The Rise of the Fallen Woman

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In June 1858, Augustus Egg exhibited at the Royal Academy a trilogy that shocked its audience by animating their deepest fears of family blight: Past and Present (Misfortune, Plate 1; Prayer, not illustrated here; and Despair, Plate 2), an allegory of the domestic havoc wreaked by the fallen wife. The narrative was accompanied by this solemn gloss: “Aug. 4: Have just heard that B. has been dead more than a fortnight; so his poor children have now lost both their parents. I hear She was seen on Friday last, near the Strand, evidently without a place to lay her head—What a fall hers has been!”

“What a fall hers has been!” These words smack of pride as well as pity at the fallen woman’s abasement and the society that engineered it so effectively. This tenderly punitive note, in which admiration mingles with condemnation, recurs again and again in Victorian treatments of the fallen woman; her prone form becomes so pervasive an image that it takes on the status of a shared cultural mythology. At first glance, the Victorian myth of the fallen woman seems even more harshly degrading than its literary archetype in Paradise Lost: Milton’s Eve gives powerful argumentative voice to her longing to reign rather than serve, while the Victorian fallen woman is usually depicted, even in literature, as a mute,
enigmatic icon, such as Dante Gabriel Rossetti's Jenny, who sleeps through the poem that probes her nature. Moreover, Milton's Eve will survive in the triumphant ascending woman whose heel will bruise the serpent's head, while Victorian conventions ordain that a woman's fall ends in death. It seems that an age of doubt has grafted the doom of Milton's Satan onto the aspirations of his Eve, generating a creature whose nature it is to fall—the sexual trespass that produced her fall is almost always elided in British treatments—and whose identity defines itself only in that fall.

This groveling figure lies at the heart of some of the most powerful literature and art the age produced, her combined penance and defiance entwining itself into Victorian premonitions of national destiny. Thus, the most ambitious epic attempts of England's most influential poets, Browning's _The Ring and the Book_ and Tennyson's _Idylls of the King_, both depict a society brought down by the ambiguous revolutionary power of a fallen woman. _The Ring and the Book_ (1868–69) is, like Egg's trilogy, the saga of a fallen wife, though Browning's more subversive treatment is set in the hotter emotional climate of the Florentine Renaissance. The child bride Pompilia flees her respectable husband with a handsome young priest, only to be slaughtered with her newborn son by her husband's henchmen. This sensational material is refracted through a series of partisan narrators, tried in street and courtroom, until the verdict of the saintly old Pope stills the babble by pronouncing Pompilia an angel of purity and her husband Guido a Satanic monster. Guido, pillar of family, Church, and state, undergoes the poem's truest fall; the touchstone of his wife's martyrdom exposes the demonic brutality of the society whose respectability he upholds and, by implication, of Browning's own society as well. Though Pompilia's death is as excruciating as any Augustus Egg might have envisioned for her, her fall is a vindication. for it brings down the institutions that oppressed her. The action of the poem justifies her self-sanctifying dying words, "and I rise."

In Tennyson's _Idylls of the King_ (1842–85), Guinevere does not rise so easily from groveling at the feet of the blameless king whose authority her infidelity has eroded. Tennyson's Guinevere is little more than a sinister, suffering shadow in the background of the action, apparently untouched by Arthur's rectitude and Lancelot's doomed lust for honor; her one activity is her own fall.
Plate 1. Augustus Leopold Egg, Misfortune. Reproduced by courtesy of the Trustees of the Tate Galley, London.
Plate 2. Augustus Leopold Egg, DESPAIR. Reproduced by courtesy of the Trustees of the Tate Gallery, London.
Plate 3. Ford Madox Brown, Take Your Son, Sir. Reproduced by courtesy of the Trustees of the Tate Gallery, London.
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Her subversive avatars, of whom we see far more, are Elaine, the lily maid of Astolat, whose passion for Lancelot makes of her a death's-head portending the fall of the kingdom, and Vivien, the serpent woman who causes the fall of Merlin, Camelot's God. Guinevere's flamboyant alter egos initiate much of the action, generalizing upon both the degradation and the potency of the fallen Queen. The proliferation of fallen, seemingly fallen, or falling women in the *Idylls* transmutes a woman's fall from a personal to a national event, both instigating and symbolizing Victorian England's epic portrait of its own doom.

For Browning and Tennyson, then, the fallen woman becomes the abased figurehead of a fallen culture; her imaginative resonance justifies the punishment to which she is subjected. But Victorian social reformers found her as painful a presence as do contemporary feminist critics. Then and now, she seems to enlightened minds a pitable monster, created by the neurosis of a culture that feared female sexuality and aggression and so enshrined a respectably sadistic cautionary tale punishing them both. To redeem the fallen woman from degradation, sympathetic critics, in her day and in our own, have turned from the denunciations of epic and myth to the more flexible reality of history.

One group of nineteenth-century philanthropists wanted to demythicize the fallen woman by making her victim rather than agent. Thomas Hood's fulsome poem, "The Bridge of Sighs," and Henry Mayhew's sternly attentive documentary, in *London Labour and the London Poor*, Volume IV (written with Bracebridge Hemyng), present in different tones the fallen woman as beaten-down prostitute, practicing one of the few trades available to Victorian females. She is defined economically rather than morally, emitting no special aura of destruction and doom but joining the poor seamstress and the shabby-genteel governess among the ranks of capitalist victims. William Acton goes further in his iconoclastic *Prostitution*, elevating many fallen women from practitioners of a dismal trade to apprentices at the nobler profession of marriage:

I have every reason to believe, that by far the number of women who have resorted to prostitution for a livelihood, return sooner or later to a more or less regular course of life. . . .

Incumbrances rarely attend the prostitute who flies from the hor-
rors of her position. We must recollect that she has a healthy frame, an excellent constitution, and is in the vigour of life. During her career, she has obtained a knowledge of the world most probably above the situation she was born in. Her return to the hearth of her infancy is for obvious reasons a very rare occurrence. Is it surprising, then, that she should look to the chance of amalgamating with society at large, and make a dash at respectability by a marriage? Thus, to a most surprising, and year by year increasing extent, the better inclined class of prostitutes become the wedded wives of men in every grade of society, from the peerage to the stable.2

In the light of Acton's sanguine common sense, the mobility of actual social life reverses the popular myth of a woman's implacable fall, introducing us to the bouncy woman who is able to fall up.

Feminist critics writing about the fallen woman today are as eager to demythicize her as forward-looking Victorians were, constructing the same morally purged models of victim and survivor. Françoise Basch and Frances Finnegar insist, with Mayhew, on the prostitute's identity as exploited worker, limited to a wretched trade by the harsh realities of capitalist economics and sexual power. Judith Walkowitz sees the prostitute as Acton did, a healthy adapter, plagued by no special sense of sin but turning to prostitution as a part-time job on the path to eventual marriage and respectability. In the corrective vision of all these social historians, the fallen woman is no longer an outcast from society; as martyr or social climber, she is at home in the world that bred her.3

Contemporary feminists share the discomfort of Victorian social reformers at the irreversible sin and doom Egg's trilogy represents; in conjunction, though by different routes, they deny that the fallen woman existed at all. "What do I think will become of


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me?” retorts a "kept mistress" interviewed by Mayhew. "What an absurd question. I could marry tomorrow if I liked."4 Nineteenth-century liberals were as drawn as we are to this glimpse of a flexible, open, nonretributive world; but in imaginative literature, the myth persisted. Insofar as no documentation could exorcise her, the titanic outcast, doomed and dooming, seems to have been like Marley’s ghost, an undigested morsel of the Victorian bad conscience, familiar social reality cast into phantasmagoric and avenging shape, a woman her readers might dream about but could not live with.

No doubt the Victorian imagination isolated the fallen woman so pitilessly from a social context, preferring to imagine her as destitute and drowned prostitute or errant wife cast beyond the human community, because of her uneasy implications for wives who stayed home. Characteristically, Victorian literature plays with her professional alliance with virtuous wifehood only to snatch the two apart at the last minute; in painting, in what Linda Nochlin calls the "secular pictorial imagery of the fallen woman,"5 she is associated with sweeping vistas of space and with impersonal urban masses, as in Egg’s trilogy, never with snug domestic interiors. Thackeray and Dickens bring her to the fringes of the family, hinting at the interchangeability of the bought woman and the possessed wife, but at the last moment she is always ostracized from the sanctity of the hearth. In Vanity Fair, Becky Sharp purchases respectability with shadiness, but her murder of Jos Sedley allows the pure, if equally heartless, domestic angel Amelia to shrink away from her at the end. In Dombey and Son, Dickens’s prostitute Alice Marwood struts after the future Edith Dombey, as she is paraded on the marriage market, like the bird of ill omen that portends the fall of the family, but Alice finally dies in a rage of penitence, and Edith, who has figuratively murdered the Dombey family and almost becomes the literal murderess of Carker, is ostracized to Dijon; neither touches the pageant of blissful marriages with which the novel ends. Generally, the fallen woman functions emblematically rather than economically in fiction; her appearance is the memento mori of a bad marriage, but her economic identity in a patriarchal society is not allowed to infect a good

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4 Quoted in Basch, p. 204.
5 "Lost and Found: Once More the Fallen Woman," Art Bulletin, 60 (1978), 139.
one.\textsuperscript{6} Rather than bridging the home and the marketplace, as the prostitute did in fact, she must destroy the home or be cast out of it. The fallen woman in whom the Victorian imagination crystallizes transcends Mayhew’s economic categories of pauper, working woman, and wife, wailing alone, with Dickens’s outcast Martha in \textit{David Copperfield}, “Oh, the river!”

Considering this use of the fallen woman as scapegoat, we are understandably embarrassed by the phantoms of our ancestors; in this case, some of our ancestors were themselves embarrassed. Both feminist criticism and broad cultural studies pride themselves on having shaken off the attitudes that created this cruel Victorian myth, without examining the myth itself very closely. Yet unconscious or half-formulated cultural myths are not always antithetical to enlightened historical understanding, nor can history and statistics always exorcise them. It will deepen our understanding of the byways of the Victorian mind to look closely at the shape of this myth as it manifested itself in fiction and art, for the mind’s changing transmutation of social fact is the only “true history” we know.

One constant element in the myth of the fallen woman, reaching back to the Old Testament and to Milton’s epic recasting of it, is the absolute transforming power of the fall. At Eve’s fall, Milton tells us, “Earth felt the wound, and Nature from her seat / Sighing through all her Works gave signs of woe / That all was lost” (\textit{Paradise Lost}, IX, 782–84). In Victorian revisions, it is the woman alone who is wounded, sighs, laments, and is lost; indifferent Nature simply reclaims her. Once cast into solitude, the fallen woman, like Milton’s Eden, is irretrievably metamorphosed, as even the enlightened modern Hardy insists in \textit{Tess of the d’Urbervilles}: “Almost at a leap Tess thus changed from simple girl to complex woman.”\textsuperscript{7} Though in life the division between fallen and respect-

\textsuperscript{6} The same pattern applies to Eliza Lynn Linton’s stentorian attack on the brazen “girl of the period.” Linton writes in horror that young women were neither shunning nor saving their fallen sisters but emulating their style in order to catch men. This incorporation of the tactics of the street into the competition of the marriage market, however, is withdrawn from her idealized good wives, whose sphere is a walled garden, not a marketplace. See “The Girl of the Period,” \textit{Saturday Review}, 14 Mar. 1868, pp. 339–40.

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able woman might have been reasonably fluid, art allows no return to the old familial boundaries of identity. Conventionally, the fallen woman must die at the end of her story, perhaps because death rather than marriage is the one implacable human change, the only honorable symbol of her fall's transforming power. Death does not simply punish or obliterate the fallen woman: its ritual appearance alone does her justice.

If we look again at the fallen wife in Augustus Egg's trilogy, in whom it seems ritual abasement could go no further, we become aware of her power as well as her humiliation. In Misfortune, her offstage sexual sin aggrandizes as it shames her; not only does her sharp diagonal line slash insistently through the regularity of verticals and horizontals that constitutes her home, defining the painting's composition and knocking down her daughters' house of cards as it does so, but it aligns her with the painting's solidest, most substantial mass—the spreading floor. Her fall empowers her to break through the design of her world. In the two subsequent paintings, as in Paradise Lost and Idylls of the King, the fall seems to open out space. The mirror's flat and enclosed perspective gives way to the vista of the window in Prayer, where the now-grown daughters form a sad tableau that seems an appeal to the moon, and then to the sweep of the arch of the bridge in Despair, through which the destitute mother watches the same moon hovering ominously over the river. In both, the dead paterfamilias seems replaced by the waxing moon as the primum mobile of the family.

As Raymond Lister suggests, the moon may hint at a reconciliation between mother and daughters, who appeal to it at the same moment; iconographically, it is more complex. Traditionally the moon stands for changeableness, connoting not simply the wife's perfidy but a certain inherent power of metamorphosis which allows her to destroy and reconstruct her world. In such Victorian feminist writers as Charlotte Brontë, the moon brings with it matriarchal potency, as in Jane Eyre when Jane's dead mother appears in the moon, commanding Jane to flee Rochester, or in Villette's final paean to the moon, "all regnant," presiding over the city's triumphant female cabal. The moon is similarly regnant in the expanded world of women that the wife's fall gen-

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8 Lister, p. 58.
erates in Egg's trilogy, as it will be in a later, and wittier, Victorian vision of a woman-ruled world: Aubrey Beardsley's wicked frontispiece to Oscar Wilde's Salomé, in which "The Woman in the Moon" frightens those she shines on. Egg's cautionary genre-piece carries intimations of ascendant female power along with its explicit images of abasement and despair and suggests a hidden potency in the fallen woman's fall, made explicit in works that did not commit themselves to the Royal Academy's respectable walls.

Perhaps because of its challenge to the sexual double standard, Ford Madox Brown's Take Your Son, Sir (1856; Plate 3), whose majestic fallen woman "thrusts forward her naked child, demanding that responsibility for the conception of the child be shared," was never finished or exhibited. Moreover, though Brown created this accusing image two years before Egg's moral fable was exhibited, we feel that here the errant wife of Egg's painting has freed herself utterly from the cumbersome design of her world and has appropriated its furniture, including its vacant mirror, to her own uses. For Brown's fallen woman is in full possession of all available space, swelling into enigmatic monumentality. Her white garment, with the audacious folds which give her the air of plucking the child from her womb, allows her to appropriate images of animality, of maidenhood, and of wifely respectability; though like all Victorian fallen women she is alone in her world, she seems to embody the defiant powers of all womanhood in the face of little men who would disown them. For not only is she free from the conventional posture of abasement, but the viewer is abased before her. The source of the awe she generates is a daring combination of anatomy and religion: the large, unfinished block of her drapery, as well as the mirror haloing her head, give her the air of a looming, almost gigantesque Madonna, asserting her powers to God, perhaps, as well as to man. More obviously than Egg's fallen wife, she seems to have gained power over size and scale, reducing the cur who impregnated her along with the viewer to a diminutive figure in the mirror. Both conventionally holy and defiant, her pose insists upon the simultaneity of her fall and apotheosis as she grows into the magus/God of her world, mocking by her size male claims of power over her.

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To find an analogue in nineteenth-century fiction for this defiant icon, unapologetic in its assertion of purity and subversion, we must turn to an American heroine, Hester Prynne, whose majestic presence diminishes the gaping spectators, including the readers of her story:

The young woman was tall, with a figure of perfect elegance, on a large scale. She had dark and abundant hair, so glossy that it threw off the sunshine with a gleam, and a face which, besides being beautiful from regularity of feature and richness of complexion, had the impressiveness belonging to a marked brow and deep black eyes. She was lady-like, too, after the manner of the feminine gentility of those days; characterized by a certain state and dignity, rather than by the delicate, evanescent, and indescribable grace, which is now recognized as its indication. And never had Hester Prynne appeared more lady-like, in the antique interpretation of the term, than as she issued from the prison. Those who had before known her, and had expected to behold her dimmed and obscured by a disastrous cloud, were astonished, and even startled, to perceive how her beauty shone out, and made a halo of the misfortune and ignominy in which she was enveloped.  

Hester’s stature, her regality, to which her “halo of . . . misfortune and ignominy” only adds an additional power, suggest the simultaneity of fall and apotheosis that are the verbal equivalents of Brown’s monumental painting. From this opening tableau to the conclusion of Hester’s “legend,” where we stare at the cryptic symbolism of her tombstone, Hester presents herself pictorially, insisting on our scrutiny. Like her own elaborately wrought letter, she becomes an outsize and troublingly ambiguous work of art whose visual power outshines our ability to “read” her. Hester’s self-created potency is made manifest when the narrator dubs the scaffold on which she is forced to stand “her pedestal” (ch. 3), adding intimations of art’s reigning power to Chillingworth’s scathing description of her “standing up, a statue of ignominy, before the people” (ch. 4). In Hawthorne’s portraiture, Hester’s fall alone enables her to stand up, imbuing her with the overweening power of creator and created object.

Insofar as Hester’s career in The Scarlet Letter is a series of penitential renunciations, Hawthorne obeys the conventions we have seen in British literature, which depict the fallen woman as

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prone and punished. Yet, more explicitly than in British art, the novel’s visual symbolism forms a counterpoint to its moral structure; Hawthorne’s deliberately difficult artistry suggests the possibility of hidden dimensions in England’s soberer literary analogues. For in this novel about a theocratic community, where sin is less a violation of social mores than of the might of souls, Hester’s fall is the novel’s one unequivocally religious activity. The adultery that precipitated it long before the beginning of the novel seems real only as a catalyst for Hester’s ensuing spiritual power. Moreover, as in Browning’s *The Ring and the Book*, the unquestioned demonism of Hester’s respectable husband Roger Chillingworth, whose evil is, like Guido’s, a reliable barometer for the ambiguity of the other characters, calls the status of her adultery into question. The novel makes Hester’s sexual sin so abstract and problematical that her fall is made to seem the one available medium of spiritual life.

Unlike Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Ruth*, whose infantine purity we shall examine, Hester’s spiritual strength does not transcend her fall but arises from it. Her stigma, the letter itself, is transmuted into her own dazzling creation, then into her vocation—“The letter was the symbol of her calling. . . . They said that it meant Able; so strong was Hester Prynne, with a woman’s strength” (ch. 13)—and finally, at her death, into her “engraved escutcheon” (ch. 24), its passage from art to vocation to election reflecting her own rise. “Hand in hand with Ann Hutchinson,” we learn, Hester “might have been a prophetess” (ch. 13) had her unlawful child not prevented her; but by the end she has indeed become a feminist saint, the vehicle for “a new truth” of empowered and transfigured womanhood. Hawthorne’s American parable explains one attraction of this myth for the nineteenth-century imagination beyond its overtly sadistic and cautionary message. Like Hester’s “fantastical” needlework, which “then, as now, [was] almost the only [art] within a woman’s grasp” (ch. 5), a woman’s fall is imagined as almost the only avenue through which she is allowed to grow.

In British fiction, the fallen woman is forbidden the audacious self-presentation of Ford Madox Brown’s and Hawthorne’s ostracized Madonnas. Yet their ambiguous spirituality and their artists’ ability to make their worlds shrink before their statuesque
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presence recall a miniature object of impassioned and ambiguous worship—Lewis Carroll’s Alice, a figure of simultaneous majesty and abasement in a world seemingly created by the catastrophe of her fall. “Down, down, down,” Alice’s story begins. “Would the fall never come to an end?” In the power of the fallen woman to infiltrate Victorian England’s most beloved children’s story, it may seem as if the fall never did, for Alice’s fall seems almost a parody of our cultural myth, though nonsense, whimsy, and sentiment defuse it. Like those of Egg’s and Brown’s women, Alice’s fall ignites her capacity for metamorphosis; she herself mutates continually as she travels through Wonderland, growing when necessary into an object as intimidating as Hester Prynne presiding from her pedestal. Moreover, her fall transforms the readers’ expectations of predictable reality, so that both Alice and our perspective are expanded by an act that seems to diminish them.

Alice is both outcast in and creator of her newly expanded world, and like the world of some of the blood-stained fallen women we shall meet later, Wonderland is ruled by potentially murderous women. The Queen of Hearts, the Duchess, the Cook, and the Cheshire Cat (insofar as it functions as a dream-version of Alice’s female cat Dinah), all suggest the varieties of female fury a pure girl’s fall can energize.11 Carroll’s book may seem a surprising addition to our adult context, but in so potent a cultural myth, one containing so many intense and unexamined feelings about womanhood, it should not surprise us if extremes meet, or that the demonic energy of the fallen woman shares some of the preternatural purity Carroll located in little girls. If the fall brings out a certain perversity within Alice’s apparent purity, so juxtaposition with a little girl should remind us of the spirituality with which the Victorian fallen woman is endowed. In the works of Egg, Brown, and Hawthorne the woman’s fall transfigures her, making her the God of her world, the vehicle of a potency which underlies her tribulations in Victorian fiction as well as in art.

Bearing in mind the dual perspective of these works—an explicit narrative that abases the woman, an iconographic pattern

that exalts her—I want to look again at three well-known fallen women in British fiction, Elizabeth Gaskell’s Ruth, Thomas Hardy’s Tess Durbeyfield, and, finally, George Eliot’s Hetty Sorrel. Though *Ruth* and *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* had an aura of controversy and scandal, while *Adam Bede* was wholesome and beloved, all three novels were widely read and together contain the spectrum of possible attitudes toward “fallen” heroines. Gaskell lovingly exonerates her pure heroine from the appearance of sin; the more aggressively iconoclastic Hardy flings his heroine’s purity as a gauntlet at hypocritical social taboos; George Eliot seems to condemn Hetty Sorrel’s ambitious sexuality with unyielding austerity, though Hetty is a more challengingly complex figure than the narrator wants her to be. For all their diversity, however, each novel is in its own way a variation on its culture’s central myth.

Hetty Sorrel is presented to us as fallen from her first lush and sensuous appearance in the novel, but both Ruth and Tess seem initially under their authors’ special protection. Ruth is too sublimely innocent to understand the fact of her own fall: through seduction and betrayal, unwed pregnancy and motherhood, she remains the victim of her destitution, her unprotected orphan state, her sexual ignorance, and the Phariseeism of respectability that generates all three. Until the ending’s abrupt reversal, like liberal reformers who did not write novels, Gaskell defiantly reclaims this sweet soul for social reintegration and respectability. Dubbed by the subtitle “a pure woman,” Tess also seems vindicated by her narrator from having fallen at all. As was Ruth, she is allowed an implausible degree of ignorance and passivity in her affair with Alec, suggesting that according to Victorian sexual ethics, the true sin lies less in the act than in willing one’s own fall. Moreover, though an absurd society condemns Tess, natural growth is her friend: her affinities with burgeoning nature, her incorrigible will to renewal and joy, seem to exempt her from the fallen woman’s guilt and sorrow. Like Hetty and Ruth, Tess is given a certain psychic integrity, a fidelity to her own nature. This integrity raises all three women above the moral flaccidity of their seducers. Their singleness of being seems to resist the myth that would transform them from characters into types of sin.

Yet each novel conforms to its strictures in the end. As Ruth is on the brink of respectability, her history is revealed, she and
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her son are ostracized, and she dies a penitential death nursing her cowardly seducer through typhus fever—a sacrificial ending that infuriated such bolder readers as Charlotte Brontë.\textsuperscript{12} In \textit{Adam Bede}, Hetty's sexual fall is compounded by infanticide: she murders her illegitimate baby, confesses her guilt under Dinah Morris's noble influence, and is dramatically rescued from the gallows only to die anticlimactically after empty years of transportation. Tess, too, compounds sexual experience with murder, and there is nobody to rescue her from the ceremonial butchery of death by hanging. No doubt, this addition of murder to sexuality eased Eliot's and Hardy's final conformity to Victorian conventions: the execution of a killer was not yet revolting to society's liberal guilts and fears.

It is easy to denounce the punitive endings of these novels, to condemn the moral timidity of their authors in the face of publishers' and readers' pressures as Charlotte Brontë did. Yet one component of their fascination comes from the tension between social possibility, in which the community, more elastic than it seems, absorbs the fallen woman comfortably, and a social myth that aggrandizes the outcast. The gestures and confessions of guilt, the ritual slaughters with which all three novels end, seem less betrayals of the social realism of Victorian fiction than expressions of its power to clarify and create the myths of its culture.

Gaskell's Ruth, for example, vehemently rejects marriage to her seducer, conventional salvation through respectability, in favor of a saint's life and a martyr's death. On our first view of her, she is marked off from her environment by moonlight: she passes wearily through "a commonplace-looking shop" past "a window (through which the moonlight fell on her with a glory of many colours)."\textsuperscript{13} Despite her pregnancy, her fall seems devoid of sexuality and will, consecrating her as the moon through the window 'does; as with the wife in Egg's \textit{Despair}, that which isolates her from society assures her kinship with the moon. As Ruth moves through the novel toward exposure and death, she seems refined

\textsuperscript{12} Elizabeth Barrett Browning, who, like Brontë, was experimenting with feminist literary forms, echoed Brontë's protest at Gaskell's concession to punitive morality. See Aina Rubenius, \textit{The Woman Question in Mrs. Gaskell's Life and Works} (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1990), p. 211.

beyond anger, conflict, and physicality itself. “She was bodily wearied with her spiritual buffeting” (ch. 24), we learn, suggesting that her essence is distilling itself into immateriality alone. With the further dilution of her sexuality, her sole remaining kinship with animalism is the instinct of fear: “Ruth lifted up her eyes for the first time since the conversation began, the pupils dilating, as if she were just becoming aware of some new agony in store for her. I have seen such a look of terror on a poor dumb animal’s countenance, and once or twice on human faces. I pray I may never see it again on either!” (ch. 26).

Like that of Ford Madox Brown’s accusatory Madonna in *Take Your Son, Sir*, Ruth’s “fall” touches her only as a benediction, allowing her to transcend the animal and thus the human condition; her martyr’s death is the fullest expression of her rarefied life rather than a denial of it. For her fall is so spiritualizing that she dies long before the end of the novel, having refined herself, like Dickens’s fallen Nancy in *Oliver Twist*, to a pair of eyes that avenge and compel simultaneously. Like the phantom of Nancy, she has left the body to become not a part of the community but its overseer and its scourge. Once again, the transforming power of the fall lends spiritual potency to the woman it destroys.

Ruth’s fall becomes an allegory of the triumph of spirit over life; that of Tess Durbeyfield suggests initially the triumph of life over spirit. Abetted by the knightly cadence of her name in the title and the vivid insistence on her sheer physical presence in virtually every episode, Tess towers over the arbitrary conventions that label her a sinner, especially as they are embodied in the callow and vacillating Angel Clare. Yet despite Hardy's radical air and idiom, his Tess seems from another perspective the most pitifully abased of all our fallen women. For with all her supposed purity, perspective and language insinuate images of a somewhat unsavory and guilty thing. Not only does a famous passage present her as “a fly on a billiard-table of indefinite length, and of no more consequence to the surroundings than that fly” (ch. 16), but, like Kafka's Joseph K., Tess seems a consciousness born to guilt. “‘Now, punish me!’ she said, turning up her eyes to [Alec] with the hopeless defiance of the sparrow’s gaze before its captor twists its neck. ‘Whip me, crush me; you need not mind those people
under the rick! I shall not cry out. Once victim, always victim—that's the law!" (ch. 47). Despite Hardy's ambivalently protective commentary, the reader is infected by Tess's own unremitting sense of sin.

Though *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* seems to fling a gauntlet at the myth of the fallen woman's ever-accelerating guilt and sorrow, the structure of its narrative seems as subservient to the myth as Tess is here to Alec. Following the orthodox pattern, Tess begins in hopeful innocence, but goes from bad to worse after her fall divorces her from her girlhood self, her increasingly estranged condition aligning her with bare and open landscapes until her murder of Alec consummates her identity as outcast. From first to last, more than any of the heroines, Tess is marked off from the human community. Gaskell's Ruth was engulfed by the sympathetic faith of the Bensons as George Eliot's Hetty was by that of Dinah Morris, but for the most part Tess attracts sympathetic understanding only from objects: "The wall felt warm to her back and shoulders, and she found that immediately within the gable was the cottage fireplace, the heat of which came through the bricks. She warmed her hands upon them, and also put her cheek—red and moist with the drizzle—against their comforting surface. The wall seemed to be the only friend she had. She had so little wish to leave it that she could have stayed there all night" (ch. 42).

From one point of view, the friendship Tess draws from the wall is the ultimate gesture of Victorian pathos: tenderness lies only in the senseless exterior of the family that casts her out. But through the friendship of the wall, she imbibes life and grandeur from her surroundings, taking her stature from objects as human beings conspire to reduce her. Similarly, when we first meet Tess, a hedge frames her solitude in opposition to the uniformity of the country dance; in the florid Eden of Talbothays, a cow's flank sets off her profile so vividly that Angel is driven to declare his passion; at the wasteland of Flintcomb-Ash, the faces without features to which Hardy likens the staring emptiness of earth and sky set off Tess's own mangled face after she cuts off her eyebrows to avoid molestation; she finds her ultimate "home," not in her posthumous reconciliation with Angel, but at the empty altar of Stonehenge where she waits to be arrested, receiving through this final
setting architectural, historical, and divine recognition. Things give Tess an epic life, belying her recurrent humiliations. Ruth's triumph was spiritual, Hetty's, as we shall see, natural and cosmic, but Tess's is in large part compositional. By stationing her against large and grand objects, Hardy gives her a borrowed magnitude that defies human measurements of her fall.

In his placement of Tess against a wall, Hardy provides a telling gloss on the fallen woman in Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *Found* (Plate 4), who huddles against a wall despite the urging of her former suitor. The wall in *Found* has the same double nature as the wall in *Tess*. In the explicit narrative, the wall bears the pathos of a last retreat to unfeelingness, overshadowing the woman as the net imprisons the lover's calf. But simultaneously, the wall is an escape from that very net, represented by the lover's clutch. Retreating from compassion, Rossetti's fallen woman is aligned through the strength of the wall with the most substantial masses in the painting—the sweep of the bridge, the touched-in wall on the right, the wheelbarrow, the solid canon beneath it whose firmness contrasts with the wrinkles on the lover's boots, the ripples in his tunic. Though he is the dominant human figure in the triangle, his wrinkles and ripples give him a suggestion of instability, while the woman's cloak drops solidly to the ground, as if it were sculpted rather than painted. Linda Nochlin reminds us that the first sketches for *Found* used a wispy, starved-looking model; the woman became increasingly substantial and strong once Rossetti brought in as his model the florid Fanny Cornforth.14 In counterpoint to the pathos of his explicit narrative, Rossetti, like Hardy, endows his fallen woman with the strength of the forms that surround her. As with Tess, we are only subliminally aware of her power in the painting's composition, but it is in large part the power of each woman, endowed and oblique though it is, that has kept both works alive for so long.

Hetty Sorrel's power in *Adam Bede* is even more oblique than that of Ruth and Tess, in part no doubt because George Eliot endows her with no spiritual gifts that will draw the reader's sympathy. Unlike the others, Hetty is emotionally insentient and intensely aggressive, falling not because she is lulled passively into a sexuality associated with sleep, but because she wills to possess the

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social glamour and power Arthur embodies. The way in which the novel’s rhetoric forbids the reader to like Hetty must have something to do with the novelist’s own fierce suppression of the impulse to self-pity and apologia, for unlike the eminently respectable minister’s wife or the polemical defender of luscious womanhood, George Eliot was herself born into artistry by “falling.” Forbidding, perhaps, her own sympathy with Hetty as well as ours, George Eliot enmeshes her in similes linking her to lower forms of life; at various times Hetty is linked to a pound of butter, kittens, small downy ducks, babies, rose petals, a young calf, a butterfly, a blossom, a bud, a peach, a brooklet, a spaniel, a bird, a pet, a “thing,” a canary, a water nixie, “a pictur in a shop-winder,” a “round, soft-coated pet animal,” a brute, a “Medusa-face,” a stone, and death. Her association with small, spiritually nonexistent forms of life seems to deprive her fall of a corresponding ascent we can admire.

But there are other, more implicit links forged around Hetty’s selfish and solitary little figure. Her nature and destiny align her strangely with her cousin, the spiritual paragon Dinah Morris, to whom she seems initially no more than a sensuous foil: “What a strange contrast the two figures made! Visible enough in that mingled twilight and moonlight. Hetty, her cheeks flushed and her eyes glistening from her imaginary drama, her beautiful neck and arms bare, her hair hanging in a curly tangle down her back, and the baubles in her ears. Dinah, covered with her long white dress, her pale face full of subdued emotion, almost like a lovely corpse into which the soul has returned charged with sublimer secrets and a sublimer love. They were nearly of the same height; Dinah evidently a little the taller as she put her arm round Hetty’s waist, and kissed her forehead.”15 That kiss by moonlight seals an association more radical than the obvious pictorial contrast. In the course of the novel, Hetty will don Dinah’s Methodist garb as a joke; but as an abandoned wanderer, her flush will disappear, replaced by an intensifying pallor until she becomes the corpse Dinah resembles here. Correspondingly, Dinah will get rounder and ruddier, and will finally marry Hetty’s fiancé Adam and discard her Methodist garb. In the plot, the strapping figure of Adam

brings the two women together, but the kiss here hints at a more fundamental complicity, for in a subtle sense they exchange natures.

Moreover, though at the beginning Hetty and Dinah meet in the context of the Hall Farm, that fecund emblem of domestic rootedness, both are disapproved of there because they are unsettled wanderers by nature and vocation. The narrator instructs us to disapprove of Hetty by botanical analogy: "There are some plants that have hardly any roots: you may tear them from their native nook of rock or wall, and just lay them over your ornamental flower-pot, and they blossom none the worse. Hetty could have cast all her past life behind her, and never cared to be reminded of it again" (ch. 15). And Mrs. Poyser laments Dinah's similar, though more high-minded indifference to settled family virtues: "if everybody was to do like you, the world must come to a standstill; for if everybody tried to do without house and home, and with poor eating and drinking, and was allays talking as we must despise the things o' the world, as you say, I should like to know where the pick o' the stock, and the corn, and the best new-milk cheeses 'ud have to go. Everybody 'ud be wanting bread made o' tail ends, and everybody 'ud be running after everybody else to preach to 'em, istead o' bringing up their families, and laying by against a bad harvest. It stands to sense as that can't be the right religion" (ch. 6). Later on, Mr. Poyser gives us a pithy echo of his wife in this dark picture of leaving home: "We should leave our roots behind us, I doubt, and niver thrive again" (ch. 32). But initially, Dinah as well as Hetty denies this inexorable fate by the fervent determination to be rootless and to thrive.

In this Wordsworthian novel, built on the primacy of interrelationship, Hetty is subtly attached both to the "higher" nature of Dinah and, in her equation with a plenitude of insentient things, to the web of life that is the novel's more equivocal, personified "Nature." Two key chapters in *Adam Bede* are entitled "Links" and "More Links," and ironically, despite her rejection of community, Hetty is the novel's primary linking principle. The definition of a character through her "links" or lack of them is a device Hawthorne used dramatically in *The Scarlet Letter*, but Hester's one remaining "iron link of mutual crime" emphasizes by contrast Hetty's boundless connectedness: "The links that
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united [Hester] to the rest of human kind—links of flowers, or silk, or gold, or whatever the material—had all been broken. Here was the iron link of mutual crime, which neither he nor she could break. Like all other ties, it brought along with it its obligations” (ch. 13). Though Hetty craves the solitude of the social climber, the novel never allows the links in her world to break. Hester appeared first as a solitary icon to be stared at by crowds, but when we first see Hetty in the dairy, her dimpled fleshliness makes her the equivalent of her environment of butter and cream; she embodies her world rather than transcending it. Once she has fallen into the role of outcast and solitary, her very alienation makes her the equivalent of a larger environment defined by “the agony of the Cross” in a pastoral landscape:

And surely, if there came a traveller to this world who knew nothing of the story of man’s life upon it, this image of agony would seem to him strangely out of place in the midst of this joyous nature. He would not know that hidden behind the apple-blossoms, or among the golden corn, or under the shrouding boughs of the wood, there might be a human heart beating heavily with anguish; perhaps a young blooming girl, not knowing where to turn for refuge from swift-advancing shame; understanding no more of this life of ours than a foolish lost lamb wandering farther and farther in the nightfall on the lonely heath; yet tasting the bitterest of life’s bitterness.

Such things are sometimes hidden among the sunny fields and behind the blossoming orchards; and the sound of the gurgling brook, if you came close to one spot behind a small bush, would be mingled for your ear with a despairing human sob. No wonder man’s religion has much sorrow in it: no wonder he needs a Suffering God. (ch. 35)

More successfully than the spiritually aspiring Dinah, Hetty is linked to the novel’s single divine principle, that of a god become tragically human, suffering alone in nature’s ironic blossoming. Her very isolation, which the narrator initially uses against her, becomes the strongest link to the novel’s somber vision of divine humanity.

But though in her solitary suffering Hetty achieves a connection to divine humanity that the nobler characters fail to reach, she is equated as well with the ironic fertility of George Eliot’s personified Nature, most importantly by a trait that is often used to dismiss her from our moral consideration: her revulsion against children, motherhood, and nurturing, culminating in her aban-
donment of her own child. A facile reading might lead us to think that Mrs. Poyser, who fusses incessantly over her own swarm of children, is the novel’s “natural” woman, but in fact George Eliot’s Nature is, like Hetty, an indifferent mother: “There are so many of us, and our lots are so different: what wonder that Nature’s mood is often in harsh contrast with the great crisis of our lives? We are children of a large family, and must learn, as such children do, not to expect that our hurts will be made much of—to be content with little nurture and caressing, and help each other the more” (ch. 27).

Like her own mother, Nature, Hetty nurtures only herself, proving truer to the design of her world than are the novel’s solicitous believers in the absolute virtue of family and farm. No doubt it is Hetty’s fidelity to the cosmic design of the novel’s world that gives her fall the power to diminish the family at Hall Farm and the larger familial community of Hayslope; like the wife in Augustus Egg’s Past and Present, she opens the composition from enclosure to vastness, “away from the familiar to the strange” (ch. 36). She is all the more structurally potent in that her links with larger cosmic and natural forces are unconscious; her one article of faith is the mirror before which she postures. But this mirror is linked to the magic well of the novel’s central shaping principle, the instrument of the sibylline artist herself: “With a single drop of ink for a mirror, the Egyptian sorcerer undertakes to reveal to any chance comer far-reaching visions of the past. This is what I undertake to do for you, reader” (ch. 1). Typically, Hetty’s mirror is explicitly condemned as vanity but implicitly aligned with the oracular instrument of narrative art: “my strongest effort is to avoid any such arbitrary picture, and to give a faithful account of men and things as they have mirrored themselves in my mind. The mirror is doubtless defective; . . . but I feel as much bound to tell you as precisely as I can what that reflection is, as if I were in the witness-box narrating my experience on oath” (ch. 17). It is fitting that Hetty become the artist’s chief ally, so intricately woven is she into the design of the novel’s world. As with the other fallen women we have examined, the materials of her abasement define her magnitude. Her junction with the cohesive power of Adam Bede’s universe and its vision is subtler and more insidious than in our other novels because, creating to such a large extent from
within the myth rather than making a case from without, George Eliot is under no liberal compulsion to make her outcast character attractive.

Demeaned and exalted, Hetty is the most dramatic manifestation of this peculiarly Victorian vision of the fortunate fall. Moreover, for all her sexuality, her abundant interactions with the natural world, Hetty is oddly devoid of erotic life. George Eliot reminds us constantly that she is ambitious, not passionate, and is thus all the more subversive of her hierarchical community. This radical sexlessness is common to British representations of fallen women, seeming, perhaps, to diminish them further. Françoise Basch, for instance, condemnsl the infantilism of British Victorian fiction compared to the lavish sensuality with which Flaubert's Madame Bovary and Tolstoy's Anna Karenina fall out of the family and out of life. By comparison, the love stories in the British works we have looked at seem remote if not inconceivable. Gaskell's Ruth seems oblivious of any sexuality beyond her indefatigable nursing of her lover; her pregnancy seems a miracle of spontaneous generation, so unaware is she (and we) of what led up to it. Tess has only contempt for Alec, the agent of her fall, reserving her hope of passion for disembodied, ultimately unattainable Angel, though her deepest sympathies spring from the inhuman potency of objects in the landscape. Moreover, the lovers fade out of the action at crucial moments in the heroines' histories, returning only when it is too late: destiny has been determined without them. In art, neither Egg, Brown, nor Rossetti bothers to include in his paintings the love affairs that generated the fall, but portrays only their fruits as shown in the women's tortured postures. No doubt this omission was imposed by Victorian propriety, but it has the interesting result of making each fallen woman essentially autonomous and her own agent. Sexlessness, expressed in the iconographic kinship between the fallen woman and the pure little girl, becomes another avenue whereby these women grow as they fall and take possession of their worlds.

On the one hand, then, as all these works remind us immediately, the fallen woman is captured in various stages of abasement, pronoiness, and self-laceration; no doubt, like some of the episodes

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16 Basch, p. 268.
in more sadistic boarding-school literature, these scenes fed their audiences’ well-known relish for flogging and tales of flogging. These works of art could punish women more effectively for an offtage and unnamed trespass than civilized society was permitted to do. Yet what these visions lose in sensuality and human interest, they gain in ambiguous suggestiveness. By excising love and passion from the fall, and by rendering subtle modulations of power in the fallen woman, they encompass both the pity of the woman’s fall and the transforming power, not of her redemption, but of her will to rise. They mediate between abasement and exaltation, hiding images of woman’s triumph in representations of her punishment.

The chords this myth touched in the Victorian imagination are felt when we look at its impact, not just on art, but on the life of a writer we know well—George Eliot. In her second novel, *The Mill on the Floss*, she pours on Maggie Tulliver all the sympathetic identification that was forbidden to Hetty. In this explicitly autobiographical fiction, the episode of an actual sexual fall becomes vestigial—Maggie’s trespass is an illusion, existing only in its effect on the community and on other lives—for in her mélange of demonic and transforming powers, Maggie seems a fallen woman by nature, in whom any activity is secondary to the intense ambiguous impact of what she is. Manifesting an eerie kinship to Ford Madox Brown’s fallen Madonna, George Eliot’s monumental autobiographical projection is both the witch Defoe imagines in his *History of the Devil*, spreading desolation and punished for it, and her community’s legendary protector, the Virgin of the Flood who sanctifies the spots she visits. The shifting mythic identities that George Eliot sheds upon her heroine suggest the almost magic metamorphosis that the role of fallen woman brought to her own life.

In one of the few expressions of glee she allowed herself, George Eliot wrote to Barbara Bodichon in the year of *Adam Bede’s* great success: “I am a very blessed woman, am I not? to have all this reason for being glad that I have lived, in spite of my sins and sorrows—or rather, by reason of my sins and sorrows.”

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Hetty and Maggie had to be destroyed for the transformations their sins and sorrows caused, but for George Eliot, the transforming power of the myth brought gladness and grace. Whether deliberately, unconsciously, or accidentally, George Eliot seems to have composed her own life so that its fitful, rudderless, and self-doubting first half was alchemized into gold when the austere bluestocking became the fallen woman. In the period of relative ostracism after her elopement with George Henry Lewes, the ugly duckling became a swan, the critic became an artist, and the awkward victim became the sibylline Madonna of the Priory and of England itself, as George Eliot was formed out of the mistakes of Mary Ann Evans.18

The role of fallen woman was so pivotal in George Eliot’s life, functioned so powerfully as the crucible in which unpromising beginnings were formed into unprecedented triumphs, that it is tempting to read her life as a mythic work of Victorian fiction. The apparent abasement and the hidden power of the fall crystallize here as they rarely do in Eliot’s novels, suggesting that despite the role Lewes assumed as George Eliot’s benign Pygmalion, her birth as an artist may have been due to the power of her faith in the unstated implications of her own fall and its potential, not for redemption, but for renewal. When we look at her biography in this broader context, George Eliot’s salvation for us as an artist seems to spring from her own awesomely intelligent appreciation of the conventional role she assumed.

We can never know a life as we think we know a work of art, but if we connect the waxing moon that presides over Augustus Egg’s trilogy, the pervasive visual icon of the fallen Madonna, the apotheosis of Gaskell’s deathly Ruth, the cosmic connections inherent in Hetty Sorrel’s selfish isolation, the alliance with monumentality in Hardy’s and Rossetti’s victims to the transmutation and metamorphosis George Eliot underwent as a fallen woman, we find a life responding to the mythic suggestions of works of art. In looking at the fallen woman, not only as she was but as she was created, we see a power transcending the retrieval of respectibil-

18 In his review article, “The Secrets of George Eliot,” Alexander Welsh equates the secret of Lewes’s household with the secret identity of George Eliot, novelist; this hidden and potent entanglement suggests that Mary Ann Evans’s simultaneous metamorphoses into “Mrs. Lewes” and “George Eliot” could not have happened without each other. See Yale Review, 68 (1979), 589–97.
ity: the alchemical possibilities of the outcast, a half-acknowledged image of revolution and transfiguration, one divine-demonic vehicle of faith in an age of doubt.

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