A Study of George Eliot  
The Mother Tongue of our Imagination

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(I)

The wood I walk in on this mild May day, with the young yellow-brown foliage of the oaks between me and the blue sky, the white star-flowers and the blue-eyed speedwell and the ground ivy at my feet — what grove of tropic palms, what strange ferns or splendid broad-petalled blossoms, could ever thrill such deep and delicate fibres within me as this home-scene? These familiar flowers, these well-remembered bird-notes, this sky with its fitful brightness, these furrowed and grassy fields, each with a sort of personality given to it by the capricious hedgerows — such things as these are the mother tongue of our imagination, the language that is laden with all the subtle inextricable associations the fleeting hours of our childhood left behind them. Our delight in the sunshine on the deep bladed grass today, might be no more than the faint perception of wearied souls, if it were not for the sunshine and the grass in the far-off years, which still live in us and transform our perception into love. (1)

George Eliot can't help making some comment on her literary thought just at the end of Chapter 7 in The Mill on the Floss. This
description has come after the scene of Maggie and Tom’s brotherly love. Eliot first of all needs a long time to shape their form of love with “the language that is laden with all the subtle inextricable associations.” The long time is regarded as a key to open Eliot’s literary world. We should look at and consider our human life over a long time, such as ten years, twenty years, or even a whole life. Eliot’s conception of true love should also be understood over a long period of time. The repeated coming seasons and the repeated conducted lives are closely entangled in our memory. Some harmony will be seen between nature and human beings in memory. There are various memories in our childhood: “the flowers that we used to gather with our tiny fingers as we sat lisping ourselves on the grass” and “these familiar flowers, these well-remembered bird-notes, this sky with its fitful brightness, these furrowed and grass fields, each with a sort of personality given to it by the capricious hedgerows — such as these are the mother tongue of our imagination.” Here the words, “a sort of personality” are the key expression of natural harmony. Eliot tries hard to find out or create harmonious space in novels.

“The language that is laden with all the subtle inextricable associations the fleeting hours of our childhood left behind them,” is also a key word to read Eliot’s novels to point out her cry for true love. The power of our memories must be recognized to make us feel happy in our life. Why does Eliot put so much value on memories, especially a lot of tiny memories? “Our delight in the sunshine on the deep-bladed grass today might be no more than the faint perception of wearied souls if it were not the sunshine and the grass in the far-off years which still live in us and transform our perception into love,” — this conception of love is
indentical to the pleasant harmony written in *Daffodils (2)* by William Wordsworth: “I wandered lonely as a cloud/ That floats on high o’er vales and hills, / When all at once I saw a crowd, / A host, of golden daffodils;/ Beside the lake, beneath the trees, / Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.” The harmony of the earth will be understood in the nicely-knitted words “cloud” “vales” “hills” “a crowd of golden daffodils” “lake” “trees” and “breeze”. “The waves beside them danced but they / Out-did the sparkling waves in glee:/ A poet could not but be gay. / In such a jocund company:/ I gazed — and gazed — — but little thought/ What wealth the show to me had brought.” This poet is no doubt Wordsworth. He is looking at the beautiful scene of nature at his hometown of the Lake District. The word “love” used by Eliot is related to the beauty and the poet’s memories, which will make us feel happier. The memories seem to be organized unconsciously in order to give us a lot of bliss owing to the Mother Tongue of our Imagination, which is constantly speaking to us, who could hardly realize it without having a sensitive soul like a poet’s with ”that inward eye” ; “For oft, when on my couch I lie/ In vacant or in pensive mood, / They flashed upon that inward eye/ Which is the bliss of solitude;/ And then my heart with pleasure fills, / And dances with the daffodils.” “They flashed upon that inward eye,” means that the unconsciously-appearing daffodils which are reflected suddenly in the author’s mind. It is our invisible deep movements that Eliot tries hard to depict for the exact illumination of the reality or the world around us. Eliot’s fundamental form of enjoying this earth is to realize the invisible beauty with “that inward eye.” Wordsworth tells us how wonderfully memories are knitted with his own unique imagination closely related to the Mother Tongue of our
Imagination.

Maggie, who is fond of reading, loves Tom: "Tom's not fond of reading. I love Tom so dearly, Luke — better than anybody else in the world. When he grows up, I shall keep his house, and we shall always live together." (3) This love of Maggie's has been closely entwined with the memories related to "the subtle inextricable associations the fleeting hours of childhood had left behind them." "But she had forgotten all about the fish and was looking dreamily at the glassy water. . . . . There was nothing to mar her delight in the whispers and the dreamy silences when she listened to the light dipping sounds of the rising fish and the gentle rustling, as if the willow and the reeds and the water had their happy whisperings also. Maggie thought it would make a very nice heaven to sit by the pool in that way and never be scolded." (4) Maggie's love is so deeply rooted that she is to die with him in the flood at the end of the book. The deeply rooted love which has grown for a long time is what Eliot wants to express in her novels. Their happy memories are a key to drive Maggie to Tom after her separating from her sweetheart. In this book nature and memory play an important role in Maggie's love. Why does Eliot put so much value on them? Eliot's constant challenging spirit can be read there. She wants to illustrate the close relation between us and our nature with true love. The invisible winding-fibres of memories are one of the most important approaches toward illuminating the reality through the Mother Tongue of our Imagination.

Life is rolling and piling up various memories one after another. Being with Tom, Maggie feels as if she were in heaven. Her wonderful feeling is caused by nature and Tom. Here this combination of nature
and Tom will remain a vivid memory in her beyond time and space. Unspeakably happy memories like this will result in her final decision to lead her to Tom. Maggie’s memories with Tom have been so deeply rooted in her that her brotherly love seems to touch her in the crucial situation. Perhaps Maggie unconsciously chooses the happy relation with him which is made up of the wonderful memories the fleeting hours of childhood have left behind in them.

In *Romola* Tito betrays Baldassarre even though he was raised by Baldassarre with his sincere love: “And if there is any love of which they are not widowed, it must be the love that is rooted in memories and distils perpetually the sweet balms of fidelity and forbearing tenderness.”(5) Baldassarre can’t excuse him for his cruel conduct. This means Tito’s death. The death of his love is equal to that of his life. This also represents how important true love is. George Eliot makes constant attempts to find it out by setting up various situations. After all her love is justifiable. Her writing helps her to find the answers to the questions of love. Reading *Middlemarch* (6) one notices that this love of Maggie’s will develop and change to the new love of Dorothea’s, for Dorothea is to get married to a young man owing to the death of Casaubon, feeling the severe pressure from the heavy relation with the world. Her love for Casaubon was once so blind that she had had no trouble about the big gap between their ages. He was sure to be the too old to get married to her. Her loss of love was also caused by finding out too narrow-minded Casaubon. So the main point of her love is to consider true love formed in a long time. Her temporary, blind love isn’t true love for Dorothea. Their love must be cleared up in the end of life. This is what George Eliot truly wants to appeal to readers for.
(II)

That is a simple scene, reader. But it is almost certain that you, too, have been in love — perhaps, even more than once, though you may not choose to say so to all your lady friends. If so, you will no more think the slight words, the timid looks, the tremulous touches, by which two human souls approach each other gradually, like two little quivering rain-streams, before they mingle into one — you will no more think these things trivial, than you will think the first-detected signs of coming spring trivial, though they be but a faint, indescribable something in the air and in the song of the birds, and the tiniest perceptible budding on the hedgerow branches. Those slight words and looks and touches are part of the soul's language; and the finest language, I believe, is chiefly made up of unimposing words, such as "light," "sound," "stars," "music" — words really not worth looking at, or hearing, in themselves, any more than "chips" or "sawdust." It is only that they happen to be the signs of something unspeakably great and beautiful. I am of opinion that love is a great and beautiful thing too; and if you agree with me, the smallest signs of it will not be chips and sawdust to you: they will rather be like those little words, "light" and "music," stirring the long-winding fibres of your memory and enriching your present with your most precious past. (7)

Here we can more clearly read what true love is for George Eliot. "To transform our perception into love" in the first quotation is a key
clue to understand Eliot's meaning of love; "The tiniest words" "the timid looks" and "the tremulous touches" of human beings in "the far-off years which still live in us and transform our perception into love." As for human love Eliot needs morality such as sincerity, or justice which is built up over a long period of time on a strong basis of her own thoughts and experiences. Eliot' constant efforts are made to approach our reality through love. "Love is a great and beautiful thing," and creates human harmony. It is tiny things that give us some important changes in our daily life. The changes sometimes or often bring out a fatal or happy situation for a better or worse life. We often miss this significant fact and go on living till the situations become distinctly clear. What is the real human relation for us? What is the real life for us? These questions could be answered in Eliot's novels.

The non-verbal communication must be thought much of. "These slight words and looks and touches are part of the soul's language, and the finest language, I believe, is chiefly made up of unimposing words, such as "light," "sound," "start," "music" — words really not worth looking at or hearing, in themselves, any more than "chips" or "sawdust."" We can understand how Eliot is interested in the verbal and non-verbal relationship and the difference between words and language: the words may be harmoniously organized into the world of language. Words are used consciously or unconsciously in our daily life. There are many ways to approach our reality whose connection with words and love is what Eliot regards as a most important point to understanding what reality is. Eliot's attack on reality is so positive that she constantly tries hard to cut into it and finds out its truth and creates her wonderful literary world with it. First of all Eliot looks at the reality
as it is and then unwinds the intricately entwined reality with her own thoughts to seek after a better world for us. Our daily activities must be seized in a rational way enough to make us feel satisfied with our life. It is hoped that a reader can’t help looking at the reality the way Eliot hopes for him to do. This close relationship between Eliot and her readers is what she expects before setting out to write a novel. Eliot’s novels positively speak to us in order that we had better know much about a reality full of love, beauty and mystery.

George Eliot’s viewpoint or focus is on a tiny sign of love. That’s her big success in revealing the reality which we generally miss so easily: “Unimposing words, such as “light,” “sound,” “stars,” “music” – – words really not worth looking at or hearing in themselves.” So one should always train one’s soul’s language not to fall into “wearied souls,” otherwise we may perhaps end our life without appreciating so many beauties and mysteries which enrich and brighten our life. Eliot helps us to open the door of such a world with various keys hidden in her novels. The movements of the complicated world are very difficult to understand. Eliot’s systematic insight into reality is quite significant even today. “I am of opinion that love is a great and beautiful thing, too, and if you agree with me, the smallest sign of it will not be chips and sawdust to you.” This means that we are surrounded by the smallest signs of love in our everyday life. On the whole we are not aware of them. It may be said that this world moves happily for those who try to notice the smallest signs of love, which “will rather be like those little words “light” and “music” stirring the long-winding fibres of your memory and enriching your present with your most precious past.” How to respond to “light” and “music” does mean how to understand
the reality and the meaning of love. Our memory is much composed of long winding-fibres which have been formed in the childhood. Light or music is a key to the door of the memory especially to have your heart and mind stirred or to have your present enriched with your most splendid past. Eliot is good at inserting the value of the long time into her novels. The long period of time is inevitable for true love with various memories. The Mother Tongue of our Imagination has much to do with true love in *The Mill on the Floss*.

(III)

We’ll see how light is described in connection with the Mother Tongue of our Imagination in *Romola*.

He showed no other change from the two months and more that had passed since his first appearance in the weather-stained tunic and hose, than added radiance of good fortune, which is like the just perceptible perfecting of a flower after it has drunk a morning’s sunbeams. (8)

The heroine, Romola begins to feel her heart moved violently by Tito’s bright smile. Tito’s smile and its bright image remain in Romola as a small sign of love. Romola’s love is described as “the just perceptible perfecting of a flower after it has drunk a morning sunbeams.” Two months and more have passed since they met for the first time. During the period her love has heightened. In the above-written quotation there is an interesting simile including “a flower” and “a morning sunbeams”. Time is needed to deepen Romola’s love in connection with
a morning sunbeam. Light, time and Tito are important for Romola’s love.

Each woman creates in her own likeness the love-tokens that are offered to her; and Romola’s deep calm happiness encompassed Tito like the rich but quiet evening light which dissipates all unrest. (9)

Eliot’s aim for this scene is related to making use of “part of the soul’s language”. As far as “the rich but quiet evening light which dissipated all unrest” is concerned, the light no doubt has something to do with the Mother Tongue of our Imagination. Eliot’s positive attitude towards the light is meaningful in illuminating our inner heart and mind. It is also necessary to know how the Mother Tongue of our Imagination will play an important role in Romola’s immature love for Tito and in Tito’s faithless love for her. The faithful love which will prove to be true in a long time is what Romola holds on to in her relation with Tito.

It seemed to her as if this first vision of death must alter the daylight for her for ever more. (10)

Full of grief Romola copes with her brother’s death. Her shock is represented by the words “as if this first vision of death must alter the daylight for her for ever more”. His advance notice that her coming marriage will result in failure is so ominous that she is afraid of something wrong in Tito. It seems that Romola will have to see
something dark in the daylight. This description makes this novel sound quite unnatural for some readers but Eliot doesn’t think so at all. Concerning the meaning of love in line with the conception of the Mother Tongue of our Imagination, it doesn’t change at all. In other words Eliot seeks true love by means of the light defined as one of unimposing words of which “the finest language is chiefly made up”. In this sense it doesn’t matter whether Romola marries or not.

Tito’s touch and beseeching voice recalled her; and now in the warm sunlight she saw that rich dark beauty which seemed to gather round it all images of joy — purple vines festooned between the elms, the strong corn perfecting itself under the vibrating heart, bright winged creatures hurrying and resting among the flowers, round limbs beating the earth in gladness with cymbals held aloft, light melodies chanted to the thrilling rhythms of strings — all objects and all sounds that tell of Nature revelling in her force. (11)

Romola’s strong feeling of blind love seems to blow away her sadness. Here Eliot can’t help writing of her as a girl who still isn’t wise enough to seize Tito as he is. Eliot tells us that Romola should know much about the reality. Tito’s words, looks and touches are the source of deepening her love. The power of blind love is thought to be working in her. Eliot also tries to write her novels according to the concept of “the soul’s language”; “these slight words and looks and touches are part of the soul’s language and the finest language, I believe, is chiefly made up of unimposing words such as “light,” “sound,” “start,”
Romola would some day tell him that she loved him. One day in Greece, as he was leaning over a wall in the sunshine, a little black-eyed peasant girl, who had rested her waterpot on the wall, crept gradually nearer and nearer to him, and at last shyly asked him to kiss her, putting up her round olive cheek very innocently.

(12)

Tito met with the love that came in an unexpected way. This is the scene where he was once in Greece. Tito seems so handsome that he was used to childish love. This memory of Tito's is influential in his positive love for Romola; “the smallest signs of love will not be chips or sawdust” to you but they will rather be like these little words “light” and “music,” stirring the long-winding fibres of your memory and enriching your present with your most precious past.” Tito's love for Romola is childish, but not true. This fact is what Eliot insists on.

Strange, bewildering transition from those pale images of sorrow and death to this bright youthfulness, as of a sun-god who knew nothing of night! What thought could reconcile that worn anguish in her brother's face — that straining after something invisible — with this satisfied strength and beauty, and make it intelligible that they belonged to the same world? Or was there never any reconciling of them, but only a blind worship of clashing deities, first in mad joy and then in wailing? (13)
The author must be distant from the characters and create them naturally with her true love. Here is the scene in which Romola saw "the pale images of sorrow and death" in connection with her brother's advice. There is a big difference between the figure and Tito in terms of their reflection in the mirror of Romola's heart and mind. In addition the scene is in the warm sunlight. Tito intends to manipulate the image of light to let her dissipate the ominous images of her brother. And he half succeeds in it, for she still loves him much. Eliot has Tito play a role of a temporary manipulator of light with the slight words, looks and touches.

'... I should like to see you under that southern sun, lying among the flowers, subdued into mere enjoyment, while I bent over you and touched the lute and sang to you some little unconscious strain that seemed all one with the light and the warmth. You have never known that happiness of the nymphs, my Romola.'

'No; but I have dreamed of it often since you came. I am very thirsty for a deep draught of joy — for a life all bright like you. But we will not think of it now, Tito; it seems to me as if there would always be pale sad faces among the flowers, and eyes that looks in vain. Let us go.' (14)

Eliot still lets Tito continue to abuse the conception of the Mother Tongue of our Imagination for her love; "These familiar flowers, these well-remembered bird-notes, this sky with its fitful brightness, these furrowed and grassy fields, each with a sort of personality given to it
by the capricious hedgerows — such as these are the mother tongue of our imagination”: “the finest language... such as “light,” “sound,” “stars,” “music.”” Tito tries to mingle Romola’s unfavourable fancy with the bright image to let her put out the pale images of sorrow and death of her brother. Romola at last, won’t accept Tito’s offer. She hasn’t been foolish enough to keep being deceived by Tito. Now, Romola can’t escape from the mysterious fancy of her brother. In a sense the long-time memories of her brother have something to do with letting her love Tito no more. The memories of her brother are more intense, or deeper than Tito’s. Romola’s refusal is to drive him into a bottomless terrible fear.

“. . . And I beg you to consider, before you take any step or utter any word on the subject, what will be the consequences of your placing yourself in opposition to me, and trying to exhibit your husband in the odious light which your own distempered feelings cast over him. (15)

Further Tito continues to persuade her to trust him with the image of sunshine but in vain. “This odious light” is the big sign of her desperate distrust in him. Tito’s wicked manipulation has totally come to an end. He has depended upon the image of light without understanding the reality. Here he, on the contrary, notices himself in “the odious light.” His selfish love is collapsing without bringing out any bright light of her true love. Romola feels pain at the words and looks of her brother, for his advance notice about Tito has come true.
But her mind was roused to resistance of impressions that, from being obvious phantoms, seemed to be getting solid in the daylight. As a strong body struggles against fumes with the more violence when they begin to be stifling, a strong soul struggles against phantasies with all the more alarmed energy when they threaten to govern in the place of thought. (16)

It’s recognizable that Eliot uses the word of light effectively. The phantoms of Romola’s brother are also to be put off in the daylight. In this sense Eliot’s emphasis is put on how to apply to her own form, the Mother Tongue of our Imagination, properly in order to let Romola come to know a little of the real feelings of Christians including her brother. She has become wiser:

But the persistent presence of these memories, linking themselves in her imagination with her actual lot, gave her a glimpse of understanding into the lives which had before lain utterly aloof from her sympathy — the lives of the men and women who were led by such inward images and voices. (17)

“Such inwards images and voices” may be the invisible light of God in Christianity. Eliot’s light is different from it. After all, it depends upon us readers whether we realize the value of the light or not. This is what Eliot wants to express in her novels. But Eliot’s light is universal and it is with the Mother Tongue of our Imagination that George Eliot contributes to a new current of the twentieth century English literature, “stream of consciousness” as a great woman writer
in the Victorian Era.

Notes
4) Ibid., p. 47.
8) *Romola*, op. cit., p. 84.
9) Ibid., p. 119.
10) Ibid., p. 58.
11) Ibid., p. 177.
12) Ibid., p. 93.
13) Ibid., p. 177.
14) Ibid., p. 179.
15) Ibid., p. 283.
16) Ibid., p. 317.
17) Loc. cit.