is most prominent. Bob's comic relief is effective for the very reason that it is usually Mrs Glegg who sustains other people's attentions to her by ostentatious concessions. Announcements such as 'Mr Glegg, you'll please to order what you'd like for dinner. I shall have gruel' (p. 193), and refusals of satisfactions such as sitting near the fire (p. 288) are typical of her. These basically aim at having her own way in the end, but at another level, it seems that she is positively enjoying keeping herself as well as other people frustrated and dissatisfied.

When satisfaction must be had, it has to be devoid of its substance: let us recall her 'pouring out the milk with unusual profuseness, as much as to say, if [Mr Glegg] wanted milk, he should have it with a vengeance.' (p. 192) Bob's trick is satisfying also because he induces her to make an unnecessary expenditure and strikes thereby at her miserliness (pp. 187-8), which has to do with the enjoyment of renouncing present satisfaction for the sake of a future one – a satisfaction that is forever deferred.

The narrator's comment that 'People who seem to enjoy their ill-temper have a way of keeping it in fine condition by inflicting privations on themselves' (p. 190) sums up Mrs Glegg's character, and could be seen as having a direct successor in Maggie. It is probably through seeing this in Maggie's renunciation of Stephen that Mrs Glegg decides to stand by her (p. 629). This brings to mind Maggie's initial tactics in unconsciously seducing Stephen by insisting that he doesn't really find her good-looking (p. 485). It must have been a manifestation of an underlying stratagem equal to Bob's, which was an application of the Dodson strategy in outwitting a Dodson. But with Maggie, the enjoyment of dissatisfaction does not limit itself to peaceful uses, and is pushed to its very limit in self-sacrifice.

The many obvious prolepses of the tragic course of events, those that are put in the mouths of the characters, could also be seen as what occasioned them in a roundabout way. Maggie wouldn't have run off to the gypsies if she hadn't 'been so often told she was like a gypsy and 'half wild'' (p. 168. See also p. 125). Mrs Tulliver, with that idiosyncratic 'facility', repeatedly expresses the fear that their children will 'be brought in dead and drowned some day' (p. 166. See also p. 61, p. 90). Maggie dreads 'lest her father should add to his present misfortune the wretchedness of doing something irretrievably disgraceful' (p. 373), which she might have directly expressed in the course of her nursing, premonitory of his finally thrashing Wakem. Philip, though not a Dodson, prognosticates to Maggie, 'you will avenge the dark women in your own person: – carry all the love away from your cousin Lucy' (p. 433), which is subsequently followed to the word. Lucy herself guides the way by generally encouraging self-indulgences to her, on which Maggie uncannily points out, 'she always finds out what I want before I know it myself.' (p. 526) Philip also pushes Maggie towards Steven by recommending self-indulgences, not realising that by then he has come to stand for abstinence rather than self-indulgence in her psyche (p. 525). So perhaps the predictions by Philip and Lucy are only realised through Maggie's imp of the perverse.

The Dodson way of attaining satisfaction through dissatisfaction and blunder culminates in the tragic history of Maggie, which is certainly aided by unfortunate circumstances (p. 514), but basically determined by her own self-destructive character whose basis was formed before the family catastrophe. While the novel, with its liberal stock of prejudiced remarks against womankind, has been effectively employed for the feminist cause, perhaps it is rather the masculine logic which fails to establish its predominance in this tale, compromised by intricate psychological maneuverings which is the Dodson forte. While it would be easy for us to drown Tom's remonstrance such as the following comment in our overflowing sympathy for Maggie, he might deserve to be listened to more carefully:

I never feel certain about anything with *you*. At one time you take pleasure in a sort of

perverse self-denial, and at another, you have not resolution to resist a thing that you know to be wrong. (p. 504)

Tom snubs her before this for refusing to live with the Pullets until he could provide a home for themselves, and becoming a governess instead (p. 503). Tulliver Jr, as had Tulliver Sr, has nothing to cling to but the consistency in his struggle for pure prestige. What makes Tom assert his narrow notion of authority is most probably his sense of powerlessness before his sister's strange ability to enjoy herself, apparently taking perverse 'pleasure' in abstention as well as in indulgence, while he could find no way in life but to drive himself deeper and deeper into solitude (see p. 511).² We might take Stephen's remonstrance against her determination to go back to St Ogg's as a similar reaction to Tom's: 'what a miserable thing a woman's love is to a man's. I could commit crimes for you – and you can balance and choose in that way.' (p. 603) But there is a certain logic beyond this apparent oscillation, and Tom was wrong when he accused Maggie for lacking in consistency (p. 445). While Tom too has a 'strong appetite for pleasure [. . .] but his practical shrewdness told him that the means to such achievements could only lie for him in present abstinence and self-denial' (p. 406), this 'abstinence' is not desired in itself. Stephen and Tom are 'monomaniac's, the former with his attraction to Maggie (p. 519) and the latter with his work. The ideal good for them is fixed, for which Tom would exert himself, and Stephen would even commit crimes. Maggie is as it were a *zeromaniac*, enjoying abstinence in itself, and the effect of the zero cannot be attained without repeated subtraction, which presupposes a certain good object before renouncing it. Philip is right to observe that 'There is something stronger in you than your love for him' (p. 634), than her tangible appetites among which she can balance and choose, but how could we describe this best?

I would suggest that, since there are so many references to eating in the book, especially with Maggie and Tom's childhood episodes, which provide prototypical actions for her tragic grown life, this *zeromania* could be figuratively understood as a kind of anorexia. Frustration of oral satisfaction is prominent right from the outset in the narrator's dream of Dorlcote Mill: 'That honest waggoner is thinking of his dinner, getting sadly dry in the oven at this late hour; but he will not touch it till he has fed his horses' (p. 54). 'I should like well to hear them neigh over their hardly-earned feed of corn, and see them, with their moist necks freed from the harness, dipping their eager nostrils into the muddy pond.' (p. 54) But we are not allowed to see their respective satisfactions, instead of which we are given the first sight of Maggie (identified by her beaver bonnet in p. 92). This presentation of sustained hunger seems to foreshadow all the drama to be enacted in this novel.

Most of the important childhood anecdotes have to do with food. The rabbit Maggie lets die is probably regarded by Tom primarily as meat, for he intends to keep in his version of Noah's ark 'plenty to eat in it – rabbits and things' (104). His anger makes her decide to hide in the attic and 'starve herself' (p. 89) as if to identify with Tom's disappointed oral expectations, as well as mimicking his lost objects that were starved to death. Her strong demand for love is compared to the natural demand for food by the narrator: 'It is a wonderful subduer, this need of love, this hunger of the heart: as preemptory as that other hunger by which Nature forces us to submit to the yoke, and change the face of the world.' (p. 91) Thus the reconciliation over the rabbits has

to be through the sharing of a cake (pp. 91-2) which is later described as sacramental (p. 505). Her hair-cutting (pp. 119-126) could be read as self-inflicted fasting, as it entails a renunciation not only of her locks, but also of a good part of her dinner.

The sequence which ends up in her flight to the gypsies is also full of food references. The double-bind³ over the choice of jam puff pieces (pp. 98-100), which springs from the course of the conversation on Lucy's visit, looks on to her later life in which she shall be caught in the 'casuistry' of passion and duty (p. 627-8), that is, satisfaction and renunciation, acted out with Tom substituted by Stephen. Tom's declaration that 'I wish Lucy was *my* sister' (p. 147) makes Maggie repeatedly destroy his objects of satisfaction, which had already been her underlying habit: according to Tom, 'Last holidays you licked the paint off my lozenge-box, and the holidays before that, you let the boat drag my fish-line down when I'd set you to watch it, and you pushed your head through my kite all for nothing.' (p. 88). Apart from upsetting his card pagoda (p. 147), she drops and stamps on the small cake for which Tom seems very eager (pp. 153-4): that she is fascinated by 'a print of Ulysses and Nausicaa' (p. 154) here may suggest a hope that Tom/Ulysses shall eventually leave Lucy/Nausicaa and come back to her/Penelope. She also spills Tom's cowslip wine in trying to make up with him (p. 155)⁴. Finally she sees that no object could be destroyed *in absentia* or *in effigie* in order to 'vex Tom' (p. 162), and pushes Lucy herself into the mud (p. 164), which makes us suspect some venom already in the tale she had told Lucy, of Mrs Earwig letting her child fall into the washing-tub (p. 161). When she subsequently defects to the gypsies, the involuntary outburst, '*I want my tea so*' (p. 174), and finding their food inedible marks the point where she admits her defeat, after which she determinedly refuses to eat anything, and promises them to come back with 'some jam tarts and things' (p. 177).

The adolescent elaboration Maggie gives to this problematics of satisfaction is to identify with the other that she desires to keep dissatisfied. The anorexic solution in the doctrines of Thomas à Kempis is thus continuous with her fasting after letting Tom's rabbits die, and moreover in accord with the Dodson tactics of desire as we have seen. It is here that we encounter this formulation: 'The Dodsons were a very proud race, and their pride lay in the utter *frustration of all desire* to tax them with a breach of traditional duty or propriety.' [my italics] (p. 364) This would mean that the way out of all the punitive double-binds in life lies in the renunciation of satisfaction, which keeps others frustrated and dissatisfied by depriving them of reasons to accuse us, as well as ourselves.

What directs Maggie towards her asceticism at this stage is her family's penury, which removes everybody's appetite. We are told on Mr Tulliver that 'the somewhat profuse man who hated to be stinted or to stint any one else in his own house, was gradually metamorphosed into the keen-eyed grudger of morsels. Mrs Tulliver could not economise enough to satisfy him, in their food and firing, and he would eat nothing himself but what was of the coarsest quality.' (p. 370) As for Mrs Tulliver, 'it was piteous to see the comely blond stout woman getting thinner' (p. 368). Maggie's desires by now are directed to knowledge and love rather than cakes, but are still described in terms of oral satisfaction: her reading of Tom's school-books is evoked in the following way: 'the poor child, with her soul's hunger and her illusions of self-flattery, began to nibble at this thick-rinded fruit of the tree of knowledge' (p. 380) This she tries to renounce so

that she could adjust to the 'narrowing concentration of desire' (p. 371) in her household, which leads her to her 'long suicide' (p. 429) in imitation of Christ, which is not unlike the long suicide of the hunger artist in Kafka's tale. On her reading of Thomas à Kempis, we are told that 'for the first time she saw the possibility of shifting the position from which she looked at the gratification of her own desires [. . .] renunciation seemed to her the entrance into that satisfaction which she had so long been craving in vain.' (p. 384) Another formulation could be found in her confession to Philip, 'I was never satisfied with a little of anything. That is why it is better for me to do without earthly happiness altogether' (p. 428). These formulations remind one of Dr Johnson's remark on wine, that total abstinence is far easier than moderate consumption. What we see at work here is the dialectical logic of desire that makes the anorexic the ultimate overeater, because she is eating *nothing*, which you could incessantly and endlessly eat. Thus desire, when pushed to its limit, inevitably becomes self-destructive, as we can see with the hunger artist's, and Maggie's, and perhaps even with Mrs Tulliver's blunders. It is not the patriarchal ideology that encloses Maggie into her 'long suicide'; rather it is Maggie's fierce gusto that breeds her asceticism and ultimately her death-wish, before which the Tulliver masculinity is powerless.

Philip sees this anorexic logic clearly, and refutes Maggie's renunciation of art and literature through oral terminology, saying that 'we *must* hunger after them' (p. 397) and asking 'why should you starve your mind in that way?' (p. 402. See also p. 427) He also rightly warns, 'You will be thrown into the world some day, and then every rational satisfaction of your nature that you deny now, will assault you like a savage appetite' (p. 429), which is true when we think of rebounds after regulatory diets, and actually materialises in 'The Great Temptation'. Philip's clairvoyance and slightly unfair ('ugly') course of actions to court Maggie springs from the straitened position he himself is in, which the narrator explains again in comparison to oral satisfaction: 'The temptations of beauty are much dwelt upon, but I fancy they only bear the same relation to those of ugliness, as the temptation to excess at a feast, where the delights are varied for eye and ear as well as palate, bears to the temptations that assail the desperation of hunger. Does not the Hunger Tower stand as the type of the utmost trial to what is human in us?' (pp. 430-1)

The menage-à-quatre in Volume III introduces a vocabulary that is different from the previous volumes, and could be seen as a reunion of the characters in 'Mr Gilfil's Love-story', which provides a paradigm for all the early novels that could be described as Orphic: the problems inherent in the foursome of [Gilfil, Caterina, Anthony, Miss Assher] is here given elaboration with the foursome of [Philip, Maggie, Stephen, Lucy], though the difference is that this time, the gentleman with a fiancée (Stephen/Anthony) is more serious about the central female figure (Maggie/Caterina), who is again repetitively sought for and lost, also by the more sombre lover (Philip/Gilfil). Reverberations of *Adam Bede*, which could be seen as a variation on 'Mr Gilfil's Love-story' with the redemptive side of Gilfil materialising in the form of Dinah, could be heard in elements such as Maggie's 'fallen' state and long travel, Stephen/Arthur's initial ignorance of Philip/Adam's attachment to Maggie/Hetty, and his unkept resolution to avoid her (p. 581).

But the basic logic is continuous, and reversing the perspective, *The Mill on the Floss* could

be seen as informing us about the essence of the Orphic structure in Eliot's early works. To be a Euridyce, who is sought for and lost over and over again, seems to be the ruling desire for Maggie all along; the Dodson tactics of keeping oneself and others frustrated and dissatisfied, which reaches perfection in Maggie's asceticism, allows us to see in turn that what had been at stake with the Orphic variations was a desire that never dies, precisely because it is never satisfied.

Contrary to Kafka's hunger artist, who lives on to be forgotten by everybody, Maggie is freed from carrying her lonesome renunciatory self into old maidenhood by 'The Final Rescue' in premature death. Her heartbreaking art of hunger leaves the reader desperately hungry for a happy ending. One would sorely wish to see her having everything she wanted, having everything her way, her cheerful figure as a glutton. She could have eloped and gone to the continent, perhaps opting for sunny Italy where Eliot herself headed for after writing the novel, instead of Germany which she and Lewes chose for their great escape. They could have had years of perfect gaiety on Stephen's money, then have made a triumphant return to St Ogg's, in time for the next election (p. 620), where the society would swallow anything for its self-preservation as the narrator suggests (pp. 619-21). Lucy would by then have found her rescuing Dionysus in Tom, compensating for his lack of Steven's glamour by his chivalrous attentions, saving his preference for patriarchal attitudes for their conjugal life: after all, he has been taken into partnership at the early age of 23; the sky's the limit for this youth. Steven shall duly represent the borough and the couple can stay in London as much as possible, looking forward to their final reconciliation in the twilight of their lives, when they could gather their families and enjoy looking back at the intense romance and drama of their early life.

Instead we are left with 600 pages' worth of heightened appetite for the redemption of their misery disastrously dissatisfied. It is then that we recognise that the novel itself had seduced us by those Dodson tactics, refusing the readers the satisfaction of comprehending and accepting Maggie and her desires, as Tom and Steven had desperately wished to do.

Notes

¹ We can also find here a food reference which we shall see in detail presently: Bob says of his muslin, 'You might as well look at poor folk's victual, mum – it 'ud on'y take away your appetite.' (p. 419. Quotations from *The Mill on the Floss* are from George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss* (The Penguin English Library, 1979))

² This leitmotiv could be seen as looking forward to the figure of Silas Marner, who is also driven into isolation in his work, as a result of avoiding confrontation rather than losing in the struggle for pure prestige in his case. Compare his money-hoarding with the Tullivers' concentration on the accumulation of money after their downfall: 'The little store of *sovereigns* in the tin box seemed to be the only sight that brought a faint beam of pleasure in to the miller's eyes' [my italics] (p. 370).

³ The famous double-bind is that of the ordeal by water in Maggie's book (p. 66), in which the suspect shall be killed either way. But there are two other double-binds in the book which have to do with oral satisfaction: this one over the jam puff, which is that Maggie shall be criticised for her satisfaction either way, and Mr Stelling's joke over declining beef (p. 204), where Tom is similarly threatened.

⁴ Nina Auerbach suggests that Maggie's giving dead rabbits as love tokens is Gothic, and that 'The

cake she crushes and the wine she spills at Aunt Pullet's have a touch of black mass in them' (Nina Auerbach, 'The Power of Hunger: Demonism and Maggie Tulliver' in *Nineteenth Century Fiction*, 30 (1975), p. 159), but I feel it would suffice to note the menacing quality in these instances of Maggie's frustrating Tom.

⁵ See Elizabeth Ermarth, 'Maggie Tulliver's Long Suicide' in *Studies in English Literature*, Vol. XIV, No. 4, Autumn 1974, pp. 587-601.