6 Memory and

*The Mill on the Floss*

Memory is another essential aspect of George Eliot's organicism. She believes that the only valid form of human identity is an organic one: there must be a sense of continuity between the formative experiences of one's past life and one's present self, and the individual should act and choose in relation to this sense of continuity. In *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* she refers to 'the divine gift of a memory which inspires the moments with a past, a present, and a future, and gives the sense of corporate existence that raises man above the otherwise more respectable and innocent brute' (pp. 261–2). Here she is referring to the general social consciousness but a similar continuity is necessary to the individual consciousness. One should note that she calls such continuity 'the sense of corporate consciousness', indicating that it is the psychological reality that is important. It is quite possible for a society or an individual to be cut off from or to reject the past. But if this occurs she believes that neither society nor the individual will possess a healthy or secure sense of identity.

Memory plays an important role in almost all of George Eliot's works. The importance of preserving continuity with one's past is particularly evident in *Silas Marner*, for example. With the loss of his religious faith, Silas feels separated from his memories: 'Minds that have been unhinged from their old faith and love, have perhaps sought this Lethean influence of exile, in which the past becomes dreamy because its symbols have all vanished, and the present too is dreamy because it is linked with no memories' (Chapter 2). He tries to forget his past and, in place of organic continuity, constructs a mechanical way of life for himself: 'Marner's face and figure shrank and bent themselves into a mechanical relation to the objects of his life.' The coming of
Eppie and his closer involvement with Raveloe life, which is a consequence of this, help him integrate his memories with his present life and so recover from his alienation: ‘and as, with reawakening sensibilities, memory also reawakened, he had begun to ponder over the elements of his old faith, and blend them with his new impressions, till he recovered a consciousness of unity between his past and present’ (Chapter 16). In living with Eppie in Raveloe he finds a form of life which can accommodate what he valued in his earlier Christianity.\(^1\) Silas needs to feel that there is continuity between his new identity in Raveloe and his earlier life in Lantern Yard.

It is interesting that Silas has some experiences akin to involuntary memory. The first is early in his life in Raveloe and though nothing comes of it, it suggests the importance memory will have in his recovery. He promises to help a woman who is suffering from a heart complaint and he is reminded strongly of his mother: ‘In this office of charity, Silas felt, for the first time since he had come to Raveloe, a sense of unity between his past and present life, which might have been the beginning of his rescue from the insect-like existence into which his nature had shrunk’ (Chapter 2). Silas needs to make this momentary sense of continuity a stable factor in his life. Eppie’s entry into his life leads to the creation of a sense of continuity with his past, and, significantly, her coming triggers off an involuntary memory which connects him with a valuable part of his past he has almost forgotten: ‘Could this be his little sister come back to him in a dream—his little sister whom he had carried about in his arms for a year before she died, when he was a small boy without shoes and stockings?’ (Chapter 12). This experience is the beginning of a new sense of connection with his past.

In Eppie’s final decision to stay with Silas and to reject her natural father, memory is also important. Her relationship to Godfrey is a purely formal one. It has no roots in her past experience since she has never known him as a father. In ‘organic’ terms Silas is her father since they have always lived as father and daughter, as Silas points out to Godfrey: ‘Your coming now and saying “I’m her father” doesn’t alter the feelings inside us. It’s me she’s been calling her father ever since she could say the word’ (Chapter 19). And it is more than life with Silas that Eppie chooses; it is life in the community of Raveloe in which she has been brought up and which she feels is inextricably a part of her.