THE MILL ON THE FLOSS (1860): GEORGE ELIOT ON IMAGINATION AND THE ART OF SYMPATHY

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1. Introduction

The art of sympathy constitutes an essential element in George Eliot's concept of authorship. In her essay *The Natural History of German Life* of 1856, she writes "The greatest benefit we owe to the artist, whether painter, poet, or novelist, is the extension of our sympathies" (Eliot, "Essays" 270). Regarding her novel *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), this thesis examines the function of imagination and how George Eliot seeks to develop this function within the realm of the realist novel. I will argue that in this novel George Eliot both explores and expresses the limits of its omniscient narrator's knowledge and style, and experiments with how she can replace it with the 'art of sympathy'. I will do so by examining more closely her concept of the art of sympathy and by applying one of Bakhtin's theories, as explicated in his essay *Discourse in the Novel* (1975), to the narrator's voice in *The Mill on the Floss*. Both steps will assist me in providing a better understanding of Eliot's own reflections on the art of writing hidden in the narrator's voice. When conducting this reading I distinguish Eliot's insistence on the narrator's scientific interests and their influence on the way he tells the narrative, and her illustrations of the narrator's limited writing skills and his struggles to find a new literary voice.

The Mill on the Floss is Eliot's third work of fiction, following on from her collection of stories, *Scenes of Clerical Life* (1857) and her novel *Adam Bede* (1859). The writing process of *The Mill on the Floss* was an important step in George Eliot's development as an author. According to Pyle, together with her second novel *Adam Bede*, *The Mill on the Floss* is "crucial to the formation of the narrative principle of sympathy" (5).

The Mill on the Floss was written in a time when the evolutionary theory was in full development. Eliot was familiar with the different arguments, being closely acquainted with social scientist Herbert Spencer (whose first edition of *The Principles of Psychology* appeared in 1855) and living together with natural philosopher George Henry Lewes, who was writing *The Physiology of Common Life* "whilst [she was] at work on *The Mill on the Floss*" (Da Sousa 119). Likewise, in the same year that Eliot started writing her novel, Darwin's *The Origin of Species* was published, which she began reading "immediately after it appeared" (Beer 156). Furthermore, her experience as editorial adviser for the *Westminster Review* allowed Eliot to deal with all other "burning intellectual issues of the day - as well as reviewing contemporary fiction" (Ashton, "The Mill on the Floss" 3). This gave her the opportunity to develop her views on the art of writing at the intersection of the various issues of her time.

Soon after her novel's publication, George Eliot received several harsh reviews regarding the tone of her writing. One notable example is a review published in the *Dublin University Magazine* (February 1861): "With the peevish fretfulness of a camel in the act of loading, our authoress keeps groaning out her tiresome tirades against evils for the most part of her own imagining" (Carroll 152). This is a judgment that assumes the narrator's voice to be an extension of George Eliot's own. This 'confusion' that forms the basis of the "kind of complaint about the obtrusiveness of the narrator [which] continued for a century" (Harris 32) is strongly refuted by Isobel Armstrong in her note on Eliot's wisdom (1970). She explains Eliot's 'wisdom', as presented in the authorial comments to which the review in *Dublin University Magazine* refers, has the intention to function as a bridge between the reader's world and the world of the novel: "some insights are insights simply because of their

truistic nature, and to say that they are truistic is not to condemn them" (Armstrong 118). Since Armstrong's essay, several critics have given attention to the 'new' role of the narrator. However, none of the critical papers I have seen uses Bakhtin's theory as expressed in his *Discourse in the Novel* as a vehicle thoroughly to examine the message worked out through Eliot's exploration of the narrator's voice.

2. Eliot's View on the Art of Sympathy

After the experience of writing her first two works and her response to the criticism those books engendered, Eliot became more conscious of her responsibilities and limits as an author. Criticism of *Adam Bede* (the novel preceding *The Mill on the Floss*) allowed her to express her view on art:

> If Art does not enlarge men's sympathies, it does nothing morally. I have had heart-cutting experience that opinions are a poor cement between human souls; and the only effect I ardently long to produce by my writings, is that those who read them should be better able to imagine and feel the pains and the joys of those who differ from themselves in everything but the broad fact of being struggling erring human creatures. (qtd in Ashton, "George Eliot" 35)

She had one clear objective for the art of writing, seeing it as a writer's responsibility to enlarge her readers' sympathy.

2.1. Imagination as Open Space for Emerging Life

Eliot believed that imagination is a space that could enhance greater sympathy and compassion for other people, on the condition that this space is an open space in which different views could co-exist. Her view on imagination is largely influenced by Feuerbach, whose work *The Essence of Christianity* (*Das Wesen des Christentums*) she translated into English in 1855. In Feuerbach's view, imagination allows men to become self-conscious and observe themselves from an objective distance (Feuerbach Chapter 8). This double-consciousness or split in consciousness of being the 'I' and the 'thou' (the 'thou' referred to the 'alter ego' which, according to Feuerbach, equals God) becomes the space in which man is able to recognise both his own limits and his needs for other people. This concept depends on Feuerbach's belief that differences between people provide an unlimited source of possibilities rather than a threat to one's own, and that human limits are an invitation to become part of a larger community: "sin is made to shrink within its limits, is thrust back into its nothingness, by the fact that it is only mine, and not that of my fellows" (Feuerbach 159). In other words, the failure of one person is only limited to that person and is reduced to nothingness by the virtues of others, to whom he is connected. Unlike many of her contemporaries, Eliot did not sees double-consciousness as a sign betraying an unstable personality. On the contrary, for Eliot it is a mark of a person's openness to the differences of others which establishes "the possibility for creative action" (Deeds-Ermarth 25). As suggested by Deeds-Ermarth, Eliot's art of sympathy springs from a "split in consciousness that permits two conflicting views to exist simultaneously" (23).

Eliot's learning process as a writer involved applying Feuerbach's concept of double-consciousness to her craft of writing. According to Sawyer, "while Feuerbach's work gave Eliot a philosophical foundation, Shakespeare provided an artistic ideal" (21). A debate that touched upon this art of writing, with which she must have been familiar, was one on Shakespeare's plays that took place earlier in the nineteenth century. Hazlitt's views on Shakespearean sympathy had an important role in in this debate. In his lecture on *Shakespeare and Milton* (1818), Hazlitt attributes Shakespeare's genius to his mind's "power of communication with all other minds - so that it contained a universe of thought and feeling within itself, and had no one peculiar bias, or exclusive excellence more than another" (Hazlitt 273). Hazlitt's insights very likely draw upon Coleridge's earlier definition of William Shakespeare as "myriad-minded" in *Biographia Literaria* (1817) (Coleridge 215). Eliot's reactions to the critics' opinion received after the publication of *The Mill on the Floss* suggest that she had such an unbiased attitude in mind when writing the novel. For instance, in a letter to John Blackwood of the 4th of April 1861, she reacted to opinions that had qualified her descriptions of Tom's attitude towards his sister Maggie as harsh:

> As if it were not my respect for Tom which infused itself into my reader - as if he could have respected Tom if I had not painted him with respect; the exhibition of the right on both sides being the very soul of my intention in the story. (qtd in Davis, "Implicit and Explicit Reason" 92-93)

What Feuerbach's concept of double-consciousness and Hazlitt's opinion on Shakespearean sympathy have in common is the emphasis on the mind's ability to allow and to share in the co-existence of differences. Both suggest that if a person or author allows differences (or

even conflicts) in people's nature and views to co-exist, a space is created that belongs to nobody and can accommodate the growth of characters. Within this 'open' space characters may act in surprising ways; this element of surprise renders it a space aesthetically pleasurable to the reader. As Davis points out, this space is the space where "life-forces are created," and where, "as in Shakespeare, the characters unknowingly help to create each other, as it were, through dialogue" ("Implicit and Explicit Reason" 92-93). In other words, it is the full exploitation of imagination as a space of creativity. Indeed, characters in Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* act in surprising ways as if they are freed from their creator's judgment. For instance, the highly opinionated Mrs. Glegg stands up for her niece Maggie, when the latter falls into disgrace, and scolds Tom for "admitting the worst of his sister" (Eliot, "The Mill" 629). Although Mrs. Glegg's reaction is surprising, it also reflects the very human attachment to family (essential to Eliot). In this way, Eliot performs the difficult feat of surprising the reader in such a way that he acknowledges the surprise as fitting given what we know of the character in question. Another example is the unexpected act of the calculated single-minded Mr. Wakem (described in a Chapter called "Wakem in a New Light"). Despite Mr. Wakem's resentment regarding Tom, he decides to sell him the Mill, when this can contribute to the happiness of his son: Mr. Wakem "yielded with more readiness than [Philip] had calculated on" (Eliot, "The Mill" 546).

2.2. The Realist Novel as Art of Common Life

While imagination is Eliot's means to enlarge human sympathy, the topic of her novel is the everyday experience of the provincial middle class in all its facets. As she argues in her

essay *The Natural History of German Life*: "Art is the nearest thing to life; it is a mode of amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellowship beyond the bounds of our personal lot" (Eliot, "Essays" 271). She wanted to approach the life of the middle class, on which so little had been written, as closely as possible. She saw the task as being to "paint the life of People" as a responsibility to create a true and faithful description of her country's middle classes and to move away from the idyllic literature that, according to her, still had influence on contemporary artists (Eliot, "Essays" 271).

For Eliot the realist novel was an excellent tool to approach common life. It allowed her to remain faithful to facts, while the fictive nature of the genre enabled her, like many other realist novelists, to "recreate the world" (Davis, "The Victorians" 359). To approach reality and prevent her imagination to 'give untruths' while writing the *The Mill on the Floss*, Eliot travelled "to Gainsborough [which she transformed into St. Oggs], finding that the town and the River Trent [renamed The Floss] would serve well as models for [her novel]" (Henry, "The Life of George Eliot" 112). Likewise, she conducted research on floods as illustrated by her notebook that contains "several extracts from old volumes of the Annual Register describing the devastation wrought on villages along the River Tyne in Northumberland in 1771 and in the countryside near Boston in Lincolnshire in November 1810," (Ashton, "George Eliot. A Life" 218) and sought "expert assistance with the complicated legal and financial position" of Mr. Tulliver in his dispute on water supply (Ashton, "George Eliot. A Life" 227). Her verifications indicate that her imagination roots itself in reality; Eliot needed "an original place" (Henry, "The Life of George Eliot" 112) and a specific "mental picture" (Ashton, "George Eliot. A Life" 226) as inspiration.

According to Eliot, realist art not only has to include facts from everyday middle-class life, but also has to reflect the population's "psychological character - their conceptions of life, and their emotions" (Eliot, "Essays" 271). Faithful to her ideas on imagination as an open space, she holds that the novelist's invitation to feel "for the peasant in all his coarse apathy, and the artisan in all his suspicious selfishness" (Eliot, "Essays" 271) has to be true and should not result from a common English novelists' mistake to "transfer their own feelings" to such characters (Eliot, "Essays" 279). Furthermore, she holds that the artist should prioritise life over science, as life is a "great deal more than science" (Eliot, "Essays" 288). In her first review of Charles Kingsley's *Westward Ho!*, published in the *Leader* (19 May 1855), she states that the artist should refrain from 'preaching' and philosophising: "We don't want a man with a wand, going about the gallery and haranguing us. Art is art, and tells its own story" (Eliot, "Essays" 123).

3. A Proposed Reading of *The Mill on the Floss*

Eliot's third work of fiction, *The Mill on the Floss,* reflects many of her ideas on the art of sympathy with its highly ambitious tasks that she set herself as writer. She is faithful in her task as a realist writer to write about life of middle-class people in a village in the Midlands. Her resistance to opinions is expressed in the way her novel illustrates how opinions and traditions have an obstructive impact on behaviour and choices of individuals, such as Maggie (the heroine in *The Mill on the Floss*), who have all the capacities and desires

to grow and advance in life. Likewise, the psychological and emotional inner life of Maggie, her family and other villagers are a central focus throughout the novel.

In contrast, the narrator who tells the story in *The Mill on the Floss* does not fully correspond with Eliot's ideas on the act of writing. His voice can be described as rather intrusive, as he does not hesitate to express his evolutionary views and somewhat simplistic perspective on the life of the Tullivers and the inhabitants of St. Oggs (My use here of the gender-specific pronoun 'he/his' is meant to be gender-neutral, as I have found no indication that suggests the narrator being either female or male). The narrator's attitude seems to contradict Eliot's insistence that artists should prioritise the description of life over scientific or philosophical discourses. The biased voice of the narrator led various critics to comment on Eliot's novel and express their "dislike" of certain characters (Ashton, "George Eliot" 39). The question arises whether Eliot has not been able to meet her own ambitions as a writer throughout the story of *The Mill on the Floss* or whether the inclusion of this intrusive voice serves a certain purpose. The latter option would suggest that the narrator is an independent character in Eliot's novel instead of a mere extension of her own voice.

The assumption that the narrator is an independent character in his own right suggests a split between the author Eliot and the narrator in the novel. This split corresponds with her view that the art of sympathy is acquired through an openness of mind and double-consciousness. Splitting the writer's role between herself and the narrator resembles Feuerbach's division and dialogue between the 'I' and 'thou', which entails a step away from a self-contained mind. Regarding *The Mill on the Floss*, it enables Eliot to create a space for dialogue as Shakespeare may have had in his direct contact and interaction with the players when trying out his plays, and like Shakespeare to provide an apparent lack of authorial intervention. Within this space Eliot exercises what Davis characterises as 'high realism' in

her work: “bringing together what it felt like at ground level with some sense of what it all might look like from above” (Davis, “The Victorians” 387). Creating an independent narrator allows her to distance herself from this dialogue between the ‘view from above’ (the omniscient narrator) and the ‘experience below’ (life as experienced by Maggie, her family and the villagers of St. Oggs). In other words, the narrator’s voice co-exists with the everyday life of the Tullivers and the villagers and Eliot’s imagination can become this space in which they can be without judgment, in which life can emerge.

The presence of the intrusive narrator as an independent character in *The Mill on the Floss* means that the novel is *not only* a story about the life of Maggie, her family and the inhabitants of St. Oggs, it is also a story about a narrator and the way he tells the story. It makes an appeal to the reader of *The Mill on the Floss* to be part of the larger audience listening to the story of the narrator while at the same time discovering how the narrator tells his story.

A literary theory that assists in fully appreciating those simultaneously working narratives has been set out by Mikhail Bakhtin. Moreover, his view on the variety of different languages contained in a novel (what Bakhtin calls ‘heteroglossia’ which is a certain type of ‘double-voicedness’) and his method to distinguish them can be seen as corresponding with Eliot’s view on double-consciousness as the capacity to let the characters speak for themselves and let their diverse views coexist.

In his essay *Discourse in the Novel* (first published in Russian in 1975, though written in the late 1930s), Bakhtin defines the novel as “a diversity of social speech types (sometimes even diversity of language) and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organised” (Bakhtin 262). Form and content are subordinate to the verbal discourse intended by the author and not *vice versa*. Bakhtin is very explicit on the role of narrators in novels.

He specifies that "the speech of such narrators is always *another's speech* (as regards the real or potential direct discourse of the author) and in *another's language* (i.e., insofar as it is a particular variant of the literary language that clashes with the language of the narrator)" (Bakhtin 313). The author reveals himself with regard to "his effect on the narrator, on his speech and his language […], but also in his effect on the subject of the story - as a point of view that differs from the point of view of the narrator" (Bakhtin 314). In other words, the narrator with his language and belief-system is opposed to the subject of the story and the author is to be found in the extent he allows a clash between these two to happen. According to Bakhtin, the introduction of an independent narrator allows the author to show the narrator's style of narrating "in a new light" and to reveal his own view on 'narrating' in a new way by using it as a "horizon against which the particularities of the teller's tale are perceivable" (Bakhtin 313).

Reading *The Mill on the Floss* with Bakthin's theory in mind suggests that Eliot uses the intrusive voice of her narrator as a perspective against which she is able to transmit her view on the art of writing as an art of sympathy. She confronts an omniscient narrator with the complexity of the middle-class' everyday life. It is very likely that Eliot herself was only partly consciously aware of this process. It could have been a way to express her view on the art of writing, as much as it may have been a way to discover the possibilities and limits of her own defined art of sympathy. This twofold function would correspond with Eliot's working process which, according to Davis, consisted of two steps: she had an intuition, but then needed "to go back into ordinary life to prove her intuition the second time around and show all its realistic working-out" (Davis "Implicit and Explicit Reason" 92).

A look at the narrator Eliot creates in *The Mill on the Floss* reveals that the narrator is a very knowledgeable person (a scientist perhaps) who tells a story (instead of a scientific discourse). He can be described as a philosopher with a profound interest in the evolutionary theory. The introduction of this character allows Eliot to distance herself from a scientific discussion, with which she was very familiar through her friendship with Herbert Spencer and her partnership with George Henry Lewes. The distance enables her to test how the different contemporary scientific arguments (as ideas and belief-systems) relate to human life, in particular the life of individuals in social classes. In this context, the life of Maggie can be considered as a test-case to test the reconcilability of ideas and real life and is a way for Eliot to contribute to the scientific discussion by means of fiction.

The narrator is also someone who is interested in telling narratives. In the opening chapter of *The Mill on the Floss*, the novel presents him as a character in his own right, as someone with the intention to tell a story that emerges from his memory. His language is scientific, philosophical, idyllic and aims to seek the interest of the refined audience of 'good society'. He is committed to tell about life in a village in the Midlands, a life that is different from his own experience. The introduction of a narrator seeking to tell a story about a simple girl to a refined audience that has certain expectations with regard to the stories they are told, allows Eliot to illustrate the limits of contemporary literary styles (as she had commented upon in her letters and essays) and to justify new ways of novel-writing to accommodate her desire to 'paint the life of People'.

4. The Omniscient Narrator vs. Maggie's Life as 'Real Life' Test-Case

The narrator's interest in evolutionary theory ranges from physiological aspects, psychological aspects, natural-historical aspects, to philosophical aspects related to human development. Examples of each can be found throughout the novel. For instance, in a light ironic way, the narrator justifies Mrs. Glegg's unusual silence after having given her opinionated discourse during the family reunion on common sense physiological grounds: "speaking for the good of others is naturally exhausting" (Eliot, "The Mill" 290). He compares Mr. Tulliver's proud attitude towards others after his bankruptcy with animal behaviour, to establish certain laws of life: "there are certain animals to which tenacity of position is a law of life - they can never flourish again after a single wrench" (Eliot, "The Mill" 275). His interest in his character's inner life (in particular Maggie's) can be satisfied by his omniscient capacity to read the thoughts of his characters. For instance, he rushes to explain that Maggie's sudden affection for Mrs. Stelling, whom she never liked before, is "the first sign" of "the gift of sorrow," a gift that closely resembles Feuerbach's view on double-consciousness (Eliot, "The Mill" 269). The wide range of interests reflects the scientific discussion that surrounded George Eliot during the writing process of *The Mill on the Floss*.

The narrator's test-case on which he is invited to give his opinion is the life of Maggie. Besides being to a certain extent an autobiographical image of Eliot herself, Maggie possesses various psychological characteristics which Spencer and Lewes considered as highly positive in the discourse on evolutionary theory. Her inner life corresponds to the narrator's scientific interests and his knowledge. However, Maggie's history as portrayed by Eliot may seem at first sight a simple case, but quickly reveals the complexity of everyday

life, with its many connections and duties. The narrator faces an unexpected web of relations and course of events that don't fit into his scientific view. Through this confrontation Eliot is able to explore and express the narrator's ability to adjust to this complexity that exceeds his own view of life. It may also have been a way to show that a person cannot be reduced to a test-case as way to contribute to the discussion, particularly if that person is someone like Maggie, who carries the seed of Eliot's highly cherished double-consciousness.

4.1 The Scientific Discussion Surrounding Eliot Reflected in 'Example' Maggie

The descriptions of Maggie focus on a very particular aspect of the evolutionary discussion: the mid-nineteenth-century discussion that relates to the role of inner life, unconsciousness and imagination. Maggie is portrayed as a highly sensitive and intelligent girl with a large imagination. She has a passionate temper and her states of mind fluctuate between conscious considerations and unconscious 'reverie-type' states of mind. This was regarded as positive by the scientists surrounding Eliot. In contrast to several scientists of Eliot's time, such as Symonds and Wigan, who held that unconscious states of mind were "essentially immoral and needed to be controlled by the rationality and morality of the higher, waking state" (Tressler 485), Spencer and Lewes regarded the fluctuation between those states of mind as an inherent part of human progress. Herbert Spencer rejected 'independent controlling conscience' and defended the position that states of unconsciousness were essential to obtain a better and wider consciousness: "there must be a *continuous differentiation* of its states" (Spencer 332, Groth and Lusty 50).

Furthermore, both Spencer and Lewes believed in the importance of passions and feelings and considered emotional and intellectual processes of the human mind closely linked. In Spencer's view passions and feelings are an inherent part of human progress:

> There is really no line of demarcation between reason, and sentiment or passion…if all mental phenomena are incidents of the correspondence between the organism and its environment… then, we may be certain, a priori, that the Feelings are not, scientifically considered, divisible from other phenomena of consciousness. (Spencer 584)

George Henry Lewes distinguished several parts of consciousness: intelligence, emotions, sensations and volition (Lewes 6). He differentiated emotions (feelings coming from the inside) from sensations (feelings coming from the outside). Both are part of the 'stream of consciousness' as defined by Lewes:

> The 'general stream of consciousness' [consists of] both the process of the mind moving between conscious and unconscious, voluntary and involuntary states, and 'the general stream of Sensation which constitutes his [the reader's] feeling of existence - the consciousness of himself as a sensitive being.' (Groth and Lusty 42)

These various conclusions of both Spencer and Lewes on the integral unity of feeling and unconscious states of mind as part of human progress are integrated in the character of Maggie. Maggie's moods and consciousness are highly susceptible to the outward changes

which she senses unconsciously. An example that illustrates the effect of a visual outward change is described when Maggie is still a young girl. After she has not been allowed to join her father fetching her brother Tom, she enters into a state of rage, which is described as a "passion that expelled every other form of consciousness" (Eliot, "The Mill" 79). This state of mind is quickly altered when she perceives a sunbeam. This sunbeam works as a sensation triggering a "reflex-feeling", in a similar way to that suggested by Lewes (57) and creates a positive general consciousness. This state of mind changes Maggie's overall perspective on the world around her and the sound of the mill seems "cheerful again" (Eliot, "The Mill" 79).

In some other situations Maggie's perception of sounds is used to indicate the shift from unconsciousness to consciousness, which was explained by Lewes as being linked with certain memories that may trigger certain feelings and moods (Da Sousa 119). For instance, when Maggie is in the boat with Stephen the "delicious rhythmic dip of the oars" is described as "if it were only the overflowing of brim-full gladness", a sound that accompanies the enchanted haze in which Maggie and Stephen are enveloped. The 'spell' is broken by the cessation of Stephen rowing the boat (Eliot, "The Mill" 589, Da Sousa 119). This sudden change resembles the example given by Lewes describing sensations that have become unperceived through repetition until the cause stops: "Let the wheel suddenly stop, and there is an immediate corresponding sensational change in us; so much so, that if it occurs during sleep, we awake" (59).

In addition to a susceptible heart and her tendency to day-dream, Maggie equally has a consciousness which corresponds to Feuerbach's view on the human mind. Through her curiosity, she becomes aware of the boundlessness of her imagination, hinting at Feuerbach's trust in the infinity of possibilities for a double-conscious mind: "In the consciousness of the infinite, the conscious subject has for his object the infinity of his own nature" (Feuerbach

170). The mysterious Latin sentences she reads when helping out her brother give “boundless scope to her imagination, and [were] all the more fascinating because they were in a peculiar tongue of their own, which she could learn to interpret” (Eliot, “The Mill” 217). She is capable of looking back on her previous actions and imagining a reality that ‘could have been’ (a capability she tends to lose as the story progresses):

> Maggie rushed to her deeds with passionate impulse, and then saw not only their consequences, but what would have happened if they had not been done, with all the detail and exaggerated circumstance of an active imagination. (Eliot, “The Mill” 121)

Maggie’s double-consciousness becomes all the more clear when contrasted with some of the other characters in the story, such as lawyer Wakem who is described as: “one of those men who can be prompt without being rash, because their motives run in fixed tracks, and they have no need to reconcile conflicting aims” (Eliot, “The Mill” 338). He is an example of single-mindedness.

Maggie’s double-consciousness is accompanied by her natural interest in others. When she is still a young girl, she is surprised that Luke (a labourer at the mill of her father) is not interested to know more about Dutchmen. She replies, “but they’re our fellow-creatures, Luke - we ought to know about our fellow-creatures” (Eliot, “The Mill” 81). This interest in others is transformed into what the narrator calls ‘the gift of sorrow’ at the moment that hardship enters Maggie’s life. When sympathising with her father, after he has gone bankrupt and has lost his senses, she discovers the boundlessness of her heart: “for Maggie,

with all her keen susceptibility, yet felt as if the sorrow made larger room for her love to flow in, and gave breathing space to her passionate nature" (Eliot, "The Mill" 348).

Despite her potential qualities to surmount problems, Maggie struggles with the many circumstances life confronts her with: her father's bankruptcy, illness and death, her family's prejudices and their single-mindedness, the strong judgments of her brother, their poor conditions and a life with little enjoyment, and her brother's prohibition to see Philip Wakem (her only 'real' friend). Within this context, Maggie tries to find a way to satisfy her hunger for more and at the same time tries to adapt herself to the reality of her environment. Throughout the story Maggie seeks to remain in a state of happiness and inner freedom which she experiences in the boundlessness of her imagination when learning new languages or listening to music, and in the boundlessness of her heart when she can share in the suffering of others. With the exception of Philip Wakem, Maggie's friends and family do not understand or correspond to this deep longing.

Maggie's experience is so much more complex than a scientist may explain. Her high intelligence and sensibility do not lead to human development that Spencer had in mind. Her inner life is not easily explained, but highly complex and "hopelessly fragmented by the forces of physiology and biological inheritance which give rise to a whirl of conflicting desires" (Da Sousa 127). Although sometimes she relies on an inner voice or impulse to resist to the many social pressures coming from her family and the inhabitants of St. Oggs, at other times she seems to be alienated from her own life. Eventually, her impulses and decisions lead to her drowning while rescuing her brother. Even at that moment it is debatable whether she has taken the right decision. The complexity of Maggie's experience shows the mystery of life, but also the limits of humans as individuals.

4.2. The Clash between the Omniscient Narrator and the Complexity of Maggie's Life

How is Maggie's struggle received by the narrator? The clash between the narrator's view and Maggie's experience points to the limits of scientific discussions. While telling the story of Maggie, the narrator struggles to remain coherent and consistent in his arguments. Two of his discourses illustrate two different ways of dealing with the inconsistency of his arguments.

A first discourse concerns the narrator's interest in childhood memories. He starts off in an idealistic way. When he talks about Tom and Maggie going out fishing together and experiencing a childhood happiness, the narrator ensures his audience that they are right in believing "that the thoughts and loves of their first years would always make part of their lives" (Eliot, "The Mill" 94). He even describes his own childhood memories as "the mother tongue of our imagination" capable of transforming adult perceptions into love (Eliot, "The Mill" 94). The narrator's perspective on childhood memory changes when Maggie and Tom have grown older and each has experienced the limits of childhood happiness at home: Maggie going to the gypsies to escape her family's judgments and Tom going to school. The narrator wonders where human ambitions might lead to if the "love and sanctities of our life had no deep immovable roots in memory" (Eliot, "The Mill" 222). In the course of the novel, his emphasis on childhood memories as an entirely positive instrument enhancing love shifts to a more moralistic one. In this later development, he no longer sees connection to such memories as a mere option, but rather as a necessity to avoid negative consequences. The narrator's image of memory soon shifts again to a less positive one, when he describes it as "sweet *imprisonment* that would strengthen the primitive fellowship of kindred" [emphasis

added] (Eliot, “The Mill” 223). Furthermore, he realises that those firm memories constructed over a span of years and cosy Christmases around the fireplace are not granted to everyone: “his kindness fell but hardly on the homeless - fell but hardly on the homes where the hearth was not very warm, and the food had little fragrance” (George Eliot, “The Mill” 223).

The narrator implicitly admits that memory may not always have the beneficial capacities for everyone, but fails to actively seek a different view. Eventually, childhood memories turn out to be fatal for Maggie. They have an unconscious power over her will and free choice and seem indeed to work as a ‘sweet imprisonment’. For instance, when Maggie finally decides not to elope with Stephen, but to go home, this decision (regardless of the moral view that the reader may have regarding her elopement) is not based on her rational thoughts of duty, but is caused by a “confused web of dreams” (George Eliot, “The Mill” 596). She wakes up from a first dream that reminds her of her duty to both Lucy and Philip to enter into a second dream which reveals her longing to be reconciled with Tom and to regain the happiness of her youth. This strong impulse emerging from an unconscious power childhood memories have on Maggie, as reflected in the double-layered dreams, refrain Maggie from making a ‘free choice’. It is only during the moment of Maggie’s death, drowning together with her brother, that she can live through “the days when [she and Tom] had clasped their little hands in love, and roamed the daisied fields together” (George Eliot, “The Mill” 655). Ironically, the narrator’s view on childhood memories comes with a very high price.

The narrator’s discourse on hope illustrates a different attitude on his part. He starts with a rather optimistic view of Maggie’s possibilities and continues to believe in human progress over a life span. He patronises Maggie and soothes her passionate fits by indicating

that she simply does not know better. The narrator mentions the 'sorrows of childhood' of Maggie, caused by the hardened attitude of her brother, and describes hope as something that still needs to be developed. He suggests that ageing will bring along a hope with "wings to fly beyond the days and weeks" (Eliot, "The Mill" 89). However, when a new episode starts in Maggie's life of sorrow after the loss of her father's law suit, the narrator stays mute on this 'hope with wings'. Instead, his view is rather gloomy when he ensures the reader that Maggie and her brother Tom have entered the "thorny wilderness, and the golden gates of their childhood had for ever closed behind them" (Eliot, "The Mill" 270). A next moment when Maggie is in distress over the great discrepancy between her world of dreams and books, and the world of reality, the narrator realises the futility of his own light-hearted views (considering Maggie's hopelessness as "premature despair") on Maggie's sorrows: "as if our vision of the future lightens the blind sufferer's present" (Eliot, "The Mill" 320). He admits that: "there is no hopelessness so sad, as that of early youth, when the soul is made up of wants, and has no long memories, no superadded life in the life of other" (Eliot, "The Mill" 320).

Allowing Maggie's experience to co-exist with his 'omniscient' views makes the narrator gradually perceive the limits of his own interpretation of life. He recognises that her hopelessness contains a reality that cannot be overcome by the vision of others, standing at the sideline and observing her situation as the narrator does. She is a soul in distress with an "unconscious yearning for something that would link together the wonderful impressions of this mysterious life and give her soul a sense of home in it" (Eliot, "The Mill" 320). In his openness of mind he starts to see Maggie's "soul made up of wants" as an inner force that resembles forces of a "living plant-seed" that sharply contrasts with the outward reality: she

is a "girl of no startling appearance […] who will never be a Sappho or a Madame Roland or anything else that the world take wide note of" (Eliot, "The Mill" 320). The "painful collision" caused by the sharp contrast between the inward forces of Maggie and the outward forces of her circumstances trigger new insights in the narrator's mind. The narrator's rhetoric starts to resemble the "rhetoric of Romanticism": "the incommensurability between a subjective interiority and an external world" (Pyle 7).

It is in the difference of those two narrator's reactions that Eliot hints to the transformative effect of recognising one's own limits, which enables a double-consciousness: the narrator is able to observe himself and realise the futility of his opinion. The result is his engagement with Maggie and her suffering which he does not keep to himself. By using a metaphor based on a comparison between the Rhine-castles and the Rhone-ruins he hopes to make his audience feel what Maggie and Tom must have felt:

> I share with you this sense of oppressive narrowness; but it is necessary that we should feel it, if we care to understand how it acted on the lives of Tom and Maggie - how it has acted on young natures in many generations, that in the onward tendency of human things have risen above the mental level of generation before them, to which they have been nevertheless tied by the strongest fibres of their hearts. (Eliot, "The Mill" 362)

The narrator starts applying Eliot's art of sympathy. He conveys to his audience the sense of oppression that people of Maggie's class must have felt. It is an oppression caused by a tension between the younger generation's eagerness to engage in a meaningful life and an older generation's ongoing provincialism. The narrator's intention is the extension of his

audience's sympathies to imagine the weight of a 'boring' provincial life for people with dreams and passions for onward progress.

5. The Narrator and the Art of Writing

The story of the narrator also identifies him as a writer using an ironic, opinionated language that stands in contrast with a true and faithful description of 'the life of People'. This contrast allows Eliot to show that the writer's exercise of the art of sympathy requires a 'new' skill. Eliot pictures him as a narrator with an incoherent style and voice, who is explicitly struggling with his own limited skills. He is a narrator who is learning to narrate and his insights and adjustments reveal Eliot's suggestions on how to exercise the art of sympathy.

In Chapter 1 of *The Mill on the Floss* the narrator is someone who is about to tell a story, before he falls asleep and starts dreaming: "Before I dozed off, I was going to tell you what Mr. and Mrs. Tulliver were talking about as they sat by the bright fire in the lefthand parlour on that very afternoon I have been dreaming of" (Eliot, "The Mill" 55). The dream-vision reveals many aspects of the narrator as storyteller, which work their way throughout the whole novel: the different sources of his inspiration; his initial idyllic way of telling stories; his misperceptions; and his special 'relationship' with his main character Maggie.

5.1. The Dream-Vision

A little detail in the beginning of *The Mill on the Floss* provides an interesting 'hint' that helps to read the shift in the narrator's way of telling Maggie's story. The presence of two ellipses (expressed by three full stops) suggests the framing of the dream-vision. The last ellipsis is included at the logical place that precedes the narrator's awaking. The first ellipsis, however, does not occur at the very beginning of the book as would be expected. Instead, it occurs between two scenes that the narrator describes: one is the description of the Floss, St. Oggs and its surroundings, and the next describes his view on Dorlcote Mill and the river, the bridge on which the narrator stands, and Maggie. This suggests that the actual dream does not cover the narrator's whole description of the river, but is limited to the second scene description, of Dorlcote Mill. It also means that the beginning of Chapter 1 can be divided into the narrator's more conscious state of mind and the subsequent unconscious state of mind. The change in tone and accents support this interpretation. Whereas the scene description of the Floss and St. Oggs is characterised by vivid images full of activity, energy and filled with the light of a winter sun, the scene description of Dorlcote Mill is characterised by a "great curtain of sound, shutting one out from the world beyond" and a "brimful river" with its "moistness" suggesting a similar surreal effect (Eliot, "The Mill" 54).

This small detail reveals two different sources of inspiration: on the one hand the narrator is inspired by facts which he recalls from his memory (the description of the first scene with vivid imagery); on the other hand he is inspired by a more unconscious level of imagination, a dream-like space (the vision of Dorlcote Mill surrounded by moist and sound). This dream-like space suggests the less verifiable level of fiction, it also suggests the more unpredictable side of imagination as source of inspiration.

The two sources of inspiration from which the narrator's story originates correspond with the sources Eliot uses for her *The Mill on the Floss*. As discussed in Section 1.2., she relies on facts and tries to stay as close as possible to the logic of reality by paying visits to the relevant places, doing research, and asking expert advice. However, she also relies on pure invention emerging from her imagination. The dream-vision incorporated in *The Mill on the Floss* "meditates on the profoundly unconscious origin of fiction" (Henry 58). According to Henry it closely resembles Eliot's own process preceding her first novella, which she describes in "How I Came to Write Fiction" (1857), as being "in a similar state while lying in bed thinking about the subject of her first story" (58).

The alternation between the narrator's different states of mind in the beginning of Chapter 1 also suggest a need for change regarding the narrator's style of telling a story, a change that can be detected at a later stage of the novel. The style in which the narrator starts describing the scene of St. Oggs can be characterised as an idyllic style. The scenery is filled with vocabulary that hints at a potentially fertile surrounding: the river Floss hurries on to the "loving tide rushing to meet it […] with an impetuous embrace," "patches of dark earth, made ready for the seed," and remnants of the previous year's "golden clusters of bee-hive ricks" (Eliot, "The Mill" 53). It is also a style that reflects a certain distance between the narrator and the scene he is describing: "far away on each hand stretch the rich pastures and the patches of dark earth" (Eliot, "The Mill" 53). This almost 'too-good-to-be-true' description of the river scenery is contrasted with the narrator's vision of the Dorlcote Mill, an unconscious vision that reveals a misperception. The narrator is physically more engaged in the second scene than in the previous scene. His perceptions are extended to the sound of the things surrounding him, which has a clear impact on him. However, his style of narrating

only partly reflects his engagement. He tells about the cruelty of the vision he witnesses of a waggoner returning home from work and violently whipping his horses, as if it were a mere pastoral picture, as if it were a two-dimensional image. To a certain extent his art lacks a dimension, a dimension that allows the harshness of the scene to co-exist with its beauty.

This shortcoming in his style is also reflected in another detail in the dream-vision. The narrator mentions that "he is in love with moistness." The effect of this moistness and the reason why the narrator might like it becomes clear when he makes the comparison with the ducks he sees in the river Floss: he envies "the white ducks that are dipping their heads far into the water […] unmindful of the awkward appearance they make in the drier world above" (Eliot, "The Mill" 54). In this image the ducks do not have to confront the awkwardness of their own appearance. The moistness of the narrator's dream-vision may work in a similar way: it enables him to escape from providing a faithful account of everyday reality.

Neither his description of the scenery of St. Oggs, nor his way of translating his impressions in his dream-vision correspond with Eliot's view on the art of realism and on her duty to create true and faithful descriptions. His rhetoric does not yet result from a full engagement with the characters and the situation that the imagination proposes: an attitude one might expect to contribute to the art of sympathy as vehicle to enlarge the reader's sympathy.

5.2. Towards the Art of Realism

The struggle of the narrator throughout the novel consists of attempting to find a way of narrating that describes the common everyday life of Maggie in a village in the Midlands, while at the same time struggling to meet the expectations of his audience reflecting the literary conventions of the mid-nineteenth century. His struggle is closely linked to the experienced discrepancy between life as told in stories and everyday life, he perceives in Maggie. This discrepancy leads him to reflect on the shortcomings of stories and discourses in general and on the problems he encounters when narrating.

Books are vital to Maggie, they are a source of inspiration, but they are also a way to escape everyday life. When she is a child, she confuses fiction and reality. When Maggie escapes everyday reality and runs away to the gypsies with whom she is often compared, she discovers that they do not resemble the gypsies out of the stories she is told and "her ideas about gypsies [undergo] a rapid modification" (Eliot, "The Mill" 177). When Maggie grows up and is confronted with deep sorrows resulting from her father's bankruptcy and illness, she becomes aware that the "world outside the books [is] not a happy one" (Eliot, "The Mill" 320). She no longer wants to escape reality: "she could make dream-worlds of her own - but no dream-world would satisfy her now. She wanted some explanation of this hard real life" (Eliot, "The Mill" 379).

Maggie's discovery of the writings of Thomas à Kempis, which are as a "voice [being] the direct communication of a human soul's belief and experience […which] works miracles to this day, turning bitter waters into sweetness" (Eliot, "The Mill" 384), make the narrator discover another more apt way of writing. He perceives the strong contrast with books "written on velvet cushions to teach endurance to those who are threading with

bleeding feet on the stones" (Eliot, "The Mill" 384). In other words, he realises that it is the writer's full engagement with life, instead of opinionated discourses, that touches hearts and gives expression to the 'art of sympathy'. He also realises that this style of writing conducted by someone who himself is in hardship and writes according to "the heart's prompting" (Eliot, "The Mill" 384) contrasts with contemporary literary customs:

> In writing the history of unfashionable families, one is apt to fall into a tone of emphasis which is very far from being the tone of good society, where principles and beliefs are not only of an extremely moderate kind, but are always presupposed, no subjects being eligible but such as can be touched with a light and graceful irony. (Eliot, "The Mill" 385)

From that point in the novel his way of narrating changes. His way to resist falling into this common 'tone of emphasis' is to start introducing Maggie as faithfully as he can. His descriptions of Maggie become less opinionated and he increasingly creates an open space to which the audience is invited to enter and to picture her in their own imagination. For instance, he invites the audience to look at her as she walks in the Red Deep, followed by a description of how she looks: "you may see her now, as she walks down the favourite turning and enters the Deeps" (Eliot, "The Mill" 393). Something similar occurs when he focuses on her inner life. For instance, he invites his audience to reflect on a reason for Maggie's change in mood after having met Stephen Guest: "Had anything remarkable happened?" (Eliot, "The Mill" 494). Furthermore, the 'awkwardness' of her rich inner life,

her unpredictable impulses, her ‘stream of consciousness’ increasingly becomes the motive of his narration:

> But if Maggie had been that [well-educated young lady with a perfectly balanced mind], you would probably have known nothing about her; her life would have had so few vicissitudes that it could hardly have been written; for the happiest women, like the happiest nations, have no history. (494)

Although his idyllic style, metaphors, or light ironic touch is never far-off, a shift in the narrator’s style can be detected and unbiased descriptions of Maggie, with all her shortcomings and awkwardness, slowly become common ground.

Through the narrator’s gradual awareness of his limited narrating skills, Eliot illustrates what it takes to faithfully describe the ‘life of People’: the writer’s engagement with life, an unbiased view on the characters and an open dialogue with the subject of the story. Her narrator slowly becomes one of the Victorian novelists who, according to Gillian Beer, “increasingly seek a role for themselves within the language of the text as observer or experimenter, rather than as designer or god. Omniscience goes, omnipotence is concealed” (45). Through the narrator’s changing tone Eliot creates the open space of imagination allowing life to emerge as it comes. Eliot gradually positions her narrator as character *next to* his heroine, instead of above her.

5.3. A New Way of Plotting.

Eliot's abandonment of the narrator's omniscient position as worked out in *The Mill on the Floss* reveals the emergence of characters (like heroine Maggie) with what appears to the reader to be a free will. This element is already suggested from the very beginning of *The Mill on the Floss.*

Unlike the narrator's inspiration that he should tell his audience about Mr. and Mrs. Tulliver (the parents of Maggie), which appears to have been his intention before dozing off, his narration of the small girl Maggie starts in a state of unconsciousness. It originates in his unconscious imagination. The image of Maggie's distinct origin, emerging from an unconscious state of imagination suggests that in a way the narrator has less control over her behaviour and her course of life.

Examples in Section 3.2. suggest that the narrator realises his loss of control. He shares with his audience the attitude to take in front of Maggie's unpredictable destiny:

> But you have known Maggie a long while, and need to be told, not her characteristics, but her history, which is hardly to be predicted even from the completest knowledge of characteristics. For the tragedy of our lives is not created entirely from within […] Maggie's destiny, then, is at present hidden, and we must wait for it to reveal itself like the course of an unmapped river. (Eliot, "The Mill" 514-515)

In other words, the only thing he and his audience can do is to wait for the plot to be revealed.

This new way of plotting results in a story that stretches the conventional ways of structuring a narrative, based on Aristotle's definition: "plots must arise from the actual structure of the plot, so that they come about as a result of what has happened before, out of necessity or in accordance with probability" (18). The story in *The Mill on the Floss* suggests that plotting is more complex than a logical connection between events and characters. Maggie's drowning is not only a consequence of the events that happened before, but depends on a complexity of life which goes beyond comprehension as well as on her unpredictable nature. What Eliot seems to suggest is that the plot escapes the writer, as reality escapes the scientist.

Eliot herself had difficulties finishing *The Mill on the Floss*. Despite her difficulties, which were partly due to the autobiographical nature of the story, she ended the novel in a way that was faithful to her views on the art of writing. The story about the narrator and the way he tells his story, which is integrated in *The Mill on the Floss*, ends with the narrator's description of St. Oggs and the Floss several years after Maggie has died. This description, if compared to his account given in the beginning of the novel, reveals a significant change in the narrator's way of telling. After the tragedy of Maggie's drowning life continues. In his description this new life co-exists with lost life: "nature repairs her ravages – but not all" (Eliot, "The Mill" 656). At the end of her novel, Eliot presents her readers with a narrator who is capable of conveying an image that fully reflects the co-existence of life and death.

6. Conclusions

A reading of *The Mill on the Floss* according to Bakthin's theory developed in his essay *Discourse in the Novel* results in an interpretation that more clearly distinguishes the narrator's voice from Eliot's own. It reveals that *The Mill on the Floss* contains two different narratives: one narrative on the life of Maggie, her family and the inhabitants of St. Oggs, and one narrative concerning a narrator confronted with the limits of his perspective and his story-telling skills.

Including a narrator as character in the novel in his own right has several advantages for Eliot. It allows her to distance herself from the scientific discussion on evolutionary theory she was well acquainted with, while also making use of it as an exploratory figurative device. It also allows Eliot to do something less obvious: to explicitly show her readers the futility of a style of writing that prioritises scientific, philosophical and moral views over art as the element closest to life itself. She shows the shortcomings of the contemporary opinionated and idyllic way of writing, which tend to dictate and restrict the development of the plot by a single-minded view that has difficulty to accommodate the complexity of common everyday life. Through the story of the narrator and his confrontation with those shortcomings, she can introduce and justify a new way of writing based on her ideas on the art of sympathy, which she has expressed in various essays and letters.

The Mill on the Floss meant another step in Eliot's discovery how to translate her own view on the art of writing into a realist novel. It enacts a shift away from facts and views expressed by an omniscient narrator towards the appeal to her reader's imagination as a way to sympathise with her characters. It also reveals what happens if the single-minded view of the omniscient narrator is to make place for an open space which accommodates different

views and different people. It can become a space in which characters can start ‘showing their story’ and surprise the readers with their unexpected behaviour and good intentions.

It is my final conclusion that in her many suggestions included in *The Mill on the Floss* the first signs of the most essential but still hidden message of Eliot’s art of sympathy can already be perceived: the bond between people through the transmission of life, which receives its fullest expression in the concluded sentences of *Middlemarch*:

> But the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive: for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs. (919)

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