

## Article

# Religion Counts: Faithful Realism and Historical Representation in George Eliot's *Romola*

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**Abstract:** This article explores the importance of faith in the Victorian historical novel, with a particular focus on George Eliot's *Romola* (1862–1863), and rethinks past secularist approaches to the genre. *Romola* was arguably the most meticulously researched historical novel of the nineteenth century. Set in Florence from 1492 to 1498, the novel traces the rise and fall of the Dominican friar, Girolamo Savonarola, as he pursued the spiritual and political reform of the city, leading to his excommunication and martyrdom. Despite the religious setting of the novel, Eliot's painstaking effort to imagine a realistic historical representation of Florentine society has often been approached in secular terms as a tour de force of the author's humanist vision of a progressive march towards modernity. Building on recent work in postsecular studies, this essay rethinks the novel's historical realism in terms of Christian faith. Centering on the spiritual journey of the protagonist, Romola de' Bardi, the novel presents a faithful depiction of Renaissance Florence by imagining historical representation as an act of faith. Drawing on Jacques Derrida's essay, "Faith and Knowledge", the article analyzes how Eliot frames the significance of the novel's historical representation as an act of faith that one's life is bound meaningfully to those of others.

**Keywords:** Christianity; faith; postsecularism; Jacques Derrida; Girolamo Savonarola; Renaissance Italy; historical novel; realism; George Eliot; *Romola*



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## 1. Introduction

On 21 March 1860, George Eliot put the finishing touches on her second novel, *The Mill on the Floss*, and set out three days later for a much-needed holiday in Italy with her partner, George Henry Lewes. On 2 July 1860, she wrote to her friend Sara Hennell about the memorable trip, which was “one of those journies (*sic*) that seem to divide one's life in two by the new ideas they suggest and the new veins of interest they open” (qtd. in Eliot 1998, p. 327). Eliot wrote in her journal that year that the aim of the trip was “the hope of the new elements it would bring into [her] culture” (ibid., p. 336). Her fiction, up to this point, had centered mostly on the English rural life of her, or her father's, youth, but, while in Florence, Lewes persuaded her to write a historical romance about the fifteenth-century Italian religious and political reformer, Girolamo Savonarola (Haight [1968] 1992, p. 326). Eliot had suffered greatly in completing *The Mill*. Lewes lamented in a letter to her publisher that she “is getting her eyes redder and *swollener* every morning as she lives through her tragic story” (qtd. in ibid., p. 321). Eliot's early provincial fiction has retrospectively, and with good reason, been labeled “realist” (Auyoung 2018; Brilmyer 2022; Freedgood 2019; Greiner 2012; Jaffe 2016; Shaw 1999; Yeazell 2008). Her meticulously written novels, however, came with much suffering. Lewes suggested the Italian trip and new book project, in part, to break Eliot's painful reflections on her past. An Italian romance was just the thing. In an article published fifteen years before in the *Westminster Review*, Lewes declares that to compose a romance one “needs only to study Scott and the historical novelists; to ‘cram’ for the necessary information about costumes, antiquated forms of speech, and the leading political events of the epoch chosen” (qtd. in Haight [1968] 1992, p. 353). An Italian

romance, in Lewes's mind, represented a sort of holiday from the pressures of realistic novel writing. Eliot proved him wrong.

Rather than writing the Italian romance Lewes intended, Eliot, after eighteen months of intensive research of materials in Italian, French, German, Latin, and Greek, wrote a realist novel on steroids (Henry 2012, p. 132; see also Thompson 2006, 2014, 2018). Her new book project, *Romola* (1862–1863), cost her more than red and swollen eyes. Eliot in her own words: “I began it a young woman,—I finished it an old woman” (qtd. in Haight [1968] 1992, p. 362). Set in Florence from 1492 to 1498, the novel traces the rise and fall of the Dominican friar, Girolamo Savonarola, as he pursued the spiritual and political reform of the city, leading to his excommunication and martyrdom. The novelist placed Savonarola at the center of the novel, as Lewes originally suggested, but strove for something much more than mere hagiography; she sought, rather, “a full vision of the medium in which a character moves as of the character itself” (qtd. in Fleishman 2010, p. 118). This meant imagining more than a hundred fictional characters and historical figures conversing in the streets and homes of Renaissance Florence. Not an easy task, especially when, as Lewes laments in a letter to her editor, “there is a weight upon her mind as if Savonarola and friends ought to be speaking Italian instead of English” (qtd. in Hughes 1999, p. 242). Yes, quite a weight it was, essentially an impossible project for Eliot that, ultimately, exposed the limits of the genre of the historical novel itself.

Despite the religious setting of the novel, Eliot's painstaking effort to imagine a realistic historical representation of Florentine society has often been approached in secular terms as a tour de force of the author's humanist vision of a progressive march towards modernity (Anderson 2015, p. 143; Carroll 1998, p. 106; Knoepfelmacher 1965, p. 27; Li 2000, p. 95). Drawing on recent work in postsecular studies, this essay rethinks the novel's historical realism in terms of Christian faith. Whereas some recent postsecular critics have called attention to the devotional aspects of Eliot's fiction (Orr 2018; Perkin 2009; Qualls 2019; Vance 2013), this essay builds on and extends the topic of faith to address questions of historical and realist representation. Centering on the spiritual journey of the protagonist, Romola de' Bardi, the novel presents a faithful depiction of Renaissance Florence by imagining historical representation as an act of faith. Drawing upon Jacques Derrida's essay, “Faith and Knowledge”, the article analyzes how Eliot frames the significance of the novel's historical representation as a belief that one's life is bound meaningfully to those of others. Eliot places the question of faith at the center of the book's plot, imagining the novel's accurate representation of Italian history in terms of Romola's spiritual struggle to remain faithful to Savonarola's program of moral reform. *Romola* demonstrates how faith and history go hand in hand in the Victorian historical novel and offers important insights into a faithful realism at the heart of Eliot's fiction.

## 2. The Victorian Historical Novel and the Postsecular Turn

Sir Walter Scott published his first historical novel, *Waverley*, in 1814 to much fanfare. The historical novel quickly developed into a staple of nineteenth-century British literature. Major novelists of the period, such as Charles Dickens, George Eliot, William Makepeace Thackeray, Charlotte Brontë, Anthony Trollope, and Wilkie Collins, all tried their hand at historical fiction at least once with various degrees of success. The Victorian historical novel provided a means of reflecting on an emerging secular modernity that challenged a Christian providential understanding of history. We see the fault lines of such a conflict, for instance, in Charles Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), which famously depicts the years leading up the French Revolution and eventual culmination in the Terror, focalized through the perspectives of competing English and French rivals, Sidney Carton and Charles Darnay. The novel reflects on the French Revolution's instrumental role in the emergence of secular modernity and addresses the moral responsibilities individuals possess towards one another within an increasingly secularized world. The novel memorably questions why one would sacrifice their life for another person and explores the significance of such a sacrifice. In the final chapters of the novel, after setting himself on a path towards his

imminent death, Carton repeats to himself three times, “I am the resurrection and the life, saith the Lord: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: and whosoever liveth and believeth in me, shall never die” (Dickens [1859] 2003, pp. 325–27). His recitation of John 11:25–26 might strike some readers as surprising, if not jarring, having been given no clue as to his religious beliefs prior to this moment but, rather, associating him with a self-professed dissolute life. Certainly, Carton would not be the first person to discover religion on their way to their execution. Dickens has his protagonist repeat the words for a great dramatic effect one final time, moments before his death by guillotine. Critics have read the Englishman’s sacrifice of his life for his French rival in relation to Christ’s sacrifice for humankind (Alter [1969] 1987; Butterworth 2016; Cotsell 1998; Cunningham 2008; Knight 2019; Sanders 1978). In two recent influential readings, Jan-Melissa Schramm persuasively situates this sacrifice in relation to theological discussions about the “Atonement controversy of the 1850s” (Schramm 2012, p. 140), and Ilana M. Blumberg insightfully analyzes the “economics and ethics” of Carton’s death through a Feuerbachian reading of the “human species as the sacred” (Blumberg 2013, p. 94). Building on this important work, this essay explores the role faith plays in the genre of the Victorian historical novel.

I start with *A Tale of Two Cities* to ask some broader questions about the function of faith in imagining historical representation in the Victorian novel, which has, until quite recently, been approached in predominantly secular terms. Georg Lukács’s magisterial work, *The Historical Novel* (1937), continues to cast a long shadow over discussions of historical representation in nineteenth-century European fiction. Adopting a Marxist “materialistic treatment of literary history,” Lukács explores “the interaction between the historical spirit and the great genres of literature which portray the totality of history” (Lukács [1937] 1983, pp. 13, 15). He celebrates the fiction of the founder of the modern historical novel, Sir Walter Scott, for his “middle way” of approaching “historical reality” through the perspective of a “mediocre” hero who does not accomplish any great historical deeds but, rather, embodies broader “social trends and historical forces” (Lukács [1937] 1983, pp. 33–34). Lukács lauds Scott’s novels for their “historical faithfulness” and for his novels’ capacity to represent “the real social and economic basis of popular life” (Lukács [1937] 1983, p. 59). In contrast, Lukács only mentions Dickens’s *A Tale of Two Cities* in passing in order to lament his “petty bourgeois humanism and idealism” that reduces the French Revolution to a “romantic background” rather than uncovering its social and economic causes (Lukács [1937] 1983, p. 59). In Lukács’s parlance, Dickens has been faithless to French history.

What difference would it make to think about faithful realism in the Victorian historical novel in postsecular rather than secular terms? In his effort to analyze the “totality of history,” Lukács assumes as an article of faith a secularist understanding of modernity that privileges “disenchantment” and assumes the inevitable decline of religious beliefs (Vance 2013, p. vi). Recent research on the Victorian historical novel critiques and complicates Lukács’s seminal work but leaves the secular framing of its argument in place (Buchanan 2017; De Groot 2010; Duncan 1992; Maxwell 2009; Sanders 1978). For Lukács, the historical novel carries the potential to present an “objective prehistory of the present”, and history is “something which is not alien and incomprehensible to the human spirit” (Lukács [1937] 1983, p. 231). We share the same problems with the past but in a “different and specific form” (ibid.). Such an assertion, however, rests not on historical materialism but rather on faith: a faith in the mutual comprehensibility of the past and present, a faith in social novels to carry significance for readers, and a fundamental faith in the receptivity of the human spirit to care for others. Dickens emphasizes the importance of faith in historical representation not only through Carton’s belief in Christian salvation but, moreover, through Madame Defarge’s willingness to give up her life for the cause of the Revolution. The novelist imagines revolutionaries dancing the Carmagnole and “feeding” la Guillotine as abject forms of worship, ritual, and sacredness (Alter [1969] 1987; Rosen 1998; Sorensen 2013). The novel’s ending, however, suggests the inadequacy of such forms of secular faith as a basis for social collectivity and gestures towards the importance of

spiritual faith. Mark Knight argues Dickens introduces a “conversion narrative” in order to imagine a “fictional solution to the chaos of the French Revolution” (Knight 2019, p. 55). Such a faith extends not only between Carton and a community of believers represented in the novel but, moreover, between the historical novel and its readers. Many critics too easily lose sight of the fact Dickens was a Christian novelist writing for a Christian audience (Cunningham 2008, p. 255), even if he did so within a contested field of evangelical writers (Knight 2019, pp. 72–76). Pace Lukács, economic and social forces represented in the novel have little meaning without faith.

Three years after the publication of *A Tale of Two Cities*, George Eliot took up this matter of faithful historical realism in more explicitly Christian terms in her novel *Romola*. Whereas Dickens gestures towards the significance of Christian salvation in the final pages of his historical novel, Eliot offers a more sustained reflection on the relationship between spiritual faith and historical representation in *Romola*. The novelist turns to fifteenth-century Florence to imagine the divine in the commonplace life of the distant past in a way, resembling the manner in which Victorian writers like Eliot and Lewes discovered the divine in natural history (King 2019). Amy King focuses on Eliot’s “paranaturalist realism” and “theology of nature” in her early fiction in the 1850s, in which the author finds “aesthetic wonder” in the “commonplaceness” of natural life, leading to reverence and “even worshipful . . . regard for it” (King 2019, pp. 168–70). She suggests the novelist felt comfortable drawing upon the religious language of “reverent natural histories” in her writings despite the fact she was “no longer a Christian herself” (ibid., pp. 169, 171). My analysis builds on such an approach but offers a more nuanced account of Eliot’s complex religious evolution and its impact on her novels. If, as King argues, the novelist adopts a “Feuerbachian emptying of God from the everyday” in her early fiction (ibid., p. 171), *Romola* marks an important shift in Eliot’s writing from a secular anthropological study of religion to an increasingly postsecular and ecumenical interest in spiritual belief and the sacred. We see this religious turn in Eliot’s framing of Catholic martyrdom for a largely Protestant audience, a widening spiritual interest that would culminate in her representation of the Jewish faith in her final novel, *Daniel Deronda* (McKelvy 2007, p. 229). The novelist presents in *Romola* what Paul Ricoeur would term a “postcritical faith” that has undergone and continues to subject itself to rational critique (Ricoeur 1970, p. 28). Eliot would not return to the Christian faith of her youth but neither would she ignore how the secular and the spiritual were inextricably intertwined in modernity (Branch and Knight 2018, p. 494). The novel does not represent religious faith in a mystified, hagiographic account of Savonarola but, rather, in the mundane details of everyday life surrounding his final years. For Eliot, a faithful representation of the past offers glimpses into the sacred and the divine at a key historical moment in early modernity. The Italian Renaissance marks not simply the advent of secularism but, moreover, a corresponding proliferation of performative faith.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Lukács did not say a word about Eliot’s fiction in his hefty tome on the historical novel. Subsequent literary critics have attempted to fill this gap by approaching historical representation in the novel in secular terms. At first blush, this might seem a little surprising. George Eliot published her first work of fiction, *Scenes of Clerical Life*, in 1857 and her final novel, *Daniel Deronda*, in 1876. Over the course of her two-decade career as a novelist, Eliot consistently addressed questions of religious faith in her fiction and incorporated ministers and spiritual leaders into all of her works, including nine Anglican clergymen (Barton, Gilfil, Tryan, Irwine, Stelling, Kenn, Crackenthorp, Casaubon, and Farebrother), two dissenting preachers (Morris and Lyon), one Catholic priest (Savonarola), and a Jewish visionary (Cohen). Despite the ubiquity of religion in her novels, much literary criticism still freely chooses to ignore religious contexts and characters in her works (Knight 2019, pp. 16–21), opting instead to focus on secular humanist concepts like “sympathy” (Albrecht 2022; Ermarth 1985; Jewusiak 2014; Reilly 2013; Tegan 2013). This occlusion has a lot to do with the secular focus of the humanities today but can also be located in elements of Eliot’s biography. Raised within the Anglican Church, Eliot had



a brief spell of evangelical fervor as a teenager, particularly through the influence of her teacher, Maria Lewis (Haight [1968] 1992, p. 18). After moving to Coventry, Eliot befriended the freethinking Bray and Hennell families and, by the age of twenty-two, broke with the Christian church (ibid., pp. 39–40). Eliot began to cut her teeth as a writer translating into English two key works in German Higher Criticism, Friedrich Strauss's *Life of Jesus* in 1846 and Ludwig Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity* in 1854, which sought to historicize the Bible in secular terms. In the conclusion of Eliot's translation of his work, Feuerbach claims, "the substance and object of religion is altogether human" and the "consciousness of God is nothing else than the consciousness of the species" (Eliot 2000, p. 69). After moving to London in 1851 and working as the shadow editor of the influential journal *The Westminster Review*, she became increasingly influenced by Auguste Comte's work on Positivism and the Religion of Humanity (Anger 2005, p. 112; Bullen 1994, p. 214; Knoepfelmacher 1965, pp. 39–40; Li 2000, p. 8; Paris 1962, p. 418), which translated many Catholic principles into a secular humanist worldview, emphasizing the social need for sympathy and altruism (Wright 1986, p. 2). On top of her intellectual development, Eliot's nearly twenty-five-year relationship with the married George Henry Lewes pushed her beyond the pale morally and socially for many Victorian Christians, particularly women. Perhaps unsurprisingly, much literary criticism still assumes Eliot was an agnostic and approaches her fiction in secular terms, often associated with her early interest in Positivism.

A postsecular understanding of modernity, however, can help to rethink the long tradition of Positivist readings of history in the novel. So what was Positivism? In a nutshell, Auguste Comte envisioned three stages of history: Theological (fetishism, polytheism, monotheism, and Catholicism), Metaphysical (Protestantism, Deism, and the French Revolution), and Positivism (science) (Wright 1986, p. 24). Comte developed his notion of the Religion of Humanity to fill the "spiritual vacuum" left by a perceived decline of Christianity (ibid., p. 2). J.B. Bullen argues, Eliot's "familiarity with Comte's analysis of history" led to her to choose "the setting of the fifteenth century in Italy" since it illuminates "the most crucial moment in the moral history of the West" as it transitioned from the Theological to the Metaphysical period (Bullen 1994, pp. 215, 222). Many Victorian writers imagined Savonarola as an "Italian Luther" (Sheets 1997, p. 324), but Eliot did not (Bullen 1994, p. 227), unlike Harriet Beecher Stowe in her historical novel, *Agnes of Sorrento* (1861–1862). According to Bullen, Eliot's "admiration" for Savonarola "resembles Comte's for High Catholicism", and the novelist envisions the Dominican friar "not so much a precursor of Luther as a precursor of Comte" (Bullen 1994, p. 229). Maria LaMonaca reads *Romola* as "Eliot's Comtean allegory of human development. . . that culminates, full circle, in a sober embrace of secularism" (LaMonaca 2007, pp. 164, 171). Hao Li, likewise, envisions the novel's positivist framing of history as "a secular ideal of humanitarianism" (Li 2000, p. 95). In such readings, *Romola* represents not just a secular history but also denotes a celebration of the history of secularism itself.

Important work in postsecular studies, however, has sought to rethink this narrow and distorted view of Eliot and her novel. Recent criticism has suggested Eliot's spiritual views cannot be conflated with those of Strauss, Feuerbach, or Comte (Hodgson 2000, pp. 7–8; Orr 2018, p. 7) and she "had not completely forsaken the reaches of Christianity" (Karl 1995, p. 360). Even after her loss of faith at the age of twenty-two, she continued to attend Unitarian church services throughout her life and "found comfort in the rituals of liturgy" (Hughes 1999, p. 232). She also participated in "Anglican, Calvinist, and dissenting services, and occasionally Roman Catholic and Jewish services" (Hodgson 2000, p. 27). Rather than viewing a sharp break in Eliot's beliefs from youthful faith to mature agnosticism, Marilyn Orr addresses her spirituality in "deeply evolutionary" terms, comparing the author to a "mollusk" that "accreted these beliefs like so many layers, with each new level of knowledge adding to and adapting, rather than displacing, her earlier views" (Orr 2018, p. 12). Eliot was, *avant la lettre*, a postsecular thinker deeply influenced by, but who refused to adhere faithfully to, secular ideology, and her fiction, fundamentally, cannot be separated from matters of religious faith.

The recent interest in spirituality in Eliot's fiction marks a broader shift in postsecular studies directed towards rethinking the secular narratives of modernity. As Lori Branch discusses, the secularization thesis, which assumes modernity causes the decline of religion, was deeply influenced by the thinking of Max Weber and Emile Durkheim, who associated secularism with modern social differentiation, socialization, and rationalization (Branch 2020, p. 94). Recent work in postsecular studies, however, challenges this notion of inevitable decline and, instead, explores the "reshaping" (Lecourt 2018, p. 1), "reconfigur[ation]" (Vance 2013, p. 14), and "relocation" (Kaufman 2007, p. 612) of religion in the nineteenth century. As Charles LaPorte and Sebastian Lecourt persuasively argue, the "compartmentalization" of religion effected by secularization, ironically, enabled its "proliferation" (LaPorte and Lecourt 2018, p. 149). Since 2000, there has been a "religious turn" within literary studies that has sparked broader discussions of spirituality within Victorian studies (Branch 2020, p. 91; Perkin 2009, p. 7). George Eliot has taken a central place in such discussions as one of the most complex and dynamic postsecular thinkers of the nineteenth century.

So here is the rub. If the genre of the historical novel emerged in the nineteenth century in response to secularization, translating Christian Providence into secular terms, how could Eliot take it up to imagine a postsecular sense of history? Why would she suffer (quite literally) such great pains to research the history, literature, philosophy, and culture of Renaissance Florence only to pivot to questions of Christian devotion and belief? And conversely, how could a clever quip from Machiavelli or a detailed description of a peasant's dress help to reflect on matters of spiritual faith? In *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, Jacob Burckhardt famously associates Italian city states with the emergence of modern secularism (Burckhardt [1860] 1990). Literary criticism exploring the broader implications of secularism in the novel have generally turned to J.G.A.'s Pocock's monumental work, *The Machiavellian Moment* (Goodlad 2015, pp. 196–97; Jameson 2013, pp. 123–24; Malachuk 2008, p. 44; Wihl 2009, p. 259). In the book, Pocock defines the "Machiavellian moment" as the emergence of a "secular political self-consciousness", in which the Florentine republic began "confronting its own temporal finitude" and struggled to "realize a universality of values within a particular, and therefore finite and mortal, political structure" (Pocock 1975, pp. vii–viii, 84). Essentially, Pocock explores how a nascent form of secular political thinking could justify a universal understanding of justice from a moment of historical particularity. In recent literary criticism following this Pocockian line of analysis, Eliot turns to Renaissance Florence in her historical novel to explore the origins of secularism in Victorian England.

And here is the nub of my argument. Eliot, in fact, reverses the secularization thesis through the historical setting of the novel. The novel tells the tale of the proliferation of religion rather than its decline. The notion of Renaissance cuts both ways, implying both the revival of classical culture and the reminder of its lengthy decline. *Romola* features pre-Christian and post-Christian protagonists, Tito Melema and Romola de' Bardi, whose pagan upbringing leads them, ultimately, to death and Christian faith. Tito is a shipwrecked Greek orphan in his twenties who finds himself washed up on the streets of Florence, appearing, in all of his beauty, learning, and wit, as an incarnation of Classical Greece. Early in the novel, he is described by one observer, Nello, as a youth who might "be taken to have come straight from Olympus" (Eliot [1863] 1994, p. 27). He uses his charm and eloquence to gain a prominent status in Florence, eventually acting as a triple agent among the competing political factions in the city. Romola is the daughter of a classical scholar who teaches her Greek and Latin but, quite deliberately, nothing about Christianity. The unhappy marriage between Tito and Romola leads the latter to discover faith in the millenarian preaching of Savonarola and the former to a life of political intrigue, adultery, and death. The novel paints a vivid picture of Renaissance humanism only to imagine its supplanting by Christian faith. *Romola's* faithful realism places faith at the center of its historical verisimilitude.

### 3. Faith and Form

Focusing on faith rather than disenchantment forces us to rethink the meaning of realistic representation in the Victorian novel. Eliot's historical novel problematizes not only the secularization thesis but, moreover, the genre of the realist novel. We often think of the historical novel and the realist novel as two separate genres. The former is typically set in the distant past and the latter in the present. Take, for instance, Charles Dickens's *Hard Times* (1854), which depicts the disturbing industrial work conditions in the fictional city of Coketown but is loosely motivated by the recent event of the Preston Strike (1853–1854). Eliot's novels, with the exception of *Romola* and *Daniel Deronda*, are mostly set one or two generations in the past, between 1800 and 1832, a period still active in popular memory, which Ruth Livesey recently terms a “just past” (Livesey 2016, p. 2). The differences between historical and realist novels, however, are ones of degree rather than kind. Realist novels, to some degree, draw on the past to explain the present. Historical novels distinguish themselves from historical romances through their realistic representation of the past. Examining more closely Eliot's faithful historical realism in *Romola* can help us better understand the rest of her oeuvre and, more generally, the Victorian novel.

*Romola*, in its effort to represent realistically fifteenth-century Florence through its meticulous research, exposes the limits of the realist novel itself. As early reviews of the novel can attest, some readers were not fully persuaded by the author's “full vision of the medium” (Jaffe 2021, p. 228; Oliphant 1874, pp. 73–74; Pagnallo 1994, p. 113). When pressed too far beyond the familiar, readers begin to lose faith in the narrative they are reading. Audrey Jaffe addresses this problem in *Romola* as one of “recognition” (Jaffe 2021, p. 228). Jaffe examines how contemporary readers failed to recognize *Romola* as “authentic” (ibid., p. 230). She suggests, however, the relationship between the text and reader is a “two-way street” and goes on to note how realist novels “can stretch our perceived realities to encompass new versions of them” (ibid., p. 232). In the remainder of this section, I show how the problem of recognizing authenticity in the novel is fundamentally a question of religious faith in *Romola* and, more generally, the realist novel.

In “Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of ‘Religion’ at the Limits of Reason Alone”, Jacques Derrida examines the relationship between religion and reason within a broader discussion of modernity. He contends there is “no incompatibility” between the “return of the religious” and a rationality associated with secular modernity (Derrida [1996] 2002, p. 81). Rather than contributing to the decline of religion, globalization causes religion to “all[y] itself with technoscience” (ibid., p. 82). Derrida contends there is no faith “without everything technical, automatic, machine-like supposed by iterability” (ibid., p. 83), and the “globalization of the European democratic model” leads to an “interconnectedness” of “knowledge of faith” and “the calculable and the incalculable” (ibid., pp. 89–90). The essay's editor, Gil Anidjar, pithily summarizes: “religion counts” (ibid., p. 40). To live in an increasingly globalized world entails an endless number of calculations. The proliferation of calculations, however, greatly expands the need for faith. The very gears of the “tele-techno-capitalistico-scientific fiduciarity” would grind to a halt without endless performative acts of faith (ibid., p. 81). Derrida claims the “religious if not religion itself” underwrites the very possibility of the modern state and capitalism:

Without the performative experience of this act of faith, there would neither be ‘social bond’ nor address of the other, nor any performativity in general: neither convention, nor institution, nor constitution, nor sovereign state, nor law, nor above all, here, that structural performativity of the productive performance that binds from its very inception the knowledge of the scientific community to doing, and science to technics. . . . We speak of trust and of credit or of trustworthiness in order to underscore that this elementary act of faith also underlies the essentially economic and capitalistic rationality of the tele-technoscientific.

(ibid., pp. 80–81)

Faith has become closely tied to knowledge production, underwriting belief in modern states and the economy by providing confidence in the incalculable. Although the Enlightenment project appears to place knowledge above faith, the hierarchy is “impossible to maintain” due to “the very nature of language” (Branch 2020, p. 98). At the same time, faith itself has been transformed through the act of counting, haunted by the “risk of autoimmunity” in communities sharing “nothing in common” and by forms of violence, paradoxically, “in the name of non-violence” (ibid., pp. 82, 88). Derrida positions faith as the supplement that constitutes and undoes secular modernity.

Derrida’s essay on faith and knowledge can help us to rethink the relationship between form and faith in *Romola* and, more generally, the realist novel. On the one hand, the overdetermined historical setting of the novel addresses the proliferation of religion in the wake of the “Machiavellian moment” and the early development of secular modernity. As faith and rationality become more inextricably intertwined, religion becomes closely aligned with capitalist expansion. On the other, Eliot’s historical research of the novel and realistic representation of Renaissance Florence entails a complex series of calculations and, consequently, the incalculable. Realistic representations necessitate an endless number of performative acts of faith, but this is exactly what theories of the realist novel have denied. *Romola* both imagines Renaissance Florence as an era of performative faith and models its historical realism as an act of faith. Building on a recent postsecular analysis of the rise of the novel (Branch and Knight 2018), I rethink in the following paragraphs the secular framing of key theories of the Victorian realist novel in postsecular terms.

The question of novelistic realism has typically been approached as a problem of totality. In *The Theory of the Novel*, Lukács refers to this problem as the “bad infinity” of the novel (Lukács [1920] 1971, p. 81). No matter how many hundreds, or even thousands, of pages a novel entails, it can never represent the world in totality. As a result, the novel resorts to the “biographical form” in order to manage this bad form of infinity (ibid., p. 77). Focusing on only the “essential segment of life” of its protagonist(s), the novel sets an arbitrary limit to the potentially limitless problem of realistic representation (ibid., p. 81). Rather than representing a fully formed world (as in the epic), the novel narrates the search for totality as the central problematic of modernity by imagining a precarious balance between subjective interiority and the objective world. The novel narrates the organic growth of a unified worldview only to abolish it over and over again as a formal novelistic element of the modern problematic of becoming. Lukács posits the novel as a mature genre (as opposed to the childlike epic) because of its capacity to surmount (through irony) the limits of its own ideas and to address the inherent dissonance of modern society (through reflective disenchantment). According to Lukács, the “composition of the novel is the paradoxical fusion of heterogeneous and discrete components into an organic whole which is then abolished over and over again” (Lukács [1920] 1971, p. 84). Belief itself must be demystified and repeatedly overcome in Lukács’s theory of the novel.

Recent studies have given particular attention to the concepts of metonymy and probability in addressing the problem of totality in realist representation. In *Narrating Reality*, Harry Shaw associates the realist novel with the creation of “a metonymical and rhetorical chain that runs from novel to reader to world” (Shaw 1999, p. 238). In *The Ideas in Things*, Elaine Freedgood links objects like fustian curtains, mahogany furniture, and negro-head tobacco to global assemblages of slavery, imperialism, and colonial exploitation (Freedgood 2006). The chains and assemblages of various individuals, places, and objects depicted in novels give a broader sense of reality than the sum of their individual parts. The realist novel’s descriptive capacity to locate individuals within complex metonymic chains is closely related to the notion of probability at the center of realistic plotting. As characters move through the social and material assemblages that constitute modern capitalist societies, they must confront countless risks and chances that can unexpectedly, yet meaningfully, influence their lives.

In “The Rise of Fictionality”, Catherine Gallagher explores the importance of probability in the development of the realist novel. She begins the essay with the counterintuitive



assertion that “the novel discovered fiction” (Gallagher 2006, p. 337). Although fables and fairy tales have existed for millennia, they did not, unlike the novel, “make referential truth claims” (ibid.). When the modern European novel began to emerge in the late-seventeenth century, fictionality still meant something like “dissimulation” (ibid., p. 338). In the eighteenth century, however, it began to mean something more complex like “believable stories that did not solicit belief” (ibid., p. 340). The general sense of truth in the novel could now only be registered through “the overt fictitiousness of its particulars” (ibid., p. 342). That is to say, we find a particular novel realistic not because it narrates the lives of people who actually lived but rather presents us with probable types of people. *Jane Eyre* constitutes a realist novel to the extent its protagonists resemble particular types like a well-educated, lower middle-class governess or a rakish aristocratic gentleman. Gallagher envisions the novel as a kind of training tool for modern subjects in its capacity to promote “flexible mental states” essential for “affective speculation” in modern marriage, financial speculation in business, the acceptance of paper currency, and vast military and imperial investments (ibid., pp. 346–47). The novel essentially taught readers to stop believing and begin speculating by providing a “protective enclosure” for affective investments (ibid., p. 347). One can experience the pleasures of risks and speculation in the novel without suffering any of the consequences. Fictionality helped mold modern subjects.

Such approaches to theorizing problems of scale and probability in the realist novel, however, focus disproportionately on rational speculation and neglect the supplementary logic of faith Derrida locates at the heart of global modernity. We see such an approach to *Romola*, for instance, in Brian Reinken’s fascinating recent work on “prophetic vision” in the novel, which approaches prophecy as a fusion of the past, present, and future (Reinken 2023, p. 237). Reinken, however, frames the notion of prophecy in terms of rationality and probability, and seems to write faith and the incalculable out of prophecy in privileging “Romola’s rational, reflective, and historically engaged method of prophecy” over “irrational mysticism” (ibid., p. 242). In contrast, Jan-Melissa Schramm associates realism in the novel with the notions of “inspiration and incarnation” and a “readerly identification” with the suffering of Christ (Schramm 2020, p. 266). She argues that “history is rendered incarnate in the experiences of both Romola and Savonarola” (Schramm 2019, p. 157). Such an approach, however, does not consider the significance of referentiality, probability, and believability that have shaped theories of realist fiction for decades. This essay seeks a middle-ground between these two postsecular approaches to the novel and puts them into conversation with one another. In particular, I emphasize how *Romola* brings together the “believable” of rational speculation with performative acts of faith in what I call her faithful realism. *Romola* maps the complex economic classes and social dynamics of late-fifteenth-century Florence through the realist probability of fictionality, particularly focalized through the character of Tito Melema, but also gives a sense of faithful realism through Romola de’ Bardi’s spiritual adoration of Girolamo Savonarola. The novel works out on the level of plot the complex interrelationship between faith and knowledge shaping the novel’s form.

#### 4. Faithful Realism

Eliot meticulously researched the history of Renaissance Italy for her novel not merely to explain the present (as Lukács would contend) but, moreover, to excavate and learn from a historical model of faith. In this sense, the novel’s historical representation more closely resembles that of Thomas Carlyle than a Lukácsian reading of Scott’s fiction. In *Past and Present* (1843), Carlyle turns to twelfth-century medieval history to reflect on the “condition of England” in the nineteenth century (Carlyle [1843] 2005, p. 5). The work draws upon Jocelin of Brakelond’s *Chronicles of the Abbey of Saint Edmund’s Bury* (1198) to celebrate the monastery’s abbot, Samson of Tottington, as a model of a “fit Governor” for an England beset by greed and suffering (ibid., p. 88). Carlyle laments of the present: “England is full of wealth, of multifarious produce, supply for human want in every kind; yet England is dying of inanition” (ibid., p. 5). In contrast, Carlyle praises Abbot Samson’s ability to

reform the monastery and create an “ordered-world” out of “chaos” (ibid., p. 94). Abbot Samson’s fitness as a reformer emanates from a reverence for the past. In a key moment, Abbot Samson must rebuild a great altar damaged by fire and, in the process, exhume the corpse of St. Edmund. Carlyle describes Abbot Samson’s “glimpse of the glorious Martyr’s very body” as the “culminating moment” of his life (ibid., p. 121). Carlyle calls this “noble awe” a form of “Hero-worship” that constitutes “the innermost fact of [one’s] existence, and determines all the rest” of one’s actions in public and in private (ibid., p. 124). The challenge is to distinguish correctly between “true reverence” for the “right man” and “sham-reverence” for the “wrong man”, the latter of which he associates with “Dilettantism” and “Mammonism” (ibid.). Carlyle values the past as a vehicle to true reverence.

Eliot, for her part, embraces the historical novel to cultivate a sense of reverence, humility, and faith through the implicit contrast of past and present. In her essay, “Thomas Carlyle” (1855), Eliot claims she does not always agree with the Scottish essayist’s opinions but acknowledges him as the most influential writer of the era (Eliot 2000, p. 188). Her portrayal of Girolamo Savonarola resembles, in important ways, Carlyle’s depiction of Abbot Samson as a moral reformer and “fit Governor.” In the proem to the novel, the narrator introduces Savonarola through the focalized perspective of Lorenzo de’ Medici’s spirit:

That very Quaresima or Lent of 1492 in which he died, still in his erect old age, he had listened in San Lorenzo, not without a mixture of satisfaction, to the preaching of a Dominican Friar, named Girolamo Savonarola, who denounced with a rare boldness the worldliness and vicious habits of the clergy, and insisted on the duty of Christian men not to live for their own ease when wrong was triumphing in high places, and not to spend their wealth in outward pomp even in the churches, when their fellow-citizens were suffering from want and sickness. The Frate carried his doctrine rather too far for elderly ears; yet it was a memorable thing to see a preacher move his audience to such a pitch that the women even took off their ornaments, and delivered them up to be sold for the benefit of the needy. (Eliot [1863] 1994, p. 8).

The narrator presents the Dominican friar as a moral reformer capable of addressing the great injustices and vices in the city by persuading citizens to renounce their forms of worldliness and embrace their Christian duties. This opening passage proleptically gestures towards the most famous example, the Bonfire of the Vanities (1497), represented to great comical effect, yet with pathos, when Romola’s wealthy, widowed cousin Brigida is persuaded, quite reluctantly, by Savonarola’s ardent youthful followers to give up her jewelry and ornaments. The mixing of the spirit’s opinions with the third-person narration in the proem, moreover, allows for both an objective reporting of Savonarola’s deep moral influence on Florence and a subjective critique from the interested perspective of the recently deceased ruler of the city. Eliot’s clever use of free indirect discourse prevents the novel from collapsing into hagiography and opens up the central question of belief. Was he truly worthy of his followers’ faith?

The novel explores the final six years of Savonarola’s life from 1492 to 1498, in which he exerted an enormous influence on both the religious and political affairs of the city. He quickly gained prominence through his prophetic preaching, most noticeably in a 1492 sermon in which he warns of a “sword hanging” over Florence. When King Charles VIII led a military expedition in Italy in 1494, Savonarola claimed his prophecy had been fulfilled and imagined the French king as a “new Cyrus” who would cleanse Italy of its sins. In the wake of the political vacuum left by the death of Lorenzo de’ Medici and the incompetence of his son Piero, who was tapped as his successor, Savonarola found himself at the heart of Florentine politics. From 1494 to 1498, he took on an outsized religious and political role, even serving as an official envoy to King Charles VIII and advocating the revival of a republican form of government greatly diminished by decades of Medicean political hegemony (Weinstein 2011).

Eliot does not offer lengthy transcriptions of Savonarola’s sermons in the novel but, rather, compresses his preaching style into a single moment set in 1494 in which he declares

his prophecies vindicated by the imminent arrival of the French king. Warning the “day of vengeance is at hand”, the Dominican friar pleads to his parishioners:

Yet there is a pause—even as in the days when Jerusalem was destroyed there was a pause that the children of God might flee from it. There is a stillness before the storm: lo, there is blackness above, but not a leaf quakes: the winds are stayed, that the voice of God’s warning may be heard. Hear it now, O Florence, chosen city in the chosen land! Repent and forsake evil: do justice: love mercy: put away all uncleanness from among you, that the spirit of truth and holiness may fill your souls and breathe through all your streets and habitations, and then the pestilence shall not enter, and the sword shall pass over you and leave you unhurt. (ibid., p. 214)

Presenting Florence as a new Jerusalem, Savonarola imagines the city as a tool for cleansing other nations. He concludes the sermon by offering himself as a sacrifice for the moral regeneration of the city:

O Lord, thou knowest I am willing—I am ready. Take me, stretch me on thy cross: let the wicked who delight in blood, and rob the poor, and defile the temple of their bodies, and harden themselves against thy mercy—let them wag their heads and shoot out the lip at me: let the thorns press upon my brow, and let my sweat be anguish—I desire to be made like thee in thy great love. But let me see the fruit of my travail—let this people be saved! Let me see them clothed in purity: let me hear their voices rise in concord as the voices of the angels: let them see no wisdom but in thy eternal law, no beauty but in holiness. Then they shall lead the way before the nations, and the people from the four winds shall follow them, and be gathered into the fold of the blessed. For it is thy will, O God, that the earth shall be converted unto thy law: it is thy will that wickedness shall cease and love shall reign. Come, O blessed promise; and behold, I am willing—lay me on the altar: let my blood flow and the fire consume me; but let my witness be remembered among men, that iniquity shall not prosper for ever. (ibid., pp. 217–18)

In his imagined imitation of Christ, Savonarola also anticipates his own martyrdom following his excommunication by Pope Alexander VI for repeatedly challenging papal authority and his execution in 1498. His self-abasement plays a central role in the development and sustenance of his moral authority over his passionate followers, which strongly resembles a form of “hero worship” advocated by Carlyle. The novel emphasizes, in particular, both the “massive influence” he wields and the “mixed” nature of his influence across all classes and political factions (Eliot [1863] 1994, p. 222). Rather than fixating on his words, the narrator repeatedly emphasizes the effects of his sermons on his listeners:

During the last appeal, Savonarola had stretched out his arms and lifted up his eyes to heaven; his strong voice had alternately trembled with emotion and risen again in renewed energy; but the passion with which he offered himself as a victim became at last too strong to allow of further speech, and he ended in a sob. Every changing tone, vibrating through the audience, shook them into answering emotion. There were plenty among them who had very moderate faith in the Frate’s prophetic mission, and who in their cooler moments loved him little; nevertheless, they too were carried along by the great wave of feeling which gathered its force from sympathies that lay deeper than all theory. A loud responding sob rose at once from the wide multitude, while Savonarola had fallen on his knees and buried his face in his mantle. He felt in that moment the rapture and glory of martyrdom without its agony. (Eliot [1863] 1994, p. 218).

The narrator stresses the importance of emotion in the friar’s “vibrating” influence over those who witness his ardent outpourings, inspiring even those with “moderate faith” and who “loved him little” to sob collectively. Such socially heterogeneous affective assemblages, which Eliot emphasizes throughout the novel, do not fit easily into metonymic

nor probabilistic accounts of novelistic realism. But Eliot frames Savonarola's faithful realism in a complementary relation to Tito Melema's speculative realism (associated with his socially ambitious marriage and career) and his mapping of complex metonymic assemblages through his social mobility throughout the city (allowing the narrator to describe marketplaces, consumer goods, peasant dresses, etc.). Eliot essentially shows there is no speculation without faith nor the believable without belief. Each set of binary terms complements and supplements the other.

Eliot places Romola's "true reverence" of Savonarola at the center of the novel's plot. Felica Bonaparte finds such reverence in a "hero-teacher father" throughout Eliot's novels (Bonaparte 1979, p. 205). Romola's faith in Savonarola, however, is only achieved slowly over the course of hundreds of pages. We see her mixed feelings towards his preaching during his Advent sermon in the Duomo:

She remembered the effect of Fra Girolamo's voice and presence on her as a ground for expecting that his sermon might move her in spite of his being a narrow-minded monk. But the sermon did no more than slightly deepen her previous impression, that this fanatical preacher of tribulations was after all a man towards whom it might be possible for her to feel personal regard and reverence. (Eliot [1863] 1994, p. 234)

Eliot's clever use of free indirect discourse once again focalizes the narrative through Romola's perspective, but the merging of the narrator and protagonist in phrases such as "narrow-minded monk", echoes, moreover, the exact words Tito uses earlier to describe Savonarola to his wife before she ever met him (*ibid.*, p. 171). Despite the fact she "felt no terror, no pangs of conscience. . . when she heard Savonarola invoke martyrdom, she sobbed with the rest" and "felt herself penetrated with a new sensation—a strange sympathy with something apart from all the definable interests of her life" (Eliot [1863] 1994, p. 235). This new sensation of sympathy sparks in Romola a deeper interest in public life:

His burning indignation against the abuses and oppression that made the daily story of the Church and of States had kindled the ready fire in her too. His special care for liberty and purity of government in Florence, with his constant reference of this immediate object to the wider end of a universal regeneration, had created in her a new consciousness of the great drama of human existence in which her life was a part. (*ibid.*, p. 366)

The force of Savonarola's influence on Romola reverberates on numerous levels in the novel. On the most intimate level, the friar acts as a "hero-teacher father" who motivates the protagonist's personal growth beyond her own narrow egoism. Savonarola's influence, moreover, pits the notion of republican virtue and justice against Tito's pursuit of self-interest and pleasure in Romola's impressionable mind. But on a metafictional level, such scenes dramatize the narrative (and social) forces of faith and knowledge, and belief and speculation. It is through Tito's ambitious career that Eliot can map the social topography of the city in the first half of the novel. In the novel's second half, the novel more narrowly focuses on Romola's spiritual adoration of Savonarola. The novel develops these competing plot strands to emphasize the complementary formal characteristics of her realist historical narration. The novel's narrative is not propelled merely by probabilistic speculation, as Gallagher suggests, but also by basic performative acts of faith.

Although Romola loses faith in Savonarola, after he refuses to intervene publicly to prevent the unjust execution of her godfather, her faith is eventually restored in the days leading up to the friar's own execution. The gradual arc of the protagonist's relationship with the Dominican friar over the slow course of the novel ultimately interpellates the reader into the position of the faithful subject. In the climactic scene of his death, both Romola and the reader are placed in the position of witnesses of his torture and death:

Then the three figures, in their close white raiment, trod their way along the platform, amidst yells and grating tones of insult.

"Cover your eyes, Madonna", said Jacopo Nardi; "Fra Girolamo will be the last."



It was not long before she had to uncover them again. Savonarola was there. He was not far off her now. He had mounted the steps; she could see him look round on the multitude.

But in the same moment expectation died, and she only saw what he was seeing—torches waving to kindle the fuel beneath his dead body, faces glaring with a yet worse light; she only heard what he was hearing—gross jests, taunts, and curses.

The moment was past. Her face was covered again, and she only knew that Savonarola's voice had passed into eternal silence. (Eliot [1863] 1994, p. 544).

Katherine Anderson argues such scenes constitute a “liturgy of torture that enlists readerly devotion” (Anderson 2015, p. 143). By emphasizing the importance of “hearing and touch” in the scene, the novel imagines a sense of community among “the victim-witness Savonarola, the spectator-witness Romola, and by extension, the reader-witness of the novel” (ibid., pp. 155–56). The silencing of Savonarola's voice marks the closing words of the novel before the final epilogue. The climax of readerly devotion, however, has been anticipated since the opening pages of the proem, in which the spirit of Lorenzo de' Medici ambivalently recounts Savonarola's moral influence on the city.

Eliot literalizes such worship of Savonarola in the novel's epilogue, in which Romola decorates an altar in remembrance of his death eleven years later:

At one end of the room was an archway opening into a narrow inner room, hardly more than a recess, where the light fell from above on a small altar covered with fair white linen. Over the altar was a picture, discernible at the distance where the little party sat only as the small full-length portrait of a Dominican Brother. For it was shaded from the light above by overhanging branches and wreaths of flowers, and the fresh tapers below it were unlit. But it seemed that the decoration of the altar and its recess was not complete. For part of the floor was strewn with a confusion of flowers and green boughs, and among them sat a delicate blue-eyed girl of thirteen, tossing her long light-brown hair out of her eyes, as she made selections for the wreaths she was weaving, or looked up at her mother's work in the same kind, and told her how to do it with a little air of instruction.

(Eliot [1863] 1994, p. 545)

The final image of his altar interweaves metonymic chains of objects first introduced in the opening chapters, depicting Tito in the marketplace, with mnemonic objects of religious devotion. The comforting image offers a sense of peace and resolution to what had been a long struggle in the novel between Tito's speculative longing after fame, money, and power and Savonarola's renunciation of worldliness, epitomized by the sixty-foot pyre of luxury objects burned during the Bonfire of the Vanities. Romola declares that she keeps the day “sacred” because Savonarola “had the greatness which belongs to a life spent in struggling against powerful wrong, and in trying to raise men to the highest deeds they are capable of” (Eliot [1863] 1994, p. 547). Eliot bases Romola's altar on historical cults of women who continued to revere the Dominican friar decades after his death (Dall'Aglio 2019; Herzig 2008). Her reverence of Savonarola, however, does not cause her to completely forget her father, whom she describes nostalgically in the epilogue as a man of “integrity” who “chose poverty and obscurity rather than falsehood” (Eliot [1863] 1994, p. 547). The final scene ties together knowledge and faith, believability and belief, and metonymic chains and mnemonic objects.

## 5. Conclusions

To conclude, I would like to think briefly about the significance of a postsecular analysis of *Romola* in relation to the recent emergence of “postcritical reading” in literary studies. In *The Limits of Critique*, Rita Felski offers a thoughtful reflection on some of the problems posed by a “hermeneutics of suspicion”, motivating much contemporary theory and criticism. She proposes, in its place, a form of “postcritical reading” involving a “form of making rather than unmaking” (Felski 2015, p. 12). Rather than merely digging

beneath the surface of the text to expose forms of violence, she also suggests approaching textual meaning as a “coproduction between actors” (ibid.). Felski is motivated by a desire “to articulate a positive vision for humanistic thought in the face of growing skepticism” (Felski 2015, p. 186). Felski’s work has motivated insightful readings of the confession and climactic death of Savonarola in *Romola* as a form of “reparative sympathy” (Reilly 2013, p. 643) and a kind of Felskian “attunement” between the physical and the cognitive (Ablow 2021, p. 218). Ablow views *Romola* as Eliot’s “great novel of belief” (ibid., p. 212), and Reilly suggests the novel demonstrates how “[g]ood historicism teaches us to feel sympathetically as well as suspiciously” (Reilly 2013, p. 643). Both readings foreground, in secular terms, the importance of affect and attachment in literary criticism on the Victorian novel. Recent developments in postcritical reading share much in common with postsecular criticism, and further discussions between the emerging fields show great potential for rethinking the role of faith in literary studies and the humanities (see Branch 2016; Branch and Knight 2018; Felski 2016; Pecora 2016; Wickman 2022).

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