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THE FUNCTION OF THE SOCIAL AND POLITICAL BACKGROUND
IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF "ROMOLA"

At the beginning of his discussion of the position that George Eliot occupies in the history of English fiction, Walter Allen observes that "her work marks a change in the nature of the English novel, a change so significant as almost to amount to a mutation in the form"¹. Indeed, though written by an author belonging, by the date of her birth, to the generation of the early Victorians and actually sharing with her contemporaries, in spite of some basic philosophical differences, many of the ideas and assumptions of the age, the novels of George Eliot, as compared with those of Dickens, Thackeray, and Trollope, exhibit certain features that make her writing akin to that of the great French and Russian novelists of the period, such as Flaubert and Tolstoy, rather than to that of the other great English writers of her day.

The difference, according to Allen, lies in the basic change of the writers' attitudes towards the novel - to put the matter concisely, the novel was recognized to be not only a source of entertainment, but also, and primarily, a serious form of art. Consequently, seeing George Eliot's moral and aesthetic seriousness as the dominant element of her work, Allen views her as a representative of the second phase of the development of Victorian literature, to be considered alongside Meredith and Har-

¹ W. Allen, *The English Novel. A Short Critical History*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth 1979, p. 218.

dy rather than Dickens, Thackeray, Mrs Gaskell, or the Brontës².

Indeed, in the light of most of contemporary criticism of George Eliot it remains beyond doubt that the above-mentioned moral seriousness is definitely the most important feature of her novels. F. R. Leavis, perceiving that she was "peculiarly addicted to moral preoccupations"³, includes her, together with Jane Austen, Henry James, Joseph Conrad, and D. H. Lawrence, in "the great tradition" of the English novel, characterized by "a vital capacity for experience, a kind of reverent openness before life, and a marked moral intensity"⁴. Thus, in the centre of a George Eliot novel there is always an important moral theme, usually closely connected with a very detailed psychological analysis of the main protagonists. As has been noticed by Joan Bennett, this "inner circle - a small group of characters involved in a moral dilemma"⁵ is in her novels "surrounded by an outer circle - the social world within which the dilemma has to be resolved"⁶. In this way, the social background turns out to be something more than a mere illustration - it becomes an important element in the whole artistic pattern of the novel. Thus, the reader is allowed to observe the life of a number of people, to participate in their everyday duties, to listen to their speech, to share their religious beliefs and doubts, to see the relationships between different social groups, to witness the current political life. The function of these elements is not only to contribute to the comprehensive vision of life that George Eliot presents in her fiction; sometimes they grow into new themes, always, however, connected with the central moral problems of the novels.

It is in this sense that one can speak about political themes in the novels of George Eliot. She never becomes a political writer in the full sense of the word; her novels, possibly with

² Cf. *ibid.*

³ F. R. L e a v i s, *The Great Tradition*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth 1962, p. 39.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁵ J. B e n n e t t, *George Eliot: Her Mind and Her Art*, Cambridge University Press, 1948, p. 101.

⁶ *ibid.*

the exception of "Felix Holt", never become political in the sense that the novels of Disraeli are. Nevertheless, the political themes do exist in George Eliot's works and their function in the construction of the novels seems to be an interesting field of research, particularly in the light of the fact that the problem has so far received relatively little attention from George Eliot's critics, most of whom have usually concentrated on the moral and psychological aspects of her fiction.

Although references to the problems of politics and to particular political events can be found in all of George Eliot's works, the political themes come to the foreground for the first time in "Romola", the author's only historical novel proper, presenting an interesting picture of the late fifteenth century Florence, the Florence of the French wars and of Girolamo Savonarola. Serialized in "Cornhill Magazine" from July 1862 to August 1863 and published in book form later in the same year, "Romola", unlike George Eliot's earlier novels, did not become a success, either with the general public or in the opinion of the critics - even the anonymous author of an article on "Romola" published in "The Westminster Review", a magazine for obvious reasons traditionally favourable towards George Eliot, though admitting that "we do not hesitate to say that it is its author's greatest work"⁷, wrote that "the picture contains too much of the substance of the author's studies, and is brightened rather by the deep and profound general views which they suggested to her than by those living characteristic touches which make a departed age to live before the reader"⁸. A similar view was expressed in "The Saturday Review": "Great as is the power displayed in it, and varied as is the interest awakened in it, there is still the general impression produced by it that the authoress has been tempted into a field where, indeed, she is not less than she has been, but where her merits are obscured, and their effect impaired"⁹.

⁷ An anonymous review of "Romola", "The Westminster Review", October 1863, [in:] A Century of George Eliot Criticism, ed. G. S. Haight, Methuen and Co., London 1966, p. 25.

⁸ Ibid., p. 27-28.

⁹ An anonymous review of "Romola", "The Saturday Review", 25 July 1863, [in:] A Century of George Eliot..., p. 21.

The tenor of most of the contemporary criticism of "Romola" resembles to a great extent, that of the early comments on the novel. Thus, Joan Bennett says that "it is a novel which could only have been the work of a gifted writer; it is the product of knowledge and wisdom and strenuous meditation; but something essential is missing; the interest flags and the illusion is not sustained"¹⁰; "there are memorable scenes in the book, there are some convincing characters, there is the merciless exposure of moral cowardice hardening into crime; but the novel is neither a successful reconstruction of fifteenth-century Florentine life nor a work of art capable of effecting what she (George Eliot) herself thought necessary when she asserted that if art does not enlarge men's sympathies, it does nothing morally"¹¹. In Walter Allen's opinion, "while it is impossible to read "Romola" without respect, it is also impossible to read it with much pleasure or more than once"¹². R. T. Jones goes even as far as leaving the book out of his discussion of George Eliot's novels, which is a consequence of his seeing the narrator's comments and analyses as made "in the mode of the essayist, not the novelist"¹³.

In turn, the more favourable critics of "Romola", though usually admitting that the book lacks the immediate charm and naturalness of the author's "English" works, tend, in general, to stress the great precision and the artistic consciousness with which George Eliot, working within the limits of her theme and setting, organizes all the elements of the novel into a well-balanced and carefully structured whole. This view of the book is taken, for example, by Andrew Sanders, according to whom "«Romola» has something of the feel of a great Victorian public building; [...] it shares with them (the buildings) a majesty, a sobriety, a completeness and a scholarship, but it remains somehow bloodless and unlovable, perhaps, given the nature of its form and function, necessarily unlovable. But the flaws

¹⁰ B e n n e t t, George Eliot..., p. 140.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 151.

¹² W. A l l e n, George Eliot, Masters of World Literature, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London 1965, p. 128.

¹³ R. T. J o n e s, George Eliot, British Authors. Introductory Critical Studies, Cambridge University Press, 1970, p. 4.

of the novel, like those of the building, are of intention, not of design or execution"¹⁴. Opinions of this kind are also shared by Barbara Hardy, who openly declares that "«Romola» is undoubtedly a book which it is more interesting to analyse than simply to read"¹⁵. Whether this statement can be accepted or not depends to a great extent on one's individual taste; it remains, however, beyond doubt that the above-mentioned general view may well be supported by a closer analysis of some of the aspects of the use that George Eliot makes of the historical and political background of the novel.

The action of "Romola" is set, as has already been mentioned, in Florence, at the end of the fifteenth century. More exactly, the story begins a day after the death of Lorenzo de' Medici, on April 9th, 1492, and ends on the day of the execution of Girolamo Savonarola, May 23rd, 1498; the Epilogue is set eleven years later, on May 22nd, 1509. Exact dates are, in fact, given to the reader several times throughout the novel, particularly when the narrator sets out to describe actual historical events or great Florentine religious and popular festivals. This carefulness in specifying the time of the action, together with the minuteness of the descriptions of the streets, squares, and buildings of the town and of the many different aspects of the everyday life of late fifteenth century Florentines, is important not only as a factor providing a rich, picturesque background for the main moral conflict, but also as a condition sine qua non of presenting the paradocumentary picture of the political life of Florence in the dramatic years 1492-1498.

Indeed, one of the most characteristic features of "Romola" is the great precision with which the novel reflects the public life of the epoch it describes, both in the sphere of the domestic conflicts within the Florentine Republic and in the wider context of the political situation of Europe at the end of the fifteenth century. The reader is allowed to observe the strife between different political parties, to see the collapse of the

¹⁴ A. S a n d e r s, *The Victorian Historical Novel 1840-1880*, The Macmillan Press, London-Basingstoke 1978, p. 196.

¹⁵ B. H a r d y, *The Novels of George Eliot. A Study in Form*, The Athlone Press, London 1981, p. 175.

oligarchy of the Medici, to listen to the sermons of Savonarola and, later, to witness his fall; at the same time, he is made aware of all the important foreign events of the period - the Italian campaign of Charles the Eighth, king of France, the conflict with Rome, etc. Moreover, the novel provides interesting accounts of such significant events in Florentine social and political life as the Burning of Vanities or the riot against the Piagnoni party.

The impression of the historical accuracy of the presentation of the world described in "Romola" is strengthened by the manner in which George Eliot introduces into the novel numerous important historical figures of the period. The foremost place, in this respect, belongs to Girolamo Savonarola, who is in the novel not only a great religious and political leader, but also one of the main protagonists of the central moral conflict. In the background, the reader sees, among others, the politicians Lorenzo Tornabuoni and Francesco Valori, the poet Politian, the painter Piero di Cosimo, and, the most famous of them all, the future writer and politician Niccolò Machiavelli. Interestingly, the function of those characters in the book is not only that of providing a mere illustration or adding to the general impression of the historical adequacy of the novel; they are living people, important in the construction of the plot (Tornabuoni), providing significant points of view in moral and political arguments (Machiavelli), contributing to the symbolic structure of the novel (the paintings of Piero di Cosimo), and, finally, functioning as chorus. The historical characters become, in this way, part of the whole fictional world of "Romola"; owing to their presence, the narrator manages to create in the book an atmosphere of complete authenticity and historical truth.

The fact that the social and political background of the novel is presented with an outstanding, almost scientific precision does not, however, change the status of "Romola" as a novel, a work of a creative writer, consciously arranging the text as a self-contained whole existing in its own right. Consequently, it is possible to see in the organization of the political subplot of the book an expression of the author's own view on the nature of political life in general.

The first reference to the public life of Florence comes as

early as in the Proem, when the narrator, characterizing the way of thinking of an average citizen of the Republic, says:

His politics had an area as wide as his trade, which stretched from Syria to Britain, but they had also the passionate intensity, and the detailed practical interest, which could belong only to a narrow scene of corporate action; only to the members of a community shut in close by the hills and by walls of six miles' circuit, where men knew each other as they passed in the street, set their eyes every day on the memorials of their commonwealth, and were conscious of having not simply the right to vote, but the chance of being voted for. [...] He had gained an insight into all sorts of affairs at home and abroad (p. 46-47)¹⁶.

This idealized vision of Florentine democracy is, however, instantly qualified:

And in this way he had learned to distrust men without bitterness; looking on life mainly as a game of skill, but not dead to traditions of heroism and clean-handed honour (p. 47).

Though apparently insignificant and uttered in a seemingly light-hearted manner, the remark turns out, in the context of the whole novel, to bear a great amount of bitter irony, and to be the first comment on what is, undoubtedly, one of the main themes of the book - the influence of politics on the morality of man.

In the story proper, the problems of politics are first mentioned as early as in the first chapter, in Ser Cioni's account of the Florentine system of government under the rule of the Medici. The picture the notary draws is that of a state in which the old rules of democracy do not actually exist; Lorenzo de' Medici is described as "a man who was trying to slip a noose over every neck in the Republic that he might tighten it at his pleasure" (p. 61). The tyranny, however, results not only from the power of the governing - according to Cioni, part of the responsibility is to be taken by the governed, who are open-

¹⁶ All quotations from "Romola" are taken from the Penguin English Library edition, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth 1984.

ly accused of passivity and submissiveness ("you need nothing but a diet of hay to make cattle of you; [...] you like to have the election of your magistrates turned into closet-work, and no man to use the rights of a citizen unless he is a Medicean" (p. 61)). The notary attacks also the greed of the Medici, saying that "you take no notice when the public treasury has got a hole in the bottom for the gold to run into Lorenzo's drains" (p. 61). Thus, Cioni's speech is significant not only because it provides the reader with a considerable amount of purely historical information - more importantly, it particularizes the above-mentioned theme of the relation between politics and morality, introducing, for example, the motif of personal profit as a source of political activity. It seems also relevant to observe that the manner in which the political subject is presented in the scene in question is characteristic of the method George Eliot uses throughout the novel - in "Romola", politics is never discussed in the abstract; it is always seen as part of direct human experience, as one of the many aspects of human life.

As the novel progresses, the references to the political life of Florence become more and more numerous and significant. Thus, discussing the social atmosphere of Florence in the spring and summer of 1492, the narrator says:

Already the regrets for Lorenzo were getting less predominant over the murmured desire for government on a broader basis, in which corruption might be arrested, and there might be that free play for everybody's jealousy and ambition, which made the ideal liberty of the good old quarrelsome struggling times (p. 133).

The function of the sentence is again at least twofold. On the one hand, it adds another touch to the purely historical background of the novel, providing an extremely important piece of information about the political situation in the Republic (in fact, the "desire for government on a broader basis" is one of the basic causes of the whole of the social and political conflict described in the novel). On the other hand, analyzed from the moral point of view, the sentence turns out to reveal the fact that, paradoxically, as long as one considers the reasons

for which the political activities of the two parties are undertaken, there is not much difference between them - the dominant force is, in both cases, that of egoistic, personal ambitions and desires.

The two passages discussed above provide a good illustration of the least complex of the methods George Eliot uses while employing the elements of the social and political background of "Romola" in her analysis of the moral aspects of politics - the method of direct exposition and description. In fragments exemplifying the use of this technique, the moral evaluation of human deeds and attitudes comes at the very moment of their presentation, suggested by the very fact of their being described in words bearing strong moral connotations.

In a more complex way, the political background of "Romola" turns out to provide important comments on the nature of public life in general when analyzed from the point of view of the way in which the narrator organizes the whole political subplot of the novel. In this respect, the first significant hint comes very early in the book, in the two above-mentioned passages concerning the two main political parties of Florence. As has already been mentioned, the Mediceans and the Piagnoni, though representing completely different approaches towards the problems of the government of the Republic, are morally equally unworthy; the real goal of almost every Florentine politician, regardless of the political line he supports, is not that of the real welfare of the state, but that of satisfying his own ambitions and carrying out his own personal plans. Characteristically, among all the egoistic, greedy, jealous Florentine politicians, George Eliot singles out, in each of the rival camps, one honest man, faithfully believing in the rightness of the path he has chosen to follow and uninfluenced by the omnipresent corruption and plotting. Among the Mediceans, this person is Bernardo del Nero, who is known as a man "whom you would never persuade to borrow another man's shield" (p. 415-416) and who says openly:

Piero de' Medici has abundant intelligence; his faults are only the faults of hot blood. I love the lad - lad he will always be to me, as I have always been 'little father' to him. [...] If we could have a new

order of things that was something else than knocking down one coat of arms to put up another, [...] I should be ready to say 'I belong to no party! I am a Florentine'. But as long as parties are in question, I am a Medicean, and will be a Medicean till I die (p. 121).

Bernardo's counterpart in the popular party is, of course, Savonarola, who believes deeply that "the cause of my party is the cause of God's kingdom" (p. 578), and whose political activity never leads him to transgressing the rules of law and morality ("Not a shadow of political crime had been proved against him" (p. 661)). And, again characteristically, both the men finally die, sentenced to death by the authorities of the very Florence they have always wanted to serve. Their deaths achieve, in this way, an almost symbolical meaning - the cruelty to politics destroys real patriotism, truth, and honesty, regardless of the way people representing those virtues understand and solve the problems they are faced with. Those who manage to survive and to gain power have to be like Dolfo Spini, "leader of the Compagnacci, or Evil Companions - that is to say, of all the dissolute young men belonging to the old aristocratic party, enemies of the Mediceans, enemies of the popular government, but still more bitter enemies of Savonarola, [...] sworn champions of extravagant suppers and all the pleasant sins of the flesh" (p. 469) - cynical plotters and murderers, ready to do anything to obtain their political goal.

Another interesting example of the manner in which George Eliot organizes the political subplot of "Romola" in order to illustrate the problem of the relationship between politics and morality is provided by her presentation of the character of Ser Ceccone and his role in the conspiracies bringing about the final fall of Tito Melema and, later on, of Savonarola. Significantly, Ser Ceccone is described in a very brief, but, at the same time, meaningful way - "Ser Francesco di Ser Barone, more briefly known to infamy as Ser Ceccone, was not learned, not handsome, not successful, and the reverse of generous. He was a traitor without charm. It followed that he was not fond of Tito Melema" (p. 488). The notary becomes, in this way, a personification of evil - and, characteristically, it is largely through the intrigues of that very man that the political situation in the

Republic finally takes its actual turn. Moreover, at the end of the novel, Ser Ceccone emerges as a close associate of the powerful man of the day, Dolfo Spini, which may be read as a metaphorical expression of the triumph of evil in the public life of Florence in 1498.

Thus, the vision of the political life of Florence presented in "Romola" is extremely pessimistic; apparently, in the Republic there is no political force whose real concern would be the genuine good of the state. The dominant motive of almost all public activity is personal ambition; what really counts is reaching a high post in the hierarchy of the state and making it a source of good financial profit¹⁷. In this way, the political subplot of "Romola" turns out to serve not only the purpose of providing a rich and convincing background of the novel; it also carries an important political and moral message, expressing the author's basically distrustful, pessimistic attitude towards political life in general.

All that has been said so far refers to what might be called, according to Joan Bennett's terminology, the "outer circle" of "Romola" - the whole society in which the central moral conflict is situated. However, as has been noticed by Andrew Sanders, "«Romola» is a study of character and environment, not an embodied political or sociological thesis"¹⁸; consequently, the primary function of the social and political background of the novel, as well as of the themes explored through the analysis of this background, is contributing to the main theme of the novel - "the study of the deterioration of Tito's character and the gradual unfolding and perfection of Romola's"¹⁹. In this respect, the most interesting field of investigation is, un-

¹⁷ It seems interesting to mention here the fact that Carole Robinson interprets this role of money in the life of Savonarola's Florence as an important piece of evidence for her highly disputable thesis that "the historical apparatus over which George Eliot laboured with so Victorian an assiduity may probably be ignored for all but its Victorian connotations" (C. Robinson, "Romola": A Reading of the Novel", [in:] Critics on George Eliot, Readings in Literary Criticism, ed. W. Baker, George Allen and Unwin, London 1973, p. 98.

¹⁸ Sanders, The Victorian Historical Novel.... p. 174.

¹⁹ Bennett, George Eliot..., p. 144.

doubtedly, George Eliot's analysis of the character of Tito Melema and of the story of his moral degradation.

Tito's first contact with the people active in the political life of Florence comes early in the novel, in the scene of his visit to Bartolommeo Scala, the secretary of the Republic. The visit is a success - apparently, it becomes for Tito the first step in his plan to find for himself a good position in the Florentine society, in which at the beginning he is a complete stranger. There is, however, a price to be paid - and Tito readily pays it, praising Scala's worthless epigram in spite of its obvious faults; later he begins just to "laugh a little at his ease over the affair of the culex" (p. 129). In this way, George Eliot establishes the basic pattern of the parallelism between the progress of Tito's public career and his gradual moral deterioration - Tito's flattering Scala means, in fact, his sacrificing the ideals of scholarship, which have so far been an important part of his system of values.

By the time of Romola's betrothal to him, Tito's position in Florence has become quite prominent - he was "supported in a Greek chair" (p. 146), he was "especially growing in favour with the young Cardinal Giovanni de' Medici, who has even spoken of Tito's forming part of his learned retinue on an approaching journey to Rome; and the bright young Greek who had a tongue that was always ready without ever being quarrelsome, was more and more wished for at gay suppers in the Via Larga, and at Florentine games in which he had no pretension to excel, and could admire the incomparable skill of Piero de' Medici in the most graceful manner in the world" (p. 248). At the same time, Tito makes some of the most important decisions in his private life: after "his first real colloquy with himself" (p. 149), he makes up his mind not to go in search of his father, even though he receives, from Fra Luca, information about him; during the festival on the Eve of the Nativity of the Virgin, he arranges his "marriage" with Tessa. All that is a consequence of the most significant trait of Tito's character - his egoism, evident in his wish "to make life easy to himself" (p. 288) and in his inability to think of the good of others. In this way, the moral theme of the novel becomes closely connected with the psychological investigation of the personality of the pro-

tagonist, which may serve as a good example of the narrator's unity of vision, so characteristic of George Eliot's approach to character.

Interestingly, the changes in Tito's personality, caused, among other factors, by the negative influence of his successful public career, are reflected not only in his actions, but also in his outward appearance, which, in this way, becomes a symbolical expression of the gradual corruption of his character:

Tito Melema had become conspicuously serviceable in the intercourse with the French guests, from his familiarity with Southern Italy, and his readiness in the French tongue, which he had spoken in his early youth; and he had paid more than one visit to the French camp at Signa. The lustre of good fortune was upon him; he was smiling, listening, and explaining, with his usual graceful unpretentious ease, and only a very keen eye bent on studying him could have marked a certain amount of change in him which was not to be accounted for by the lapse of eighteen months. It was that change which comes from the final departure of moral youthfulness - from the distinct self-conscious adoption of a part in life. The lines of the face were as soft as ever, the eyes as pellucid; but something was gone - something as indefinable as the changes in the morning twilight (p. 278-279).

As the story develops, Tito becomes more and more involved in the political life of the Republic, trying to find in it both a compensation for the unsuccessful private life ("he found it the less difficult to wait patiently for the return of his home happiness, because his life out of doors was more and more interesting to him" (p. 382)) and a fulfilment of his personal ambitions ("since that moment in the Piazza del Duomo, when Tito, mounted on the bales, had tasted a keen pleasure in the consciousness of his ability to tickle the ears of men with any phrases that pleased them, his imagination had glanced continually towards a sort of political activity which the troubled public life of Florence was likely enough to find occasion for" (p. 383)). He begins to treat not only politics, but also life as "a game in which there was an agreeable mingling of skill and chance" (p. 383); he becomes a cool and calculating man,

trying to shape his future according only to his own egoistic plans.

This development of Tito's character is, parallelly, reflected outside his public activity. Thus, he decides to sell the Bardi library, which is against his father-in-law's will and which brings about a serious conflict with Romola; he continues to deceive Tessa; he determines to declare that Baldassarre is an imbecile. At the same time, the feeling of fear, which has accompanied him since the very day of his arrival in Florence ("something like a painful thrill appeared to dart through the frame of the listener, and arrest the careless stretching of his arms and chest" (p. 54)), becomes stronger and stronger; it finds its symbol in the coat of mail that Tito buys from Niccolò Caparra.

The corrupting influence of political intrigue and plotting on Tito's personality comes out most clearly in the scene at the Rucellai Gardens, when Tito, without any apprehensions, accepts the role of a spy:

Tito seldom spoke so confidently of his own powers, but he was in a state of exaltation at the sudden opening of a new path before him, where fortune seemed to have hung higher prizes than any he had thought of hitherto. Hitherto he had seen success only in the form of favour; it now flashed on him in the shape of power - of such power as is possible to talent without traditional ties, and without beliefs. Each party that thought of him as a tool might become dependent on him. His position as an alien, his indifference to the ideas or prejudices of the men amongst whom he moved, were suddenly transformed into advantages; he became newly conscious of his own adroitness in the presence of a game that he was called on to play. And all the motives which might have made Tito shrink from the triple deceit that came before him as a tempting game, had been slowly strangled in him by the successive falsities of his life (p. 419-420).

Characteristically, the last sentence once again stresses the close interconnection between Tito's public and private life, thus providing another instance of the precision and unity with which the character of Tito is represented.

The final comment on the theme of the role of politics in

the gradual moral degradation of Tito Melema comes close to the end of the novel, in the scene describing Tito's escape from Florence and his subsequent death. The construction of the scene is evidently metaphorical - Tito is actually killed by Baldassarre, but his death is, at the same time, also a consequence of the disclosure of his conspiracies and the resulting hatred of Dolfo Spini; thus, he is punished both for his wickedness in his private life and for his treacherous political activity. Significantly, however, this act of justice, if the phrase can be applied here at all, is performed by people whose motives are, from the moral point of view, as condemnable as Tito's - all that Baldassarre and Dolfo Spini really want is taking their revenge on the young Greek. Consequently, Tito's death brings about no feeling of purification; on the contrary, the fact that the more cynical and the less human of the avengers, Spini, becomes, at the end of the novel, "one of the Eight" (p. 670) is, as has already been mentioned, an ironical, pessimistic comment on the nature of political life in general.

In contrast to the important role played by the elements of the social and political background in the analysis of the personality of Tito Melema, the function of this background in the characterization and the psychological analysis of Romola, the other main protagonist of the novel, is very limited indeed. Romola is not involved in the political struggle; she lives in an isolated world in which politics exists only in so far as it affects the few people with whom she remains in contact - primarily, Tito Melema and Girolamo Savonarola. Even then, however, what matters to her is the moral and human consequences of particular political choices rather than the choices themselves - thus, Savonarola is for her always a religious and moral authority, never a political leader and it is largely, though by no means exclusively, owing to his spiritual support that she manages to find the sense of life in the acceptance of the essential rules of humanity, identified with Christianity, but Christianity freed of the limitations of denominational orthodoxy²⁰. In this way religion, in the sense defined above, turns out to play in Romola's life a role parallel, to a considerable

²⁰ Cf. Sanders, *The Victorian Historical Novel...*

extent, to the role of politics in the life of Tito - both are for the protagonists means of self-realization, fundamental influence, bringing about the basic developments in their characters. Consequently, it seems possible to read "Romola" as a novel about religion and politics, a novel whose historical costume enables George Eliot to analyze the ways in which those significant aspects of the life of the human society influence the morality and psyche of man.

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FUNKCJA TŁA SPOŁECZNO-POLITYCZNEGO W KONSTRUKCJI "ROMOLI"

"Romola" to jedyna wśród utworów Georga Eliot powieść, której akcja jest osadzona z dala od Anglii i w odległej epoce historycznej. Jednocześnie jest ona pierwszym chronologicznie dziełem tej autorki, w którym istotną rolę odgrywa prezentacja szeroko zarysowanego tła społeczno-politycznego, w bezpośredni sposób oddziaływającego na losy głównych bohaterów, uwikłanych nie tylko w osobiste dylematy moralne, ale i w skomplikowane problemy życia publicznego. Przedstawiając funkcjonowanie mechanizmów życia politycznego oraz ich wpływ na kształtowanie się osobowości człowieka, George Eliot dokonuje moralnej oceny postępowania ludzi zaangażowanych w proces sprawowania władzy przeciwstawiając niszczącemu moralnie wpływowi świata wielkiej polityki ideał życia opartego na przyjęciu wyływających z szeroko rozumianego chrześcijaństwa zasad humanizmu.