The sleepless sense that a new code of duty and motive needed to be restored in the midst of the void left by lost sanctions and banished hopes never ceased to stimulate her faculties and to oppress her spirits.

Lord Acton

The publication of *Silas Marner* in 1861 brought Marian further critical acclaim and even more gratifying sales figures than those for her previous books. Only four years after *Scenes of Clerical Life* 'George Eliot' was established as one of the foremost novelists of the day and the creator of a distinctive fictional world with a distinctive *apport*. In Virginia Woolf's memorable formulation: 'Over them all broods a certain romance, the only romance that George Eliot allowed herself – the romance of the past'. But as Woolf went on to observe, 'the mist of recollection gradually withdraws'. Marian's six subsequent books are different from their predecessors in subject, form and aesthetic preoccupation; and their sources – their germs or millet seeds – are not found in her early experience. It is true that two of her later novels are set in 'Loamshire' in the early 1830s; but neither *Felix Holt* nor *Middlemarch* simply offers the faithful representing of commonplace things. The former is a political novel with a tract-for-the-times dimension; while the latter, subtitled 'a study of provincial life', is less the *étude* of a genre painter than the *oeuvre* of a social scientist. This appreciable divide between the early and later works needs to be accounted for. The place to begin is with *Romola*, Marian's fourth novel, which she was later to say marked a turning point in her life: 'I began it a young woman, – I finished it an old woman' (Cross, ii, 273).
The germ of *Romola* was Lewes’ suggestion, made during their stay in Florence in May 1860, that the city in the time of Savonarola afforded ‘fine material for an historical romance’. Marian was immediately enthusiastic about the idea, even though it would be an ambitious project requiring ‘a great deal of study and labour’. Lewes encouraged her to believe that she could do something in historical romance rather different in character from what has been done before; and Blackwood was equally positive, telling Marian he expected she would ‘return Historical Romance to its ancient popularity’ (L, iii, 295, 307, 339, 340). By ancient he meant the period between Walter Scott, who had started the vogue for historical fiction, and the mid-1850s, when its popularity appeared to be waning despite the appearance during that decade of two such notable examples of the genre as Thackeray’s *Henry Esmond* and Dickens’ *A Tale of Two Cities*. Compared with the traditional village life of Hayslope or Raveloe, or with the stagnant culture of Milby or St Ogg’s, the historical subject that Marian proposed to tackle was full of volatile and dramatic materials. The late 1400s in Florence were a time of political turmoil and cultural and religious conflict – a ‘strange web of belief and unbelief’, as it is called in the novel’s ‘Proem’, ‘of Epicurean levity and fetishistic dread; of pedantic impossible ethics uttered by rote, and crude passions acted out with childish impulsiveness; of inclination towards a self-indulgent paganism, and inevitable subjection to that human conscience which, in the unrest of a new growth, was filling the air with strange prophecies and presentiments’. Moreover, from the point of view of the would-be writer of historical romance, the ratio between individual actions and historical events was attractive. As Marian had noted in 1857: histories like that of the Reformation in southern Europe, ‘which have their climax in persecution and martyrdom, and not in political revolution, necessarily treat chiefly of individual action and individual fates – the interest in the heroes of the conflict is not merged in the grand general results of the conflict’ (WR, 67 [1857], 295).

But this distinction between foreground and background could by no means entirely alleviate the onerousness of the historical novelist’s task. For Marian the task could ‘only be justified by the rarest concurrence of acquirement with genius’. The ability to become familiar with ‘the relics of an ancient period’, and then, by the force of ‘sympathetic divination, restore the missing notes in the “music of humanity,” and reconstruct the fragments into a