“Immovable Roots”: Bildung and the Limits of Self-Determination

Both Tom and Maggie’s stories thus focus on the problem of inadequate education. While Tom only reluctantly reconciles “himself to the idea that his school-time was to be prolonged and that he was not to be brought up to his father’s business” (111; bk. 2, ch. 1), Maggie would be thrilled at the opportunity to stay at Reverend Stelling’s. However, the boy Tom has to stay where he is, while Maggie, because she is a girl, is sent to “Miss Firniss’s boarding school in the ancient town of Laceham on the Floss” (154; bk. 2, ch. 7). The place name “Laceham” provides us with some clues as to the kind of schooling Maggie can expect there: not geometry or Latin, but weaving decorative cloth (‘lace’ and ‘hem’). Significantly, the narrator tells us virtually nothing about Maggie’s time at Miss Firniss’s boarding school – a gap in the story that highlights how irrelevant this type of schooling is for Maggie in terms of Bildung (i.e. the development of one’s innate potential).  

Jane McDonnell notes that unsatisfactory education is in fact a common theme in the Bildungsroman, and we could therefore conclude that The Mill on the Floss simply forms part of a larger movement for educational reform, leading to a system of schooling that would allow each individual, irrespective of gender, fully to develop his or her potential for true Bildung.

The story of Philip Wakem intimates, however, that changes in educational policy alone are not sufficient. We have seen that The Mill on the Floss incorporates two related but different Bildungsromane: the ‘female’ story of Maggie, and the ‘male’ story of her increasingly one-dimensional brother Tom. To these two plots, which explore the social inadequacies of institutionalized education, the story of Philip’s development adds a third narrative, one that is crucial for the novel’s critique of the inherent problems of the ideal of Bildung. Importantly, Maggie herself adheres to such a classical ideal of wide-ranging and ‘well-rounded’ intellectual formation, insisting that it is “a sort of clever stupidity only to have one sort of talent.” Philip, however, believes himself “cursed with susceptibility in every direction,” implying that the sheer breadth of his interests merely serves to dilute and disperse his intellectual faculties (266; bk. 5, ch. 3). Moreover, though Philip may be the intellectually most well-rounded individual in Eliot’s novel, his physical “deformity” marks him as an outsider and makes it impossible for him to feel at home in the community of St. Ogg’s (277; bk. 5, ch. 5). In other words, in the case of lawyer Wakem’s son at least,

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12 Given that Eliot’s German was excellent, the name Firniss may be intended as a reference to the German word Firnis, which can be translated as ‘varnish’ or ‘lacquer.’ This in turn would strengthen the suggestion that the type of education reserved for girls focused mainly on surface accomplishments.
wide-ranging Bildung does not automatically lead either to personal fulfillment or to social success.

It is significant in this context that Philip does not suffer from a congenital ‘deformity.’ The fact that Philip’s hump is due to an accident (134; bk. 2, ch. 3) rules out any suspicion, on the part of the readership, that Eliot might have intended Philip as an example of the fearful consequences of hereditary degeneration. Such racialist fears, though not yet widespread in 1860, were nevertheless growing amongst Eliot’s contemporaries (Pick 178–179). If Philip had been born a ‘deformed creature,’ then it would be possible to interpret his failure to succeed in life as a kind of biological or eugenic inevitability. The purely contingent nature of Philip’s ‘deformity,’ in contrast, highlights the inherent limits of the notion of self-determination that lies at the core of ideals of Bildung, for if one’s ability to reach an ideal depends just as much on accident as on one’s innate potential, then perhaps the ideal itself is in need of qualification. Put bluntly, we can say that through the story of Philip, Eliot’s novel explores to what extent ‘deformity’ can render Bildung (in the sense of successful formation) difficult if not impossible. The Mill on the Floss thus complements the twin-narrative of Maggie and Tom’s inadequate Bildung with what we may call Philip’s ‘novel of deformation.’ In each of these three cases, the mental or spiritual ideal of Bildung is qualified by the problem of embodied existence: sexual difference with Maggie and Tom, and physical disability in the case of Philip. In short, Eliot’s novel critiques, or at least questions, Bildung’s lofty idealism with a sober reminder of bodily limitations.

In addition, the notion of self-determination is circumscribed in The Mill on the Floss by the lasting impact of one’s past and, more specifically, one’s experiences as a child. We have already seen that the prejudices of relatives and teachers affect, and in many ways stunt, the development of both Maggie and Tom. Similarly, Philip’s accident took place when he was still an infant, which means that he grew up with the experience of seeing people shrink from him “only because he was deformed” (247; bk. 5, ch. 1). Moreover, in a passage worth quoting at length, Eliot’s narrator argues explicitly that one’s childhood sets the boundaries of self-determination:

[Tom experienced] the happiness of seeing the bright light in the parlor at home […]; the happiness of passing from the cold air to the warmth and the kisses and the smiles of that familiar hearth, where the pattern of the rug and the grate and the fire-irons were “first ideas” that it was no more possible to criticise than the solidity and extension of matter. There is no sense of ease like the ease we felt in those scenes where we were born, where objects became dear to us before we had known the labor of choice, and where the outer world seemed only an extension of our own personality;
we accepted and loved it as we accepted our own sense of existence and our own limbs. Very commonplace, even ugly, that furniture of our early home might look if it were put up to auction; an improved taste in upholstery scorns it; and is not the striving after something better and better in our surroundings the grand characteristic that distinguishes man from the brute, or, to satisfy a scrupulous accuracy of definition, that distinguishes the British man from the foreign brute? But heaven knows where that striving might lead us, if our affections had not a trick of twining round those old inferior things; if the loves and sanctities of our life had no deep immovable roots in memory. (127; bk. 2, ch. 1)

The narrator here suggests that, as children, we are not required to lead a self-determined existence – we do not yet know “the labor of choice” – and therefore we feel perfectly at ease in the “early home.” To strive after “something better and better” may be in one sense what makes us human, but there is also an undercurrent of violence to this ideal of implacable progress, which for the narrator tends to hinge on a racist distinction between the supposedly progressive “British man” and the backward, primitive, “foreign brute.” Countering such destructive fantasies of boundless (self-)invention and improvement, the narrator emphasizes that we can never entirely determine ourselves because our affections and convictions have “deep immovable roots” – roots not in blood or soil, but “in memory.”

Both Marx and Freud would, of course, agree that complete self-determination is in fact an illusion, and that the explanation for this lies in one’s past. Marx stated his case most famously in “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte,” published in 1852 (only a few years earlier than Eliot’s novel):

Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please in circumstances they choose for themselves; rather they make it in present circumstances, given and inherited. Tradition from all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living. (32)

While it is possible at any point in time for men – and women – to choose their course of action, Marx emphasizes that they can never select freely the context

Note that Eliot’s argument is strikingly similar to Margaret Morse’s claim that “[f]eelings and memories linked to home are highly charged, if not with meaning, then with sense memories that began before the mastery of language” (63) – i.e. in early childhood.

“Die Menschen machen ihre eigene Geschichte, aber sie machen sie nicht aus freien Stücken, nicht unter selbstgewählten, sondern unter unmittelbar vorgefundenen, gegebenen, überlieferten Umständen. Die Tradition aller toten Geschlechter lastet wie ein Alp auf dem Gehirne der Lebenden” (Marx, Der achttzehnte Brumaire 115).
of that particular choice. And, importantly, one of these contexts that lies entirely beyond our range of choice is the early childhood home: the place and the community where we grow up, and which can never be ‘self-selected.’ In a dialectical view of history, the ‘starting point’ called home necessarily remains part of everything that follows, albeit in what Hegel would call a ‘sublated’ form (in German, aufgehoben: the point of origin is at the same time canceled, kept in store, and lifted to a higher level; see J. Hillis Miller 28). Likewise, Sigmund Freud argues that the past establishes the limits of self-determination. Beyond these limits, Freud suggests, lies the realm of the unconscious, which is shaped crucially by our childhood experiences, and which makes it impossible for us ever to attain complete mastery over ourselves.

Like Freud and Marx, The Mill on the Floss is hostile to postmodern dreams of infinitely malleable, fluid identities – but not necessarily in a conservative or reactionary sense. Postmodern dreams of boundless self-fashioning appear problematic, for instance, in the light of recent findings regarding the long-term effects of malnutrition in the fetal stage and during childhood, which not only impair individuals’ health, cognitive abilities, and labor productivity over the course of their lives, but which also heighten the chance that such individuals will lack the necessary resources to take sufficient care of their children: “It is therefore in no way fanciful to see the influence of the health and welfare of grandparents in the bodies of their grandchildren and the effect may be even longer lasting” (Floud et al. 37). Our own life is thus shaped by the lives of our ancestors – and not in the sense of ancestral spirits or fateful heredity, but in terms of the contingent yet long-lasting effects of detrimental living standards. Moreover, as Terry Eagleton maintains, change and flexibility are not inherently progressive or oppositional qualities:

A faith in plurality, plasticity, dismantling, destabilizing, the power of endless self-invention – all this, while undoubtedly radical in some contexts, also smacks of a distinctly Western culture and an advanced capitalist world. [...] Capitalism may be upbraided for many defects, but a lack of dynamism is hardly one of them. (Sweet Violence xi)\footnote{See also Fredric Jameson, who argues that the “ambiguity of postmodernism as a philosophy” lies in the fact that “its progressive endorsement of anti-essentialist multiplicity and perspectivism also replicates the very rhetoric of the late-capitalist marketplace as such” (Archaeologies of the Future, 163) – a replication that Jameson finds “exceedingly suspicious” (ibid., 165).}

We may quite rightly insist that identity is neither simply given nor eternally fixed. At the same time, however, there would also be something callous about