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Upright Posture and Gendered Styles of Body Movements in *The Mill on the Floss*

Monika Class

In the essay “The Natural History of German Life” (1856), Mary Ann Evans alias George Eliot formulates the mid-Victorian desideratum for novels in the great “realist” tradition to authentically represent “psychological character—their conception of life, and their emotions” (1990, 111).¹ The composition of novels should pass seamlessly “from the humorous and external to the emotional and tragic, without becoming as transcendent in [...] unreality” (111). Eliot criticises the stereotyping of certain postures in literature. The “slouching shoulders” of “the conventional countryman” should not merely function as an indicator for “an upright disposition”; that is “too simple”, she notes (109). Instead, Eliot calls for novelists to reimagine people’s embodied lives and their milieu.

Eliot’s *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) explores the structural differences that give rise to the double standards in girls’ and boys’ body motions. Her second novel recounts the coming of age of two siblings during a

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period of roughly ten years, from the age when Maggie Tulliver is ten years old and Tom is 13. It unfolds the short life of the “rebellious girl” (Eliot 2015, 32), who has experienced a comfortable early childhood in a coastal town in the rural Midlands. When the Tulliver family suddenly loses their mill, which means their livelihood, Maggie experiences social isolation, religious enthusiasm, and forbidden love, while her brother learns a trade, labours, and schemes tirelessly to pay off the family debts and buys the mill back. The siblings end up drowning together when Maggie attempts to save Tom from the deadly tidal flood.

It is known that Eliot details body posture in her early fiction to create authentic fictional characters and embed them in the narrated world (Korte 1997, 164). However, the scholarship on Eliot’s realist poetics has focused on non-verbal behaviour rather than mobility. The present chapter showcases how Eliot’s fiction reflects the variable manners in which people inhabited their bodies in the Victorian age not as static beings but in movement. Body movement warranted attention, in literature and beyond, because of its signalling potential of agency. I argue here that the novelist’s critical engagement with Victorian double standards of acceptable bodily postures and movements, which is the focus of mobility within *The Mill on the Floss*, conveys the link of medical and moral norms in a vision towards variable, and even untamed, gender identities. I propose that the novel is prefigured by two divergent trends in Victorian medical culture: normative posture, on the one hand, and the primal, erupting life force of the lived body, on the other hand. Accordingly, this chapter examines Eliot’s two main characters, Tom and Maggie, as embodied beings and as figures of two opposed discourses on motor motion in the mid-Victorian period: the emergent subdiscipline of medicine (orthopaedics) and physiological speculations on motion in Victorian philosophy. Whereas Tom exemplifies the proto-military, gymnastic formation of the docile body in entitled white middle-class masculinity, Maggie embodies the dark-skinned “deviant” life force struggling against the narrow restrictions of bodily motions for white middle-class women.

Nineteenth-century Western culture saw the emergence of “an entire medical sub-speciality that defined the healthy body and treated the ill body based on notions of acceptable posture” (Gilman 2018, 204). These so-called gymnastics built on medicine and, partly, on dietetics in Galenic medicine. Dietetics were also called the nonnaturals of hygiene, consisting of six categories including “motion and rest” (Emch-Deriaz 1992, 135). Dietetics promoted a healthy lifestyle to prevent ill health as well as

regulate excessive feeling. Within proto-orthopaedic discourse, posture correlated directly with health and moral character. “By the time of Daniel Gottlob Moritz Schreber’s *Die ärztliche Zimmergymnastik* (Medical Indoor Gymnastics, 1855)”, Sander Gilman notes, “the line between physical state and moral position had become completely blurred (if it was ever clear)” (2018, 205–206). Schreber reinforced the ableist view that “your external bodily position defines your moral attitude” (39)—which resonates with the Roman slogan “a sound mind in a sound body” (51). The notion did much to establish not only gymnastics but also the gendered codes of bodily conduct in Victorian life.

Derived from French *posture*, and Latin *positura*, the English lexeme “posture” denotes the position and the carriage of the body as a whole, indicating emotion and attitude. Posture is synonymous with bearing, comportment, pose, stance, or mien (44–45). It is often thought of as a frozen body image, but it actually comprises both the resting and the moving body (30). Closely associated with military drill, posture connotes habituated coercion by disciplinary power. After all, the soldier’s perfect posture exemplifies Michel Foucault’s docile body: “a lively, alert manner, an *erect* head, a taut stomach, broad shoulders, long arms, strong fingers, a small belly, thick thighs, slender legs and dry feet, because a man of such a figure could not fail to be agile and strong” (1977, 135; my emphasis). Albeit compartmentalised into body parts, agility and strength characterise the docile body as a whole. Above all, posture is predicated on bipedal body movements and an “erect head” and dominant bodily motions as such.

George Henry Lewes’s physiology-based philosophy, by contrast, considers bodily motion as a material foundation of life. In one of his articles published in *Fraser’s Magazine* in 1856, Lewes divides the physiology of life into three “cardinal aspects—Nutrition; Motion; and Sensibility [sic]” (289; see also Diedrick 1988, 30). Lewes posits the nervous system at the centre of his life model and compares it to “the great fountain of influence” that “runs off in three distinct streams—the Nutritive, the Locomotive, and the Sensitive” (289). The three streams are interdependent insofar as Lewes claims that there is “a given amount of energy” (290), which is to be distributed between the streams: “[T]he activity of one will always be at the expense of another” (290). This principle of life applies to humans and animals alike in Lewes’s physiological studies. Digestion, locomotion, and sensations are not only entangled but require a certain distribution of energy flow through the “three streams” of

physiology to maintain life. On the one hand, movement underpins Lewes's theory of the materiality of life, but, on the other hand, it also eludes his physiological and evolutionary designs (Erchinger 2013, 157).

Considering the ineffability of motion, narrative fiction offers an opportunity to convey such intricate vitality. Eliot's novel features variable points of view (among other expressive devices) that lend themselves to the creative evocation of the interplay of locomotion and sensation (Ricoeur 1985, 81). The title of the novel with its eponymous river already indicates as much: *The Mill on the Floss* "revolves insistently" around the uncontrollable flow of the tidal river (Law 2010, 16). The novel associates the material power of the river with the living bodies of the heroine and her brother not least because they drown in it. Moreover, Eliot's principal characters operate as filters for the gendered codes of mobility, which, in turn, question the dominant double standards in Victorian mobilities regarding physical agency and potential empowerment.

By prioritising Maggie's perspective, the narrative composition challenges the extraliterary norms that reduce mobility to masculinity and stasis to femininity. *The Mill on the Floss*, illuminates how, as Tanu Priya Uteng and Tim Cresswell put it, "gender constitutes mobility and is constituted by mobility" (2008, 5). The novel represents, at times satirically and at times empathetically, the way gendered postures regulate and shape the stream of the protagonists' motions whose passions overwhelm them in much the same way as modern irrigation technologies channel and block the tidal river but cannot prevent it from flooding. In this sense, mobility in Eliot's novel captures Cresswell's conceptualisation of mobility in modernity as "socially produced motion" (2012, 3).

French existential phenomenology corroborates mobility as socially produced motion (Cresswell 2012). Iris Marion Young's feminist framework is based on Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*. Both suit Eliot's and Lewes's theory of motion since the phenomenology of perception conceives of movement as a major constituent of embodied consciousness (i.e. the lived body). Merleau-Ponty locates the conscious orientation of the body (i.e. intentionality) in movement. For him, the power of movement is key to "original intentionality" (2012, 139). We inhabit space and time consciously through movement. The power of movement creates and is created by conscious life (137); or, as Alva Noë notes, "the world makes itself available to the perceiver through physical movement and interaction" (2004, 1). It follows that kinaesthesia (bodily movements) does not merely supplement aisthesis (sensory perception).

Rather, aisthesis is inherently kinaesthetic (Kristensen 2012, 29). The world discloses itself sensorily through motor action, such as turning our trunk, or stretching our arms; movements shape and are shaped by our engagement with the world. Movement thus underpins the sensory perceptions and, by extension, embodied consciousness. The lived body orientates us towards the world and simultaneously expresses our orientation. Young observes that “it is the ordinary purposive orientation of the body as a whole toward things and its environment which initially defines the relation of a subject to its world” (1980, 140). Being a body, then, is part and parcel of bodily movement (including rest).

In the spirit of Simone de Beauvoir, Young establishes differences in men’s and women’s motor performances irrespective of their sexual organs or genetics. In her influential essay “Throwing Like a Girl”, the feminist theorist provides a phenomenological description of “the modalities, meanings, and implications of the difference between ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ body comportment and movement” and the relation in space (1980, 138). Here, “feminine” and “femininity” connote “a set of structures and conditions which delimit the typical situation of being a woman in a particular” milieu (140). This definition includes persons with female sexual organs to be not “feminine”, as well as those with male sexual organs to be “feminine”. Young ascertains that feminine comportment and body movement “are frequently characterized, much as in the throwing case, by a failure to make full use of the body’s spatial and lateral potentialities [...]. Typically, the masculine stride is longer proportional to a man’s body than is the feminine stride to a woman’s” (142). On the one hand, Young’s theory suggests that regulations of the female body seep into lived experience and become ingrained in habits, skills, gestures, and, especially, patterns of movements. On the other hand, Young indicates that the masculine and feminine modalities of comportment have existential implications beyond sexuality. “As stylistic characteristics of a person, ‘manhood’ and ‘womanhood’ are”, as Sara Heinämaa notes, “not anchored on any particular activities or objects, but are given as two different ways of relating to objectivity, acting on objects and being affected by them” (2012, 236). The two styles of movement amount to two styles of intentional life and thus two modes of engagement with the entire world.

Differentiating between posture (as a subcategory of disciplinary power) and style of movement (as the modality of the lived body), I trace the way in which Eliot’s literary configurations in *The Mill on the Floss* evoke the transition from girl- into womanhood and boy- into manhood

as the conflicted or harmonious engagement of the lived body with posture and, more broadly, with what it means to be “normal”. I contend that the narrative composition of Maggie’s trajectory challenges the normative scripts of feminine posture inasmuch as Tom’s development eventually conforms to, and reinforces, dominant masculine upright motion.

MASCULINE VARIATIONS OF BODY MOVEMENTS: TOM’S CORRECT POSTURE

The Mill on the Floss critically engages with Victorian gender norms; indeed, the novel throws the exclusion of Victorian girls from formal education into sharp relief. Eliot’s narrative exposes the flawed logic that the brightest member of the family is barred from classical education because of her sex. Maggie represents the intellectually curious and gifted child, whereas Tom is an “average” boy, who is forced to learn mathematics and ancient languages although he loathes the subjects (Eliot 2015, 31). Thus, the novel highlights Tom’s privilege as a white male from the landowning ranks of society. It narrates the ways in which Tom’s expensive, classical education enhances his development in general and in particular his comportment. Thanks to his experiences at the boarding school at King’s Lorton, Tom finds his posture much improved. Extradiegetic commentary does much to satirise the growth of the clumsy boy of flesh into the self-made merchant and unforgiving head of the Tulliver family.

In Book One, the narrator still belittles Tom’s teenage physique, describing him as one of “those lads that grow everywhere in England [...] with indeterminate features” (31–32). Not only is his physiognomy depicted as pale and indistinct, his moves are also still uncoordinated, looking like the waddle of a “gosling” (31). The narrator in one of his satirical moods describes Tom as “this pink-and-white bit of masculinity” (32). On the one hand, the diminutive “bit” suggests immaturity and weakness. On the other hand, “pink-and-white [...] masculinity” makes Tom’s privilege explicit. Accordingly, the representation of his style of movement conveys entitlement, domination, and mastery. The narrative composition thus passes seamlessly from the mocking description of external actions to the serious configurations of emotional states and sensibilities, interweaving the outside and inside aspects as an exploration of a white middle-class boy’s capability of movement.

Tom's outdoor activities reveal the discrepancy between his illusions of superior posture and actual clumsiness, which suggests that Tom prematurely assumes the role of mastery. Adolescent Tom envisions himself as a "benevolent patron" (47), treats his playmates "with authority" (45), and declares "I'm master" (48). However, it is actually the poor neighbour's son, Bob Jenkins, who possesses superior agility compared to Tom: "Bob [...] could climb trees like a squirrel, [...] detecting hedgehogs and stoats [...] making gaps in the hedgerows, [and] throwing stones" (45). Fascinated as Tom is with "such qualities in an inferior" (45), he regards Bob as a surrogate for his own body, one that is under his command just like the terrier Yap. When Tom fails in the water-rat hunt and Bob refuses to submit, Tom feels so "humiliated as a sportsman" (47) that he attacks Bob. Having won the fight against Bob only with the help of Yap's sharp teeth, Tom walks away from the defeated Bob "without looking round" (49). The narrative composition of Tom's failed attempt at hunting water-rats features a style of movement that deviates from proper posture and conveys instead a masculine fragility which arises from an exaggerated sense of one's own physical capabilities and mistaken entitlement.

Eliot constructs Tom as "a boy made of flesh and blood" and opposes him to "a boy in the abstract", a role occupied by Tom's fellow pupil, Philip Wakem (2015, 160). Tom finds it nearly impossible to retain any learning in Greek or Latin classics. The chapter "The Young Idea" recounts the details of Tom's education at the hands of Mr. Stelling. One passage intermittently focalises through the teacher, who assumes the authority of the "educator-judge" within the "carceral network" to diagnose the abnormality of Tom's mind (Foucault 1977, 304). For Stelling, Tom is "a boy born with a deficient power of apprehending signs and abstractions, [who] must suffer the penalty of congenital deficiency" (Eliot 2015, 159). The description of Tom's learning difficulty reinforces his inferiority compared to Philip and Maggie. More importantly, however, the passage satirises Mr. Stelling as the "incompetent" judge of Tom's "exceptional dullness" (159). The narration shows discipline to serve primarily the financial gain of the privileged since Stelling keeps a boarding house to be able to afford an expensive lifestyle: "[W]ithout private fortune it is difficult to see how they could all live genteelly if they had nothing to do with education or government" (159). The narratorial voice gives way to the internal presentation of Stelling's narrow-mindedness. The resulting ambiguity exposes him as an opportunist who profits from the burgeoning professionalisation of education in the early nineteenth century despite his

pedagogic incompetence. Passing normalising judgements is the essential posture that Mr. Stelling performs within the diegesis. Eliot's cynical narrator suggests that behind Mr. Stelling's pedagogic façade lurks a man entrapped by his "fixed opinion" (159). Switching between the character's deluded internal focalisation and satirical narratorial comment, the passage revolves around a trope of the "thumb-screw" that associates discipline and punishment with torture (159). "Mr Stelling", the narrator notes, "had a fixed opinion that all boys with any capacity could learn what *it was the only regular thing to teach*: if they were slow, the thumb-screw must be tightened" (159; my emphasis). Stelling personifies a major pitfall of disciplinary power: he detects abnormality and applies punitive measures where his norm is too narrow. At no point does Tom live up to Stelling's "abstract" expectations (160).

The boy "of flesh and blood" resents Stelling's tuition and loves Mr. Poulter's physical education: martial arts, drill, and military history. These activities take up considerable room in "Book Second" entitled "School-Time". Indeed, the drilling lessons are Tom's favourite subject: "There was a great improvement in his bearing, for example, and some credit on this score was due to Mr Poulter, the village schoolmaster, who, being an old Peninsular soldier, was employed to drill Tom—a source of high mutual pleasure" (160). Tom models his movements on those of the ex-soldier. The male figures of authority at Tom's school are all associated with the military realm. Eliot configures Mr. Stelling's main bodily style, to some comic effect, through the phrase "broad-chested" (e.g. 127, 158). The expression links Stelling's professional habitus as a teacher with the military command "chest out!" (Gilman 2018, 109). The tuition of a war veteran reinforces the bellicose connotations of upright posture within the novel and thus encodes the roots of posture in military practices. However, the drilling master's memory of the Peninsular War against Napoleon (1808–1814) is clouded (Meyer 1996, 149). Part of Poulter's embodied memories is the mystification of his war injury: "[N]o other flesh would have healed in anything but the same time" (Eliot 2015, 161). Stories like these spur Tom on to follow Poulter's drills and to imitate his movements outside of class. Eliot depicts the drilling-master's posture in detail: "martial erectness", "scrupulously brushed", "strapped" uniform, and "an exceptionally spirited air, as of a superannuated charger who hears the drum" (160). The image suggests perfect posture, but the narrator mocks this manly performance of verve and vitality by pointing out that it would be impossible without the aid of inebriation: "[N]othing but gin

could enable him [Poulter] to sustain with any firmness” (160). This comment gives readers more insights into the nature of the drilling lessons than the intradiegetic characters have. The discrepancy reinforces readers’ sense of Tom’s naivety and ridicules his eagerness for the drills.

The narrative captures the modalities of Poulter’s fencing exercise. Once the drill master starts his martial demonstration in the “carriage house”, he is “entirely absorbed in the cut and thrust—the solemn one, two, three, four” (164). Although the narratorial commentary mocks such solemnity, the internal focalisation through Tom gives us a glimpse of the boy’s admiration for the veteran’s movements. His bearing meets the expectations of universal patriarchal posture and, moreover, extends to the automatic handling of the weapon. Through experience of combat, Poulter has mastered the incorporation of the sword into his body schema so that the tool functions as an extension of his lived body (Leder 1990, 33); that way, the ex-soldier exerts control over the weapon, cutting effortlessly through the air. Second, Poulter’s movements take full command of the spatial dimension in the enclosed facility, while Tom observes the martial exhibition “from as great a distance as possible” (Eliot 2015, 164). Eliot represents the feelings this spectacle incites in the boy through Tom’s mimicry of Poulter’s posture.

Tom’s accident with the sword illustrates this further. It is prohibited to bring weapons into the dorm room. Nonetheless, the gymnastics teacher conspires with the pupil and even lends the sword to the boy against a small fee. Once in his possession, Tom tries to wield it in his bedroom while Maggie is watching. He wishes to perform “with the severity of a great warrior” (168). The description of his movements indicates misjudged overdetermination, “he grasped the sword [...] with decision” (168), since the untrained teenager wants to show off “the cut and thrust as would necessarily be expected of the Duke of Wellington” (169). The attempt exposes his lack of capacity and training, while the representation combines the external action with interior psychology (164–165). Tom frowns “with a double amount of intention, if not of corrugation” but cannot help smiling (169). The narrator comically juxtaposes Tom’s beginner’s mistakes with Poulter’s masterful cut and thrust on the count to four: Tom lifts the sword “resolutely” on the count of one, his wrist trembles on the count of two, he loses the momentum of his thrust on the count of three, and on the count of four, the “sword swung downwards”, falling “with its edge on Tom’s foot, and in a moment after, he had fallen too” (169). The incident satirically conveys Tom’s pre-mature and

perilous incorporation of the sword. To habituate oneself to such a weapon “is to take up residence in them, or inversely, to make [it] participate within the voluminosity of one’s own body” (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 145). It takes sustained training to achieve such a skilled incorporation of an instrument—training that Tom has not yet undergone. Furthermore, Tom’s inadequate handling of the weapon poses a serious threat to both himself and his sister, who is “shrinking away from him into the opposite corner” (169). Maggie’s shrieks indicate the violence that Tom naively glorifies and reproduces. Ironically, however, it is not the sister but the brother who swoons. The fainting fit effeminates the boy, while the foot injury emasculates him temporarily.

In “School-Time”, Tom’s impaired mobility connects the flesh-and-blood boy with the boy in the abstract, Philip. The latter suffers from “kyphosis—excessive curvature of the spine” (Gilman 2018, 36). The boys’ relationship is fraught due to Tom’s prejudice. With the exception of Maggie, the Tullivers reject Philip’s father, calling him a “rascal”, and feel “repulsion to Philip’s deformity” (Eliot 2015, 156). The Tullivers’ hostility towards Philip echoes stigmatisations of the “hunchback”, according to which crooked posture reveals an inborn nature. Similar to Victor Hugo’s *Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1831), *The Mill on the Floss* rewrites this stereotype of deformed posture and dissociates it from immorality (Gilman 2018, 40). Preferring sedentary activities that conceal his abnormal spine (Eliot 2015, 151), Philip’s perspective on events highlights the role of the imagination in mobility. After all, “imagination is itself a practice of transcending physical and sociocultural distance” (Acosta 2021, 525). Philip, for instance, reminds Maggie that “we can never give up longing and wishing while we are thoroughly alive” (Eliot 2015, 280).

During the protracted restitution of his physical mobility, Tom benefits from Philip’s empathy, aid in Latin and Greek, and entertaining stories. But once Tom’s mobility is restored, the old animosity erupts again. The upright mould of the body predominates Tom’s narrow views so much that his repulsion extends to any woman who might love a deformed man. The thought that his “sister” might be married to Philip is unbearable for Tom (315). The prejudice is mirrored in the conversation between Philip and his father, which reveals that Philip has internalised such ableism (393–394). The contrast of the two boys conveys a chiasm, featuring the mobile in the immobile and, vice versa, the immobile in the mobile: the impaired Philip is closely associated with imaginary mobility, which he shares with Maggie, while the agile Tom aspires towards manly posture

and illustrates an imaginary fixation on war. The crossed configuration of mobility and immobility in these types of boyhood pushes against the narrow limits of upright posture and points towards the variability of masculine bodies.

Thanks to his early bourgeoisie schooling, Tom develops exemplary bearing, which proves to be an asset for his social mobility as a young man. The events in Tom's life as a 20-year-old show the main outcome of Tom's classical education at the boarding school ironically to be the improvement of his posture rather than his intellect. The trained upright demeanour plays an important role in Tom's social and financial redemption of the Tullivers. Tom's career as a business apprentice and member of society in St. Oggs culminates in the meeting with his father's creditors in "Book Fifth". Through hard work and shrewd investments, Tom manages to pay off his father's debts. This means that Mr. Tulliver regains "his honest name" and the whole family no longer lives in "disgrace" (328). Everyone present at the meeting, including Tom's employer, praises his work ethic, loyalty to his family, and moral conduct. Tom's posture plays a vital role in this crucial moment at the bank: "Tom himself got up and made the single speech of his life" (328). Tom lives up to the expectations of masculine comportment to the dot: he stands up, stays upright, and expresses little emotion. His elocution is as brief as possible: "Tom looked so gentlemanly as well as tall and straight, that Mr Tulliver remarked [...] that he had spent a deal of money on his son's education" (328). The configuration conveys that "the straight/gay dichotomy has deep roots that are reflected in" notions about acceptable and poor posture (Gilman 2018, 51). Standing up straight and controlling his feelings makes Tom a "real" man. His posture signals his elevated status according to the Darwin-inspired idea of upright manhood as the pinnacle of evolution (Dawson 2010). In terms of social class, his "normal" masculinity expresses the self-controlled bearing and quiet confidence that used to be the mark of noblemen. The novel suggests that this elite posture and ideal of masculinity widened in the nineteenth century to include the lower strata of society. Tom's role model, the entrepreneur Mr. Dean, carries himself like a "nobleman" with a "general solidity without heaviness" (Eliot 2015, 59). The narrator comments that Mr. Dean's comportment is "a type of physique to be seen in all the ranks of English society" (59). Tom's gentlemanly look does not imply illusion about social rank on Tom's part but serves as a marker for his elevation to the symbolic realm of "true men". The overall narrative composition, however, questions male dominance and especially Tom's

moral integrity when he abandons his sister in her moment of greatest need after her supposed elopement with Stephen.

On the one hand, the scene with the creditors conveys Tom's rite of passage to "true manhood" in British capitalist society. By the close of the nineteenth century, "certain tests had made it easier to ascertain if one were a true man: the duel, courage in war, and more generally, the possession of will power as well as the manly virtues of 'quiet strength' and of an acceptable moral posture. Proper looks and comportment had provided proof of true manhood" (Mosse 1996, 91–92). *The Mill on the Floss* suggests that paying back debts does not only figuratively straighten the spine as it feels like a weight lifted off the debtor's shoulders but also that the financial transaction belongs to the test of manhood. Furthermore, Tom has taken away an essential lesson from King's Lorton, namely, his manly conduct. On the other hand, it seems ironic that Mr. Tulliver unwittingly reduces Tom's elite education to lessons in comportment, which was known as one of the domains of Victorian schools for middle- and upper-class girls. The rite of passage into "true manhood" widens the set of possibilities through which the world discloses itself to Tom. It is his choice to pursue his father's wish single-mindedly to buy back Dorlcote Mill, which had previously belonged to the Tullivers for generations.

FEMININE VARIATIONS OF BODY MOVEMENTS: MAGGIE'S DEVIAINT POSTURE

Feminine mobility is curbed right at the start of *The Mill on the Floss*. The circumstance that introduces little Maggie to readers is her "heavy disappointment" that she is not allowed to join the trip in her father's gig because of sartorial conventions: "[T]he morning was too wet [...] for a little girl to go out in her best bonnet" (Eliot 2015, 26). The bonnet features as one of the constant markers of the sartorial deceleration imposed on girls and women in the novel. While going for a walk, for instance, Maggie wears her bonnet but takes it off as soon as she feels unobserved (260). Eliot variously configures Maggie's style of movement as a struggle against the decorum of feminine immobility. The novel describes the manner in which Maggie's corporeal experiences lead beyond norms that women were meant to comply in the nineteenth century (Gowing 2012, 813), giving us insights into the lived experience of "deviant" girlhood and womanhood at the time. Proper English girlhood until the

mid-Victorian period meant, according to Eliza Lynn Linton's 1868 article "The Girl of the Period", that "a girl [...] was *neither bold in bearing nor masculine in mind*" (1996, 356; my emphasis). Above all else, girls had to be "tender, loving, retiring or domestic" (358). Eliot fictionalises the psychological impact of this norm. The heroine knows and internalises the standards of female propriety, but she does not fully incorporate them in her style of movement. Her movements keep defying posture. Perceived as "dangerous, unmanageable" by hegemonic men like Wakem Senior (Eliot 2015, 396), Maggie's bearing is ambivalent insofar as it simultaneously adopts, challenges, and transgresses the nineteenth-century scripts of immobile femininity.

Early in the novel, the narrator anticipates that "the dark-eyed, demonstrative, rebellious girl may after all turn out to be a passive being" (32). However, the plot and figurative composition suggests that Maggie is never fully tamed. Eliot ends the novel with a natural disaster, in which the heroine unleashes her physical potential in the attempt to save and protect others. Furthermore, Maggie is a "troublemaker" (Ahmed 2010, 60–64), her life "troublous" (Eliot 2015, 45). As a child, for instance, she forgets to feed Tom's rabbits and lets them die; then she sticks her head into a bucket full of water to sabotage her curls; she cuts her hair off; she unintentionally knocks over Tom's card house; and she befriends Philip against her family's will. As a young woman, she feels attracted to her cousin's fiancé, Stephen Guest, but rejects his proposal of marriage. Her list of offenses against the norms of Victorian womanhood also includes "growing with a rapidity which her aunts considered highly reprehensible" (174), being "[t]oo' cute [acute and clever] for a woman", "read[ing] almost as well as the parson" (12), and protesting sedentary needlework (13). Significantly, her mother others Maggie in racist terms: her "brown skin as makes her look like a mulatter" (12). From the point of view of Mrs. Tulliver, whom the narrator ridicules persistently, the dark complexion is a sign of Maggie's inferiority.

Most of the brief narratorial characterisations of little Maggie's style of comportment lie within the semantic field of energetic movements, such as "tossing", "jumped up", and "whirling" (e.g. 23, 27–28).² Eliot thus creates a prototypical tomboy. The narrator evaluates her qualities negatively in the sense of the late-sixteenth- and early-seventeenth-century meaning of tomboy as a girl misbehaving like "a spirited or boisterous boy; a wild romping girl" (Moon 2021, 195). Yet at the same time, the narrative insights into Maggie's endearing mischievousness and

understandable anger anticipate the positive connotations of the tomboy figure in the emergent girls' culture from the 1880s to 1910s (Mitchell 1995, 3). Eliot bolsters up the heroine's tomboyism through similes: Maggie, for example, has "the air of a small Shetland pony" (2015, 13), and she is "like a Skye terrier suspecting mischief" (15). These figures of speech create an impression of constant movement. The construction of Maggie's flight to the gypsies harnesses this effect. In this episode, Maggie runs away several miles to "Dunlow Common" to lead a nomadic life with the Roma of the area. She aborts her flight as soon as she gets out of breath, tired, and hungry (99). The episode nonetheless portrays Maggie as a runner fit enough to cover several miles.

This representation of girlhood undermines the nineteenth-century views on moral and physical hygiene, such as those of Schreber. His *Gymnastics* regulates feminine posture, advising that girls should not generally be allowed to "raise" their "knees": "the most immediate working of this movement is a heating one; and its use must therefore be dependent on this consideration, and regulated accordingly. [...] By women, where there is a disposition to orgasm [...], it is to be used with caution. For girls it should be allowed only as an exception" (1856, 57). Women and girls should generally be prevented from getting "hot". Schreber sexualises feminine perspiration as he casts it as a state of arousal that threatens women's moral and physical health.³ Furthermore, he pathologises women's libido and bars girls from running as a measure of inhibiting feminine sexual arousal. Disregarding such regulations of the female body, Eliot's narrator dedicates significant detail to Maggie's image as a girl runner: "[S]he ran along [until she] got out of breath" (2015, 99). Maggie's run implies the quick extension of her lived body into her surrounding space. The representation encodes the spatiality of the girl's extending body and thus rejects the "enclosed" mode of prescribed feminine existence (Young 1980, 149). This running girl, then, is part of Eliot's re-evaluation of the tomboy trope and, broadly speaking, amounts to a counterhegemonic, profeminist representation of Victorian girlhood.

Maggie's perceived naughtiness is closely associated with the spatiality of her lived body. The episode when Maggie pushes her delicate cousin Lucy Deane into the mud epitomises this correlation. The chapter heading spells out that this iconic event is to establish Maggie's reputation as a troublemaker: "Maggie behaves worse than she expected" (Eliot 2015, 3). While exploring the area around their favourite pond, Lucy, who is unaccustomed to outdoor activity, blocks Maggie's view of the

water-snakes: “[W]ith a fierce thrust of her small brown arm, [Maggie] was to push poor little pink-and-white Lucy into the cow-trodden mud” (95). The opposition between “brown” and “pink-and-white” skin reinforces the earlier racialisation and othering of Maggie. Eliot configures her heroine’s offense against white feminine posture in somatic terms as an aggressive demand for space through the forceful flexion and extension of her arms. Driven by the desire for an unblocked view on the spectacle that the water might disclose, Maggie spontaneously reclaims her place through the medium of her body. She uses her body, and she is her body at the same time.

Figuratively speaking, Maggie overthrows the dominant Victorian model of girlhood. Lucy, by contrast, personifies standard, domestic, delicate girlhood since she embraces the social constraints that bind girlhood to future wifeliness. Victorian middle- and upper-class girls are raised to fulfil the role of the “angel of the house”. The fiancée’s point of view illustrates this bourgeoisie ideology. From Stephen Guest’s perspective, readers learn about Lucy’s qualifications as a future wife: “A man likes his wife to be pretty [...] accomplished, gentle, affectionate, and not stupid” (342). The representation of Lucy matches these patriarchal expectations. Her impeccable behaviour extends to her perfect posture: “Lucy Deane is such a good child—you may set her on a stool, and there she’ll sit for an hour together, and never offer to get off”, Maggie’s mother notes (41). The passive voice is significant: not only is the perfect girl to perch for hours, but the position of the body is also to be determined by someone other than herself.

Little Maggie’s immobility is as “deviant” as her mobility: the girl likes “lingering in great spaces of the mill” (28), “sit[ing] down by the holly” (45), or perching on a low stool near the fire “dreaming over a book” (15). In so doing, she follows her idle thoughts and escapes into her imaginary world, “a little world apart from her outside everyday life” (28). This representation undermines another aspect of the docile body that Schreber postulates. His *Gymnastics* takes the unity of body and mind as the point of departure for his “paean to *mens sana in corpore sano*, a healthy mind in a healthy body” (Gilman 2018, 207; emphasis in original). Conflating mental and physical health with productivity, he notes: “He [universal man] is destined to activity in both ways—to the full use of his mental and bodily powers: his whole being is so arranged. The sluggish of mind or idle of body long in vain for the full enjoyment of mental or bodily pleasures” (Schreber 1856, 5). For Schreber, idle or sluggish comportment is

a symptom of “physical pathology” as well as of “moral degeneration”, as Gilman notes (2018, 205). It requires a cure. A strong spine, in turn, allegedly prevents nervous conditions ranging from hypochondria to hysteria (Schreber 1856, 57). The representation of the sedentary side of Maggie’s bearing resists these postural norms and, concomitantly, defies the docile body (Foucault 1977, 137–170).

Furthermore, the narrative composition indicates the way the patriarchal regulation of feminine lifestyle affects Maggie’s orientation within the diegetic world. “For any lived body”, Young notes, “the world also appears as populated with opacities and resistances correlative to its own limits and frustrations” (1980, 147). Eliot does much to represent the experience of such limitations; indeed, the novel includes the internal focalisation of what it is like for Maggie to have her fluctuating energy curtailed all the time: “Maggie thought it would make a very nice heaven to sit by the pool in that way, and never be scolded” (2015, 38–39). The absence of disapproval alone would be heaven for the young girl.

Eliot represents the older brother as an influential patriarchal figure in Maggie’s life, whose “contemptuous conception of a girl” (95) extends to a strong disapproval of their spontaneous movements. Tom excludes his sister from outdoor activities on sexist grounds, claiming that “all girls were silly—they couldn’t throw a stone so as to hit anything, couldn’t do anything with a pocket-knife” (38) or that girls are “unfit to walk in dirty places” (95). All these activities involve dexterity, mental focus, flexion, and extension, be it of hands and arms or the whole body. Throwing certain objects at a target can bring the entire body into motion; it involves the extension of the body in space, stretching sideways, twisting the trunk, extending legs backwards, stepping and leaning forward, planting the foot and releasing. Tom considers girls to be naturally deficient in mobility, which points to the patriarchal reduction of the feminine repertoire of movement in Victorian culture.

Eliot shows her heroine to internalise patronising behaviour, while Tom acts out patriarchal and sexist disciplinary practices. Their joint fishing outing is a case in point: Tom “threw her line for her, and put the rod into her hand” (38). By throwing the fishing line for her, Tom prevents her from expanding her body spatially and teaches her to underestimate her own capacity. This behaviour shapes Maggie’s expectations: she “thought it probable that the small fish would come to her hook, and the big ones to Tom’s” (38). The girl cannot imagine catching a large fish on her own. Promptly, when a fish bites, Tom “came running to prevent her

from snatching her line away” (38). The composition shows Maggie to experience her body as a set of limitations rather than possibilities: she “was frightened lest she had been doing something wrong, as usual” (38). Eliot thus conveys a specific modality of the girl’s lived body, one that relates to the world in terms of “incapacity” (Young 1980, 147). Maggie’s style of fishing configures the “discontinuity between aim [here: catching a fish] and capacity to realize the aim” (150). This discontinuity, in turn, takes the shape of “tentativeness and uncertainty which characterizes the inhibited intentionality of feminine motility” (150). While Maggie’s comportment retains elements of spontaneous energy, Eliot’s representation of her movements also showcases the conformity to feminine posture advocated by dominant medical discourse. At the same time, however, the internal focalisation through Maggie sheds a critical light on Tom’s patronising behaviour and the ways in which feminine posture seeps into the girl’s lived experience and hampers her motor performance. Maggie’s style of engaging with the world thus gradually matches the inhibited intentionality that characterises feminine comportment according to Young (1980, 146).

Maggie eventually fulfils the bodily norms of white middle-class womanhood. Yet, Eliot eschews the conventional script for the tomboy tamed by marriage (Moon 2021, 195), since Maggie never ties the knot. Instead, her conformity culminates in her participation in the charity event at St. Oggs. The occasion marks the adolescent girl’s rite of passage insofar as her body no longer bursts with energy but waits anxiously (de Beauvoir 1989, 357–358). The setting at the bazaar attributes the status of passivity to femininity just like a ball does. In her stand, Maggie “was sitting quite still”, waiting in front of a “stream of costumers” (Eliot 2015, 402). Maggie’s performance of ideal Victorian womanhood points to the capitalist underpinning of the gender binary: while Tom becomes mobile enough to purchase and trade, Maggie acquires enough sedentariness to be purchased.

Looking “at once beautiful and simple [naturally elegant]” (397), Maggie is mockingly represented as the great success story of patriarchal regimentation since the naughty girl has finally adopted feminine posture. Part and parcel of her commodification is her sexualisation since the portrayal renders her “an ornamental surface for the male gaze” (Threadcraft 2016, 207). Tellingly, this respectable surface of “simple, noble beauty” is modestly “clad in a white muslin” (Eliot 2015, 397). With her dark complexion concealed, whiteness combined with embodied passivity firmly

places Maggie in the symbolic realm of white, English middle- and upper-class women: “as passive object—within white supremacist patriarchal culture” (Threadcraft 2016, 214).

The configuration, then, associates Maggie closely with the inanimate merchandise sold at the bazaar. Commerce in this scene operates strictly along the divide of female sellers and male buyers. Given that most women sell their hand-made products, which identifies the seller with her merchandise, the representation of these kinds of trade even smacks of prostitution: sexual difference is reduced to the binary of female objects/goods and male subjects/customers. The male gaze and heteronormative desire dominate the entire perception and meaning of the so-called charity event. The bazaar illustrates Foucault’s repressive hypothesis since it exposes the profound fascination of Victorian society with sexuality behind the guise of philanthropy (1981, 15–17). The female competitors are obsessed with Maggie’s sex appeal. Envyng Maggie for her popularity, they condemn her high selling rate “at once [as a sign of] frivolity” (Eliot 2015, 398). So prevalent is the male gaze, adopted by female and male characters alike, in the configuration of the pinnacle of Maggie’s social career that Eliot can be said to anticipate de Beauvoir’s insight that “man defines woman in relation to himself [...]. She appears to man as an essentially *sexual* being because he has produced her as such” (1989, xxii; emphasis in original). Concomitantly, this male-gaze dynamic reinforces regulative discourses that determine socially acceptable behaviour for two binary genders and make heterosexuality compulsive (Threadcraft 2016, 218).

Whereas Tom’s rite of passage consists in the upright delivery of a concise speech, a speechless bow to her potential father-in-law, Wakem Senior, and to Stephen marks the highest degree of Maggie’s social acceptance that she ever gains as an “admired member of the society of St. Oggs” (Eliot 2015, 397). Maggie’s symbolic gesture suggests that the two patriarchs approve of her and are willing to grant Maggie’s full social validation by virtue of marriage either to Philip, who needs his father’s permission to marry, or to Stephen, who disregards his family’s wishes. The final course of events, however, brings out the energetic, strong side of Maggie’s bearing, which correlates with her rejection of both options for marriage.

With the great tidal flood, Eliot creates a setting that calls for the relinquishment of the strictures on the female body for the sake of survival. In this natural catastrophe, Maggie takes initiative from the start. She notices the flooding in the middle of the night; wakes her friend and landlord, Bob Jenkins, and his family; fetches his two boats; enters one of them; and

sets off across the floods to her old home, the mill, to save her brother. Eliot ascribes attributes like “fearless”, or “without a moment’s shudder of fear” to her heroine, accompanied by active verbs, such as “she plunged”, “she mounted”, “crept into”, “unfastening”, and “mastering an oar” (478). The author spells out the rationale for Bob’s untypical failure in chivalry, letting her set off without any male assistance: “The fact that Maggie had been up, had waked him, and had taken the lead in activity, gave Bob a vague impression of her as one who would help to protect, not need to be protected” (478). The word choice “vague impression” points to the difficulty of representing a woman’s strong, independent bearing seriously. The narrator’s unusually earnest tone reinforces Eliot’s previous representation of Bob’s working-class code of honour. His background enhances the authentic configuration and recognition of women’s physical strength, which is otherwise seen as highly dubious within middle- and upper-class Victorian culture (264).

The chapter “The Last Conflict” represents Maggie’s deviance from feminine posture in a series of actions that evoke the capable and unwavering mode of movement of an “I can” in relation to her body’s task orientation in the world (Young 1980, 146; Merleau-Ponty 2012, 139). The depiction of Maggie’s navigation of the rowing boat conveys an intentionality of movement that is capable of the incorporation of large tools into her body scheme (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 144–145). Her movements are equally controlled and directed by muscle memory as Poulter’s performance of masculinity is in Book One: “She seized an oar and began to paddle the boat forward with the energy of wakening hope [...]. She was hardly conscious of any bodily sensations—*except a sensation of strength*” (Eliot 2015, 480; my emphasis). The description of Maggie as “clutching the oar mechanically” highlights her dexterity and intuitive motor movement (479). Readers also learn about “all her skill and power” to manoeuvre the boat in the current (481). Eliot does not convert Maggie into race-boat rower. The heroine also rests during a “helpless” moment (481), but, overall, the scene encodes Maggie’s complete absorption in the strenuous physical exertion and represents her ability to integrate the oars automatically into her motor performance.

The portrayal of Maggie’s heroic act features signs of darkness and madness. The surroundings are cast in black—“twilight,” “black trees,” “the slowly defining blackness of objects above the glassy dark” (479–480)—and Maggie’s long, open, dishevelled hair suggests hysteria, her “streaming hair was dashed about by the wind” (480; see also Pearl

2010, 165–167). The dark shades of the “final rescue” realign Maggie with her highly agile body during her flight to the Roma people and with her racialisation as non-white. Crucially, these features demarcate the deviance from white feminine posture. Maggie reaches the mill, where she finds Tom “pale with awe and humiliation” (Eliot 2015, 482). Commentators have failed to observe that it is Tom who rows the boat when some huge drifting debris crashes into the siblings before he can navigate away from it. “Pale” as Tom features here, his whiteness apparently overwrites his helplessness and incapacity as a fictional character. Much (unfavourable) scholarly attention has been paid to the subsequent scene, in which Maggie and Tom reconcile and drown in an eternal embrace (Atkinson 2015, xxiv). Scholars have failed to observe the remarkable representation of Maggie’s physical stamina that precedes their deaths. Eliot’s composition of Maggie’s rescue attempt transcends white feminine posture, while Tom’s otherwise correct white masculine posture suggests untypical fragility and errors in navigation.

CONCLUSION: MAGGIE’S EXPANSION OF THE VICTORIAN REPertoire OF FEMININE MOBILITY AND BEYOND

My analysis of Eliot’s embodied narration has shown that Maggie remains an iconic character that expands the Victorian repertoire of feminine mobility. Beyond that, Eliot models the siblings’ characteristic movements loosely on the water ecology of the tidal river.⁴ Maggie’s untamed style of body movement resembles the tidal flow of water energy pictured in the opening of the novel insofar as the incoming tide, parallel to Tom’s masculine dominance, checks the flow of the river Floss, parallel to Maggie’s lived body (Eliot 2015, 7). The narrator resumes the aquatic image in the final book. The course of Maggie’s actions is to “reveal itself like the course of an unmapped river: we only know that the river is full and rapid, and that for all rivers there is the same final home” (371). Considering gender norms, the allegory implies that femininity and masculinity are at times discrete but ultimately joint flows of water without stable boundaries and that they merge with and dilute in the currents of the seas and oceans. On a material level, the novel conveys both Maggie’s and Tom’s embodied characters to be predicated on life force as a flow of energy but unequally channelled, blocked, and stagnated by modern technologies. This poetic configuration is partly prefigured by, and simultaneously

transforms, the ways in which Victorian orthopaedics and other medical disciplines prescribe people's movement along the axis of gender, sexuality, class, and race (Ricoeur 1988, 246). Eliot's often satirical take on the proto-orthopaedic discourse and medical gymnastics corresponds to her critical portrayal of the modern techniques of irrigation. Human life forces, the narrative suggests, are prone to overwhelm modern disciplinary power by virtue of deeper primal energies that erupt periodically like the equinoctial tidal flooding at the end of *The Mill on the Floss*.

NOTES

1. This article forms part of a larger research project in literary and cultural studies entitled "The Visceral Novel Reader" designed and led by Monika Class (Principal Investigator) at Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz, Germany, from 2019 until 2023. The project is funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG—grant number 422574378).
2. For readings of similarly energetic physical movements of the heroines of Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) and Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891), see Natasha Anderson's contribution to this volume.
3. The chapters by Pamela Gilbert and Ariane de Waal in this collection contain further analyses of the cultural and medical significance of perspiration.
4. Representations of water and rivers form one distinct context in which Victorian fiction negotiates the interplay of medicine and mobility, as Ursula Kluwick demonstrates in Chap. 7.

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