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The treatment of history in Romola

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The Treatment of History in Romola.

Thesis for Master's Degree.

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In view of the character of the novel contemplated, George Eliot showed masterly insight approaching genius in seizing upon Florence as the scene of action in Romola. Above all other cities, Florence lent itself to the purpose of the writer. The nature of its government as a republic based on the liberty loving independence of the people, the cosmopolitan character of its population, the state of art and letters, the intellectual keenness of the Florentines, all contributed just the elements the author needed for the atmosphere of the story of Romola.

But not only is it true that Florence was pre-eminently fitted to be the scene of the story's action but discriminating discernment was likewise shown by George Eliot in selecting this particular period in the history of the little republic. The social conditions obtaining at Florence at just this juncture, the contentions constantly engendered by the factions into which all classes were divided ecclesiastically, and the series of crises rapidly succeeding each other in the feisty political life of the period, furnished the best of backgrounds for the intricate life and movement of the story.

The question of the wisdom or unwisdom of going so far back as the fifteenth century to secure an historic background will

depend not only somewhat on the character of the story to be written and the viewpoint of the critic but much on the availability of abundant and accurate historical materials. In this particular, Florence was a well-filled storehouse of good things - a mine of rich treasures. Not only were there at hand books of all sorts accurately and minutely describing the events of the period to be used, but the character of the city itself and the political events which have occurred there since the important dates within which the scenes of Tomola were laid have been such as to preserve much of the historical tradition and many of the historic landmarks of the earlier day. The city is full of all kinds of monuments and architectural splendors reminiscent of the great characters and events in Florence in this period of the Renaissance. George Eliot's frequent visits and recurring periods of residence in Florence must have been fruitful in this respect.

It is for this reason that we are able to justify the author in harking back some four centuries to secure the historic setting of this excellent bit of literary fiction. Although it has been held by some critics as a canon in the production of the historical novel that the more remote in time the scene, the more difficult the marshalling of the materials, yet, in the novel before us with the scene in Florence, the passage of four centuries is not a sufficiently long period

to baffle one in securing and ordering the necessary historical data. This rather aids in throwing a cloak over any minor defects which might appear in the delineation of the great historic characters of this Florentine period.

In this connection it is interesting to note that George Eliot does not hesitate to introduce as characters the chief personages who were at that time making history. Savonarola, Machiavelli, Lorenzo de Medici and the King of France, Charles the Eighth, are all brought before the reader as occasion seems to demand. This gives a semblance of greater reality to the story and contributes a certain pleasure to the reader in the sense of delight which ever comes from participating in some measure at least in the activities of historic personages if not with the really great.

While most of the characters are superbly drawn - and this is especially true of the fictitious personalities in the story - Romola, Tito, Nesso and Baldassarre - so that ^{they} seem as real as the history of which they are made to appear a part - Savonarola, the enigma of personalities, though occupying so large a place in the novel is represented to us in shady unclear lines. This may in part be due to an attempt to picture him in contradictory moods. Pope Pius VII, many years after Savonarola's death, is

reported to have said: "I shall learn in the next world the mystery of that man. War waged around Savonarola in his lifetime; it has never ceased since his death, Saint, schismatic or heretic, ignorant vandal or Christian martyr, prophet or charlatan, champion of the Roman Church or apostle of emancipated Italy - which was Savonarola?" But may not the unclearness of Savonarola's character as delineated in Romola be in part a confirmation of the dictum which laments that no great historic character has ever assumed the semblance of real flesh and blood when transferred from the pages of history to those of fiction. In the drama it may be otherwise. But it is a supreme task to take a great name and personage and embody such in a story and be able to fill in the details of realistic life with the facile touch of naturalness.

There is a glamour of romanticism thrown about the work in the profusion of Italian words everywhere present. To an ear accustomed to English the very sound of the names of such men as Lorenzo de' Medici, Piero di Cosimo, Brunelleschi, Bernardo del Nero, Poliziano, Piero Sapponi, Messer Luca Cosimo and Pico della Mirandola is at once a suggestion of romance and days of chivalrous knight-errantry and is a sort of "flavor and feeling" device to anticipate or suggest great and brave deeds in a realm of semi-

Enchantment.

This effect is not decreased as one is made perfectly familiar in the progress of the story with the different landmarks of Florence. The architectural splendors of the city in her various public buildings meet us everywhere - The Duomo, San Marco, the Campanile of Giotto, the Palazzo Riccardi, the Church of Santa Maria Novella, San Miniato, Palazzo Vecchio della Signoria and the Uffizi Palace. The streets of the city also with their winding bridges contribute to the same effect. The Via de' Bardi and the Via dell'Arno, the Via San Sebastiano and the Via San Gallo are among the former and the Ponte Vecchio and Ponte Pitti illustrate the latter.

What is worthy of note from the historians point of view in all of these references to men and localities is their accuracy in each case. There must have been infinite pains-taking care in preparation for writing the novel. Not only residence in Florence for some time but access to volumes of history and accurate information of a varied sort George Eliot must have enjoyed that such faithfulness of detail might be secured. It is not a matter of surprise therefore to have pointed out by one related to the author by close ties of kinship a portion of her library as "the quarry from which George Elliott dug her enduring monuments".

A similar carefulness in handling the facts relative to the literary, social, political and ecclesiastical activities in the Florentine Republic at this Renaissance period is to be observed. It would be difficult to conceive a more successful reproduction of the well-rounded life of a city in every particular than this which we have presented to us of Florence in Romola.

And first we note how fully and accurately the literary and artistic life of Florence is delineated for us. The very opening sentence of the first chapter in Book I contains a reference to Florence as the birthplace of Dante. This may be said to be if not a foreword yet surely a fore-note for the work. It is as literary in tone as the city in the midst of whose life the scenes are laid. Romola the heroine is pictured to us as being reared by the blind scholar Gerardo who is multiplied a hundred times in Renaissance Florence. The very atmosphere seemed pregnant with a yearning desire for knowledge. Everywhere in Florence and in nearly all the cities of Italy and spreading over all Europe, learning and scholarship were fostered. The old masters were being studied with great zest. Plato was being devoured with gusto by all classes of men but especially was his philosophy being rediscovered by the Academy at Florence. Horace and Virgil together with the rest of the

Latin classics of the earlier days were not forgotten. The influence of Dante and Boccaccio on the Florentine mind is not overlooked, nor on the other hand that of the popular poet of the day with his lighter verse, Luigi Pulci. Lorenzo the Magnificent, patron of art and letters, as the novel opens has died. Though dead his love of learning and art will still find many an apt pupil and faithful devotee. All of this is true of the actual literary condition of Florence finds expression with exactness of detail in the pages of Tourola.

Given such conditions and one element is prepared for the introduction of the kind of character presented in the young Greek, Tito Melena. Welcome as all scholars were to Florence at this time especially those of Greek blood, Tito is conceived as one of these. Such an atmosphere readily makes possible, also the kind of scene which occurs around the banquet board in the Rucellai gardens, when Baldassarre, Tito's father by adoption charges Tito with having deserted his poor foster-father to die in slavery. Those about the board put the old man to test in that he claims to have been a scholar. They place before him Tito's ring which the old man affirms to have belonged to himself and which contains a fine sard engraved with a subject from Homer and they ask him to prove his scholarship and

previous connection with the ring and with Tito by pointing out the place in Homer from whence the subject is taken. After years of slavery and burning thirst for revenge the old man is partially demented; the reason refuses to act; he cannot even read the text; the accusation falls flat. A scene such as this must be out of place except in the midst of a literary atmosphere like that of the Florentine Republic at this time. But there is nothing pedantic or overdrawn in it when the actual conditions are borne in mind.

There is another element in this precise literary portraiture in the confiscation of Romola's father's library to the French. This was the universal fate to befall many choice collections of books and works of art in that day when "the scourge of God", to use Savonarola's phrase for the French King, had actually taken possession of the city. It seemed a light task to invite him to make a peaceful occupancy of the city, but quite another matter to secure his peaceful departure. Many a vast treasure house of literary masterpieces and works of art changed hands before this was brought about.

The picture we have of art and architecture is

correspondingly correct. Mention has already been made of many public buildings and architectural treasures of the city which are constantly referred to in Romola. Some of these remain today. The references to them are most faithful. The Baptistery of San Giovanni is mentioned as "the Octagon of San Giovanni"; descriptive of the shape of the structure. The Campanile of Giotto presents an opportunity for frequent expressions of pride. Marzocco, the stone lion, emblem of the Republic, offers an illustration of bold independence and power. Ghirlandajo and Piero di Cosimo, the painters, are not overlooked. The mention of Messer Angelo is another suggestion not only of the richness of Florence in literary and artistic names but also a corroboration of the accuracy of George Eliot's use of her historical material, since it will be remembered that, while not born at Florence, yet Michelangelo came to Florence and began his greatest work under the encouragement of Lorenzo, the Magnificent. On the latter's death, the great sculptor and painter severed his relation with the Medicean family. Michelozzi, too, sculptor, architect and engraver of genius of no mean repute, not long dead when the period covered by Romola begins, is mentioned. It will be seen, then, that in Romola a faithful portraiture is

drawn of the literary and artistic atmosphere of Renaissance Florence and Italy.

The social life, also, of Florence finds an almost perfect mirror in this story. The realism here is not only healthy but is quite in contrast with those elements of Romanticism which have been previously mentioned. This helps to secure a poised balance in the work.

It has already been noted that Florence was a most cosmopolitan city. And not all of the people were either learned or wealthy. Some had come in the interest of trade and to follow commercial pursuits. One has said that Florence was "far famed for purest gold coinage, finest dyes and textures, pre-eminent scholarship and poetic genius, statesmanship and banking." So that the reference to the house of Pucellai as the importers from the orient of the dyes for which Florence was famous is but in keeping with what we know of the mercantile life of the city. This must mean an element in the population other than the literati and those who gave themselves to the pursuit of art.

Both among these former and among the scholars themselves, a corrupting looseness of morals obtained. The day might witness a more or less assiduous application to

literary or commercial pursuits but the night quite as frequently was not without its debauchery and immorality. The Florentine, intellectually alert though he was, could ^{not} seem to take life seriously, and duplicity, insincerity and hypocrisy were the customary traits of character developed. Whether one went hungry to bed in some wretched back street of the city, or "dined on peacock cooked after a receipt of Apicius," the bird still glorious in all its plumage while being served in the gardens of the Pucellai, did not materially affect the character. All alike seemed not to know any serious motive in life. The lighter moods and the desire for pleasure prevailed. Villari, in his biography of Savonarola, says of the Florentines of this day: "But artists, men of letters, statesmen, nobles and people, were all equally corrupt in mind, devoid of public and private virtue, devoid of all moral sense. Their religion was either an engine of government or a base hypocrisy; they were without faith of any kind, whether civil or religious, moral or philosophical; they were not earnest even in scepticism. Their dominant feeling was utter indifference to principle. These clever, keen-witted, intellectual men were incapable of real elevation of thought and despising all enthusiasm for noble and generous

ideas, showed their contempt by coldly compassionate smiles. Unlike the sceptic philosophers, they neither combated nor threw doubt on such ideas; they simply regarded them with pity. And this vis inertia was more hurtful to virtue than a declared and active hostility. It was only in country places and among the lowest classes removed from all contact with politics and letters, that any germ of the old virtues was still to be found. And even this was not visible on the surface."

This state of morals and life does not escape George Eliot. She incorporates this general atmosphere throughout the work and makes coin of it in building the story. It will suffice for our purpose if we quote first from the twelfth chapter of Book I the words of Monna Brigida, supposed to be a cousin of Tomola: "Not but what the world is bad enough now-a-days, for the scandals that turn up under ones nose at every corner - I don't want to hear and see such things, but one can't go about with ones head in a bag - - - But, nevertheless, Florence is a wicked city - is it not true, Messer Tito? for you go in to the world. Not but what one must sin a little - Messer Domenico expects that of us, else what are the blessed sacraments for?" Again, in Book II, Chapter ~~XXX~~, the statesman,

Tornabuoni, in urging a commission of more or less difficulty on Lito says "A wise dissimulation is the only course for moderate, ~~rational~~ rational men in times like these of violent party feeling - Yes, you have only to play your game well, Melma and the future belongs to you. - To manage men one ought to have a sharp mind in a velvet sheath." These quotations will reveal the condition of morals and the low-stopping ideals depicted in the characters of the story and quite consonant with the actual conditions obtaining at Florence. The character of Niccolò Machiavelli seen here in the flush of his young manhood is faithfully reproduced and presents him as at this time in full keeping with the cynical, sceptical mood of the period.

There yet lingered also a deep-rooted spirit of superstition among this wide awake intellectual people in great contrast with the mental alertness, possibly a heritage from the not far distant dark ages. Every volume which unfolds the life of this era reveals the same truth. In recording a supposed vision of Savonarola's earlier career the historian says; "We recount it, with other legends, as part of the history of the times when even great minds had faith in similar visions." In Libri's "Histoire des sciences mathématiques" reference is made to a letter of Christopher Columbus in which he describes a similar hallucin

ation that occurred to him in America, "when, at the moment that he was forsaken by all, he heard a heavenly voice encouraging him to persevere in his enterprise."

Hence, we are not surprised to find much use made of superstition in Romola. It appears in the incident where the private secretary of the Republic, Scala, secures the gems from Tito, one of them as an "added preventive of gout", and one of these, Tito himself had considered a "safeguard against ill luck by sea." Again the same spirit is dominant when it is rumored on the death of Lorenzo that his image fell in the Mugziata; and on the street soon afterward voices affirmed that various portents had been observed - "light shooting over San Lorenzo for three nights together" - "thunder in the clear starlight" - "lantern of the Duomo struck with the sword of Michael" - "lions tearing each other in pieces" -

It is likewise fully pictured in many of the events which occurred when Romola, having fled from Florence, finds herself in the plague-stricken village by the shore of the Mediterranean. There, ministering to the needs of the sick, a kind of superstitions halo seems to surround her, so greatly do the simple peasant people stand in awe of her as she pursues her sweet ministries.

It is not surprising that Romola herself, well-born and cultured as she is represented to be, should also be seen to possess

a great superstitious dread when in Book I, Chapter XX, the masked procession contains a ghastly image of winged Time with his scythe and hour-glass, simply because of its suggestiveness and foreboding for herself in her betrothal to Tito. This is in perfect accord with all the contemporaneous life at Florence. Superstitions and visions playing so large a part in Savonarola's world, it is not surprising to find that he depends more and more upon intense moods of the soul, mental and mystical impressions, resulting in all sorts of visions and extravagances and at last in that colossal blunder of prediction wrongly named prophecy. Much is made of this in Romola, as it must be reckoned with in any estimate of Savonarola and his work; and increasingly so as that period of his life is discussed which nears the great tragedy.

In the delightfully realistic description given of the "Peasants Fair" in Book I, Chapter XIV we have a revelation of a phase of life which was then very common in Florence. This is correspondingly true of all that is said of the carnivals and of the incidents supposed to have happened during their observance. These festal days were entered into very heartily by every Florentine and are quite fully reproduced for us in Romola. The twice repeated "burning of the vanities," in 1497 and again in 1498 is a matter of history too well known to need special mention. The putting of the matter is pleas-

ing to the historian since both history and the novel agree in the fact that many vicious things were consumed and, excepting for some few works such as copies of Ovid, Boccaccio, Petrarca and Pulci, no worthy pieces of art were destroyed. The poets mentioned found a place on the condemned pyramid because of the immodest and indecent references which, as Savonarola saw it, they contained.

The reference to printed hand-bills in Florence with the first flush of triumph at the discovery of printing, and the demand of the street crowd for one who should be scholar enough to read them has the touch of historical accuracy about it. The biographers and historians make mention of various printed matter available in Italy at just this time. Among these things was Savonarola's Ascension Sermon of 1498 which was not fully finished - its preaching - on account of the uproar. The historians relate that this was repeatedly reprinted and speedily diffused throughout Italy.

A like correspondence with fact is found in the description of the plague. Not only is it correctly timed but the character of it as not excessive in its mortality is shown.

The reference to Columbus has also the right historical tone.

If we shall turn now to the political aspect of Florentine life we shall find it almost perfectly revealed in Romola. It is the mer-

curial character of the people and the unsettled condition of the times ecclesiastically and politically which gives much of spice to the story. The sins of the common people do not rouse Savonarola to his scorching denunciations so much as the vices of those who have both culture and power. Hence the bitter strife with Lorenzini. It is true that the ecclesiastical history of Florence is so interwoven with the political that ^{it} is most difficult to find any fixed line of demarcation. Savonarola was more than a monk. He was well nigh political dictator of Florence during most of the time covered by the pages of Romola. The relations of Florence with the Pope, with the French King, Charles VIII, with the banished Medici, with the rebellious city of Pisa and other cities and powers in Italy are all luminously set forth as the fabric of the novel is woven.

Parties and combinations, coalitions and secret missions were the order of the day. At least three strong ^{factions} were firmly entrenched against each other when the French King withdrew from the city: The Medicans, comprising all who desired the return of the exiled family of the Medici; the Piagnoni, who were devotedly attached to Savonarola and his policies and the Arrabbiati, among whom were the roistering young ruffians, the Compagnacci, the "bad fellows." These latter were diametrically opposed to the ideals of Savonarola especial-

ly in desiring a return of that license which they had enjoyed before the interdict of the great monk. It would be difficult to conceive better material for story purposes than this. It is used very cleverly by the author; even the names and personalities of the leaders among these parties are transferred with absolute reality from the pages of history to the pages of fiction. Capponi, the rough and ready soldier, who dares to return with counter threat that of the French King; Ridolfi Opini, the coarse-grained ruffian who led the Compagnacci in brutal hostility to Savonarola - not that he cared for the best interests of the Republic but that he might secure his own ends -; Francesco Cei, the poet, friend of Opini and holding similar aims; Machiavelli, cynical critic of men and measures and especially of Savonarola in this day of early young manhood though at last proving a true friend of the Republic - these and many others have life-size portraits drawn for us in the work. It is as a past-master in chicanery that Tito finds his versatile Greek genius brought into full activity now playing into the hands of the one now into the hands of another of these contending parties.

But when we pass to consider carefully the ecclesiastical conditions in Romola and at Florence we shall be ready to assert that this work of fiction must have been

far other than it is if Savonarola had not lived and if ecclesiasticism had not been in just the condition it was in Europe at that time. As it is, the pattern which gives character to the story is much as it is because of the conditions obtaining in the church, especially as centering about Savonarola. There can be no questioning the fact that he was a man of marked personality. Whether he is considered as great as his closest followers supposed him will depend some on point of view. There can be little question that conditions at Florence made it possible for Savonarola to occupy the center of the stage, political no less than ecclesiastical, and political last because he occupied the ecclesiastical center first. Then the two are combined in one. San Giovanni had been the patron saint of Florence for more than 500 years, both Romola and History inform us; but to a great host this patronage is transferred from the long since dead to the living and dominating personality of Savonarola. No history could make more real and vital for us the power of this self-appointed spiritual and political dictator than does Romola. The completest analysis of his character with its contradictory elements is most fully worked out as likewise are the conflicting parties and opinions generated by his preaching.

The description of the man in his physical characteristics as also his mental and spiritual moods, as to the details at least, leaves little to be desired. The note of absolute truth is struck in such a word as that of Tito when he describes Savonarola as having "a high nose and a large under-lip" - and that "he is not handsome". And yet it must again be noted what previously we have observed that while individual features are thus faithfully drawn they are not well united into a recognizable whole. The completed portrait is not clear. Or again we may say that while the physical, mental and spiritual characteristics of the great monks anatomy are all most faithfully brought together the frame does not move, the body does not live.

Everywhere in the work is to be found the fullest portrayal of the exact ecclesiastical conditions. The play upon the name Dominicans by Francesco Bai, the popular poet, speaking of them as "hounds of the Lord" - *domini canes* - has the correct historical touch, since the Dominicans accepted this term as applied to themselves by those who hated the vow of poverty and austerity imposed on the order by Savonarola. This conception is pictorially represented in a fresco painted for them by Simone Memmi. That this historical reference should, like so many others, be placed in an explanatory footnote is indicative of George Eliot's purpose to

reproduce most accurately the real events of the period.

The reference to Savonarola's book on Widows and the beating of women in Book I, Chapter II is given in true historical light, for while there may have been no words on the part of Savonarola used either in print or in preaching making light of women his fulminations against dress and feminine fashions and sometimes foibles were so interpreted with much feeling by those hostile to him.

The three famous doctrines of Savonarola's preaching have a large place in the novel. "The Church will be scourged; it will be speedily regenerated; all this will come to pass quickly." That these doctrines were variously interpreted and understood the story as well as history make clear. The conditions which made such preaching necessary are well known and have already been partially reviewed. They are revealed quite clearly in the following quotations from Romola: "Altogether this world - seemed to be a handsome establishment for the few who were lucky or wise enough to reap the advantages of human folly, - a world in which lust and obscenity, lying and treachery, oppression and murder, were pleasant, useful and when properly managed not dangerous." Again, - "Flattery could always be had in the choicest Latin" - And again, - "Sublime artists were at hand to paint the holy and

the unclean with impartial skill". Against all this Savonarola hurled his burning messages and again and again rang the changes upon the need of reformation. He tried to show that "the world was certainly not framed for the lusty convenience of hypocrites, libertines and oppressors." So that while we may agree that it would have been far better if Savonarola had not predicted in such particular detail, thus avoiding such farcical fulfilment of them as in the case of the weak and wicked French King being taken for Savonarola's "scourge of God", yet we must continue to appreciate to the full the moral courage, the absolute self-surrender and holy purpose of this mysterious monk.

It would have been expected that the Pope, the head of the one Universal Church, would have rejoiced in just such fearless rebuke of wickedness in high places. But not so, as history and Romola abundantly make evident. The sad termination of Savonarola's misunderstood life in a supreme tragedy might have been altogether different had there been a respectable occupant of the Papal Chair. As it was a great conflict was inevitable since Savonarola persistently preached so vehemently against vice and corruption in so many resolute. One of the darkest chapters in the history of the Christian

Church is this which centers about Savonarola and the base Alexander VI. Instead of heartily indorsing all that Savonarola was attempting to do to stay the tide of wickedness in a corrupt city, he seemed to feel under obligation to hinder in every possible way the work of the warning and rebuking Friar. It may have been true that powerful enemies of the offending monk were constantly bringing pressure to bear against him. Indeed history relates that the Arabbiati were continually conspiring with the Pope to secure the downfall of the great preacher. The conduct of Alexander is sometimes as difficult to understand as that of Savonarola. He was not free from strange and contradictory courses of conduct relative to the unworly monk. It may have been fact that he was not altogether persuaded as to the best attitude to take in the crisis. This would appear evident from the manner in which the brief of excommunication of May 13, 1497 was given out addressed as it was not to the Universal Church but to the Friars of the Santissima Annunziata and other convents. The language too was very strange for such a document.

It is this attitude of the chief pontiff which at last leads up to the tragic crisis with which Savonarola's life ends, and which is of such great aid to the novelist in presenting

a splendid though tragical climax to the work. It would be difficult to invent a more telling chain of events for use in any novel than those furnished in the clash of parties and in the ecclesiastical ferment of the period.

It will depend on the view-point of the critic whether he will approve or condemn this so faithful a reproduction of history in the novel. If the interest is greatest in the historical element in fiction rather than in the inventive phase, there will be recognized here a supreme triumph. It will be difficult to conceive a more detailed portrayal of the actual events as they occurred. The history is not consciously colored to suit the need of the writer. There was already coloring enough. It can scarcely be said even that events were adapted or even rearranged to fit the needs of the novelist. The story is so linked into the events as to seem an integral part of them. It is as if the author's method had been to take the history and insert the story within it.

This gives a genuine verisimilitude to the story. The narrative gains much from the incorporation within it of these great events and personages. There is no harsh grating on the historical sense here because of facts distorted, mistaken chronology or wrong philosophy of history. If George Eliot had set herself the task of making this bit of history more readable and enjoyable sim-

ply by weaving in the lighter thread of the novel she could not have succeeded more admirably. The work is a story and a history both in one.

To one with historical tastes, then, the volume has great commendation. Such an one will contrast it with all those so-called historical novels in which the facts are distorted according to some minor need of ^{the} novelist or in which, if the general historical atmosphere is preserved, accuracy is not attempted in details.

On the other hand if the inventive faculty and the imaginative powers - if we may so speak of the story-teller's talent - have in abeyance the historical element, there may be no appreciation of all this laborious attempt to reproduce the actual history. Such will say that fiction is not expected to be too serious and that many object to being compelled to study history when reading for recreation. It will be affirmed that there appears to be a most painstaking attempt to reproduce to the full the history of the period. They will further say, "The gem is almost lost in so elaborate and colossal a setting. It is a legitimate question if Romola is not quite as much a history with background of fiction as a work of fiction with historic background. The true perspective is lost and the background intrudes everywhere into the foreground. Savonarola

quite as fully dominates the novel as he did Florence in the period covered by the work. There may be some justification for asking the additional question, with a few slight changes in the arrangement of the material might not its name be changed from *Romola* to *Savonarola*?

Perhaps it is not needful to camp exclusively with either party in the foregoing estimate of the work. Surely no one will desire to affirm, whatever view is taken, that in handling historical matter even in a novel errors or purposeful misstatements of fact are as good as the exact truth. If the facts are at hand or can just as well be secured then they should by all means be used with historical accuracy. If one does not desire to write an historical novel - does not care to handle the matter of history - there is no law civil or literary which compels him to do so. Let such be content to select some other kind of fiction for his exploiting - fiction of such a character that he may not be trammelled by historical limitations.

However, it is a question whether it is needful to parade the entire pageant of history in presenting a novel dealing with the life of a certain period. There would seem to be a limit to the infinite historical details which one may marshal within the compass of a novel. The story is or should be the impor-

tant thing, unless indeed one is simply writing history in the guise of a story. It is this which has very nearly come to be true in Romola though presumably not intended. If one should desire to read this period of Florentine history in a most delightful manner and without that encyclopedic, statistical matter-of-factness which so many historians have boasted in the past, and which has its own excellencies, but which we are now glad with Macaulay to be escaping, then we can think of no better way than to read Romola. We have the quite complete historical matter and in addition a delightful story. Presumably, however, this is not what most of those who take up Romola are expecting to do.

Since then it is the story and not the history we are expecting, it must be admitted that more is made of the historical matter than need to have been in order to secure the necessary result. It is true as one has well said that the writer of the historical novel must put up a placard on the stage, so to speak, announcing where the scene is laid. Still we shall not expect the entire stage to be filled with placards.

An illustration of this profuseness of historical detail is found in the first chapter of Book II. The entire chapter is given over to the conditions in Florentine life of 1494 just prior to the coming of Charles VIII, the "scourge of God, the new Cyrus". To know something of the

conditions obtaining in Florence at this time was necessary in order to understand the events of the succeeding chapters, but it seems a little overdone to devote so much space to historical detail.

However, if this were the only instance in the work where so much is made of historical conditions presumably no criticism would have been evoked. But every where the same fact appears. It would seem better to have kept the story within such limits that fewer historical details would have answered all requirements. By way of comparison Dickens' method in the " Tale of Two Cities " might commend itself to us in this respect. One can surely catch the spirit of the French Revolution in this novel, but aside from the first brief opening word of the first chapter on " the Period " - the placard put out on the stage - there is seemingly ^{no} attempt at even a tolerably complete history. The author was content with having created the correct historical atmosphere. The paucity of actual, historical events consistent with clearness would seem to have been the criterion here.

Chapter XV, Book II, is likewise given over almost entirely to historical matter revealing conditions at Florence. It is not quite a sufficient explanation to say that this prepares us for what is beyond in the story. The question is, could not the succeeding events of the story have been of a certain character such

that a less detailed handling of the materials of history would have satisfied all conditions for a great work?

Similarly we must feel that the section given over to the preaching of Savonarola and the analysis of his motives, while reflecting a strong light on the reasons for the intense hatred of his enemies on the one hand and the devoted love of his friends on the other, might well have been reduced to a smaller compass in the book. The sketch of a sermon reproduced in Chapter IV of Book I is another of the portions in question.

In Chapter IX, Book II - which chapter contains the account of the "trial by fire" - we have a similar prolonged analysis of Savonarola's motives and multiplied data regarding his confession. In a biography of Savonarola this is well. In a history of Florence it might have been expected and would have been desirable from some standpoints. In its entirety, however, it need not have been an essential part of the novel.

Notwithstanding this slight overdoing, the world must ever be indebted to George Eliot for the stakes she has driven marking out the same way the novelist should take who determines on the use of historical material. The mistake of weighting down the story with the heavy load of solid, historical events is far more easily forgiven than the crime of distorting every

fact of history. It is as if the author of Powola would say to the host of would-be novelists, "Whatever historical matter you use, little or much and of whatever period, deal with it faithfully. Let it remain the history you found it. Your story you may invent, but the facts of history lie ready made for your consistent use."