"His Own Spirit Unto My Soul"

Political Resistance and Religious Authority in George Eliot's *Romola*.

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Quoted text taken from the record of Anne Hutchinsons's 1637 examination for heresy before the Massachusetts General Court. Hall, *The Antinomian Controversy*, 337.

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Romola is a novel of political resistance whose fanatical hero reaches his apotheosis in a dramatic act of heretical self-immolation. The purpose of Savonarola's heroic political martyrdom is to transmit the spirit of resistance to Romola, the novel's protagonist, in whose hands the novel, and consequently civilization, are left. Eliot's specific choice of Savonarola, whose resistance to Papal authority and Church corruption bears a generally striking resemblance to American Puritanism and a specifically striking resemblance to the historical life of Anne Hutchinson, links the novel to a course of events in early American history whose implications some scholars believe to have been world transformative. *Romola*'s connection to this broader historical course of world transformation, and the means by which Eliot joins it, suggest a number of new critical possibilities for the novel.

Avrom Fleishman rightly suggests that Savonarola is a far more complex character than many of Eliot's contemporaries would have recognized.[1] Aside from having served as the creative spark for the "historical romance" inspired by George Henry Lewes's suggestion,[2] Savonarola is the figure out of whose resistance to Papal authority the inspiration for Romola's transformative struggle on behalf of humanity originates. The general idea of personal transformation forms a complex matrix of ideas in Eliot’s work and thus cannot be said to have a singular point of origin; however, the influence of Feuerbach’s *Das Wesen des Christentums* (*The Essence of Christianity*) on Eliot’s creative and intellectual lives is particularly significant in this respect,[3] and plays an outsize role in many of Eliot’s novels,[4] often as a tool with which plot structures, constructions of value, and complex characterizations are built.[5]

Feuerbach’s essential argument is that the true essence of religion is not God, but humanity, whose awareness of God is nothing more than self-consciousness projected onto a non-existent object, which is in itself merely humanity’s misapprehension of the basic form of its own self-consciousness. As a result, Feuerbach’s idea of religion is firmly secured within material human existence, and draws its practical meaning from humankind’s behavior toward itself, as opposed to theological abstractions and dead dogmas. The love that theology claims humanity to receive from God is merely a clerical perversion of the love humanity freely and naturally feels for itself. When the Christian religion is stripped of these confining dogmas, humankind will be free to express the true essence of religion, which is humanism, or love of humanity by and for itself.

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[1] Fleishman, *Intellectual Life*, 114.

[2] Haight, *George Eliot*, 326.

[3] Eliot’s translation of the book was a watershed in her thought. Aside from having famously stated, “With the ideas of Feuerbach I everywhere agree,” she validates this enthusiasm by proudly noting in a letter to Sara Hennel that the book is considered, “*the* book of the age” in Germany. Haight, *Letters*, 2:154, 138.

Feuerbach's principal role in *Romola* is as a structural vehicle for Savonarola's transmission of value to Romola, who is changed by her contact with him; Feuerbach's arc of historic transformation from dogmatic Christian past to religious humanist future is skillfully replicated in Romola's relationship with Savonarola. The transmission is temporally progressive, and as such comes into sharpest relief when Romola's character is examined at her first contact with Savonarola and at the novel's end.

Romola's initial moment of contact with Savonarola comes when he accompanies her brother, Dino, as he presents himself to Romola with a forewarning vision of her impending marriage to Tito. At first, Romola does not take notice of Savonarola, but when she finally does, it is his hands the narrator describes first, saying of them that,

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[4] Knoepfelmacher, "George Eliot, Feuerbach, and the Question of Criticism," 306-309.

[5] Knoepfelmacher, *Religious Humanism*, 24-148.

"They had a marked physiognomy which enforced the influence of the voice: they were very beautiful and almost of transparent delicacy."[6] The scene until this point, and Savonarola's long introduction *in absentia*, are soaked with medieval imagery, but Eliot's employment of physiognomy here represents a particularly revealing medieval allusion. Physiognomy, the belief that the condition of a person's soul can be scientifically determined by the details of his or her outward appearance, is particularly widespread in the Middle Ages,[7] and is used canonically throughout much of medieval art and literature.[8] Eliot's application of physiognomy to Savonarola through the mirror of Romola's gaze does much to strengthen Savonarola's link to the medieval world of

Dante’s Florence, which is alluded to in the novel’s first paragraph.[9] Although it was in the Middle Ages considered a science, the underlying assumption behind physiognomy is not scientific, but rather philosophical, and is itself built upon the deeper belief that there can be and is a direct, positive correspondence between the way an object appears and its orientation toward truth. The application of physiognomy to Savonarola’s hands, symbols of work and creation, serves to emphasize the primacy of work and labor to Savonarola’s characterization, qualities Eliot couples with and contrasts to the qualities of strength and inborn authority when, moments after she first glimpses him, and despite the fact that she expresses an overt contempt for his religion, Romola falls “on her knees”[10] before him, simply because he demands that she abandon her false pride. However, at this early stage of her progress, Romola does not yet understand the full significance of Savonarola’s labors, a fact she illustrates in her response to Dino’s prophecy. As Dino relays to

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[6] Eliot, *Romola*, chap. XV.

[7] Friedman, “Another Look at Chaucer and the Physiognomists,” 138-152.

[8] Mâle, *Gothic Image,* 1-23.

[9] Eliot, *Romola*, chap. I.

[10] Ibid., chap. XV.

Romola that he has three times envisaged in Romola’s impending wedding a terrible foreboding, she is doubtful that there could be any possibility for truth in her brother’s "sickly"[11] religions vision, but she is nonetheless haunted by his warning. Yet, when she relays the vision to Tito,[12] she allows herself to be moved by his characteristically skillful and self-serving dismissals of religion into discounting it, a feat Tito accomplishes by carefully reminding Romola that such visions defy reason and therefore cannot be truthful. Through her dismissal of Dino's prophecy, Tito leads Romola to a failure on two levels: she fails to recognize the lie in Tito's manipulation of reason; and she fails to see the truth inherent in Dino's religious vision. When she meets Savonarola, Romola can see that he and his religion are significant, but she does not yet possess the power to see through worldly deception to religious truth.

Contrast this to the novel's closing scene when, after having assumed Tessa and Tito's children to her own care, Romola admonishes Tessa's son, Lillo, to the following:

> And there was Fra Girolamo – you know why I keep tomorrow sacred: he 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. And so, my Lillo, if you mean to act nobly and seek to know the best things God has put within reach of men, you must learn to fix your mind on that end, and not on what will happen to you because of it.[13]

Romola has accomplished two significant changes. First, Romola's perception of Savonarola as a figure in his own right has changed; instead of associating his religion with a general sickliness, or a type of intimidating authority extrinsic to herself, Romola now perceives in Savonarola a sacred and noble, but also very much human, greatness. Second, Romola is able to clearly explicate the political context from which Savonarola's

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importance emerges. He is no longer a vague and amorphous entity existing in the shadows of Romola’s naiveté, and has now taken on the shape of a man whose greatness consists in the selfless “struggle against powerful wrong” to which he sacrifices his life. Romola can now see and identify Savonarola’s meaning, both as a religious and a political figure. In choosing to impart this meaning to Tito’s son, himself a dual symbol of his father’s transgressions and the potential for ameliorative change, Romola fully assumes the didactic role passed on to her by Savonarola.

The structural sympathy with Feuerbach is clear, but so is the failure of Feuerbach’s secular anthropological humanism to fully address or explain the significance latent in Eliot’s choice of Savonarola. At the time of *Romola*’s publication, Eliot could have written about any historical place and time she wished. She could presumably also have written any number of novels whose political intrigues play themselves out along Machiavellian lines, but do not involve the famous lengths to which Eliot goes while writing *Romola*.[14] For even Tito, whose character is certainly in part inspired by and named in reference to Machiavelli,[15] and thereby intimately linked to

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[12] Ibid., chap. XVII.!

[13] Ibid., Epilogue.

Florence, is sadly not a species of political animal that history has chosen to confine there. Savonarola is the only character that could not have been re-imagined, removed, or entirely replaced, and thus its *raison d'être*; he provides *Romola*'s creative spark, his historical lifetime forms its temporal backbone, and its moral purpose originates in him. Tito, Bardo, Tessa, Dolfo, the Medicis, Florence, and even Romola are the novel's accidents, all of them lesser objects made functionally necessary by virtue of their proximity to the novel's principal concerns, which are Savonarola and the unique historical and personal properties that aggregate themselves in his existence.

To further justify this position, one need only to reexamine the images surrounding the means and circumstances by which Savonarola transforms Romola. Between the opening and closing scenes already discussed, Romola's gradual transformation expresses itself in various forms, which share in common that they are born from struggle, and that they take shape in the *polis*, the public world of Florence lying outside the ancient and cloistered Bardo compound, from which Romola symbolically descends. The first of Romola's struggles stems from her inability to recognize the essence of religion expressed latently in Savonarola's identity and explicitly in Dino's prophecy. This lands her in a balefully unhappy marriage to Tito,

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[14] Eliot brought all of her intellectual and physical resources to bear in preparing for and executing *Romola*. Fleishman, *Intellectual Life*, 112-128; Haight, *George Eliot*, 343-373.

[15] Eliot's well-marked Italian edition of *The Prince*, includes Machiavelli's *Discourses on Livy*, Titus Livius being the anglicized form of Tito Livio.

from which she twice attempts to flee. Savonarola abruptly halts her progress on the first occasion, a moment Eliot chooses to immortalize in one of Frederick Leighton's lush illustrations, which accompanied the novel's initial publication. The image, titled *Romola and Savonarola* and bearing the caption "Father, I will be guided.",[16] shows Romola on her knees before Savonarola, who commands her to reassume her place in Florence, where duty and service await her. This image visually echoes Romola's introduction to Savonarola, but additionally demonstrates that Savonarola as a religious figure is intended to function as a catalyst of action, that Romola's purpose will be measured through the moral quality of her works. The illustration's predominant dynamic tension emerges from the sharp contrast between Romola's infolded posture and Savonarola's rigid, outstretched hands. As she kneels before him, Savonarola urges her backward with the entire force of his moral authority, symbolized by his cloak, tonsure, and preternaturally human linearity.

Hoping it will ease her way out of an increasingly tumultuous Florence, Romola dons a religious costume before she flees. In the illustration, we see Romola clothed in the trappings of a religious order – crucifix peeking out from hood, cloak, and mantle – and assuming a devotee's awestruck posture; however, we also know that Romola is an impostor to these vestments, that she bears them only to deceive, and that she is not a true believer. Romola never undergoes a religious conversion in the doctrinal or theological senses; she submits only to changes in her thoughts and actions, despite the fact that

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[16] See page 17.

many in Florence embrace Savonarola’s message much more enthusiastically.[17] *Romola and Savonarola* subtly retains the spirit of Romola’s rebellion, and stands as a symbolic representation of Romola’s submission, bearing within it the subtle reminder that, while Romola does indeed submit, she does so on her own terms.

As Savonarola’s outstretched hands symbolically demand, when Romola returns to Florence, her immediate course of action becomes the direct expression of *caritas* toward the Florentine *polis*.[18] *Romola and Savonarola* can thus also be understood as an image standing at the midpoint of Romola’s progress, between her introduction to Savonarola and the moment she passes his religious essence on to Lillo. Such an approach to Romola’s development invites her complete transformation to be imagined as an arc of slow metamorphosis, rather than as a singular, paroxysmal moment of change. If the three significant images through which we have visualized Romola’s narrative life are placed along this arc at discrete points, they serve to divide Romola’s development into five concurrent parts, consisting in three symbolic moments and the spans of narrative time that connect them: Romola meets Savonarola, rebels against his religious essence, and marries Tito; Romola suffers greatly thereby; Romola submits to the spirit of Savonarola’s religious essence on her own terms; Romola transmutes her

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[17] Romola’s refusal to fully convert is throughout contrasted to the increasing hysteria surrounding Savonarola’s growing popularity. Even as those close to her convert, including Monna Brigida, Romola retains her independence. Eliot, *Romola*, chap. LI.

[18] Ibid., chap. XLIV.

rebellious internal energy into externally transformative action performed on behalf of the Florentine *polis*; Romola in turn passes the spirit of religion on to Lillo and the future of civilization.

Romola's transformation is clearly significant; it dominates the novel's plot, underwrites its moral purpose, and informs its temporal direction. However, as her development indicates, Romola herself is not the character in which any of these directional qualities originate. Her arc of development is consequently subsumed beneath Savonarola's much broader arc of heroism, out of which emerges the motive force behind Romola's protagonistic momentum. Avrom Fleishman points out the important role Pasquale Villari's *La Storia di Girolamo Savonarola e de' suoi Tempi* (*The Life and Times of Savonarola*) played in informing Eliot's conception of Savonarola and his historical moment,[19] and Eliot's personal copy of the Villari text bears this out. Among the most heavily marked chapters is the tenth chapter of book one,[20] wherein a fully matured picture of Savonarola's thought first comes into focus. As it was to Florentines in Savonarola's time, this thought is presented to Villari's reader in the form of what have come to be known as Savonarola's Lenten sermons, followed by an account of Savonarola's prophetic vision of a French invasion.

Villari's text is a history, thus his decision to pair the sermons with the invasion prophecy is necessarily linked to the fact that the two events are historically concurrent. It

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[19] Fleishman, *Intellectual Life*, 113.

[20] Villari, *La Storia di Girolamo Savonarola,* 163-172. Dr. Williams's Library, London.

is more significant that Eliot chooses to introduce her reader to Savonarola during the same historical concurrence, which she does in *Romola*'s Proem, where the sermons become the object of the narrator's historical contemplation,[21] as well as the historically embodied point of entry into *Romola*'s Florence. Felicia Bonaparte describes *Romola* as an epic poem,[22] drawing particular attention to the Proem and the role of its night-student, who wishes his life "to be an arc in an immeasurable circle of light and glory."[23] Epics are not the stories of individual persons, but rather the essential, historical narratives of entire civilizations. When Savonarola's role is commensurately elevated to the epic, "immeasurable" heights envisioned by the night student, which is the contextual height at which Eliot's Proem introduces him to the reader, two conclusions can be drawn: that the essential religious content progressively transmitted to Romola as she travels across her arc of development is rooted in the content of these very sermons; and that said content is passed not to Romola the person, but rather to the entire civilization in which her person consists.

Near the end of the same chapter in Eliot's copy of Villari's narrative, the following is underlined in graphite:

> "Noè oggi invita ognuno, la porta è aperta; ma verrà tempo in cui l'arca sarà chiusa, e molti invano si pentiranno di non esservi entrati." Nei sermoni di quella quaresima ed in altri ancora continuo sempre a parlare a lungo dei vicini flagella; annunziò la venuta d'un nuovo Ciro, che avrebbe traversato vittorioso l'Italia, senza trovare ostacoli, e senza rompere lancia.[24]

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[21] Eliot, *Romola*, Proem.

[22] Bonaparte, *The Triptych and the Cross*, 34.

[23] Eliot, *Romola*, Proem.

[24] Villari, *La Storia di Girolamo Savonarola*, 172. Dr. Williams's Library, London.

The second edition translation of this passage reads:

> "Let all hasten to enter into the Lord's Ark! Noah invites ye all to-day, the door stands open; but a time will come when the Ark will be closed, and many will repent in vain of not having entered therein." In these Lenten discourses,[25] and also in some others, he continued to dilate on the threatened scourges, and foretold the coming of a new Cyrus, who would march through Italy in triumph, without encountering any obstacles, and without breaking a single lance.[26]

As the underlining suggests, Eliot, the once fervent evangelical, did not miss the historical and doctrinal significance of the fact that Savonarola's jeremiad culminates in Noah, who is selected from among the corrupted descendants of Adam to receive the new covenant because he alone has the Lord "seen righteous before me in this generation".[27] Above all of Savonarola's complaints hover his issues with Church corruption, a preoccupation that eventually costs him his life. His focus on the failures of Church righteousness most certainly forms an enormously important theme in Savonarola's biography, and thus naturally provides a great deal of background and meaning for

Romola's plot. However, the biographical aspects of the sermons are of less importance than what they reveal about Savonarola's thought, for the real genius of this excerpt lies in what it assumes, not in what it expresses. As he urges his fifteenth century listeners to "hasten into the Lord's Ark" of repentance and leave the corrupted Church to the "threatened scourges" he imagines will soon overcome it, Savonarola is expressing two latent assumptions: that he knows what God's Church ought to look like; and that he has the right to express such knowledge. When Savonarola stands before the Florentine people and insists that God has selected him to receive specific scriptural and prophetical

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[26] Villari, *Life and Times of Girolamo Savonarola*, 1: 186-187.

[27] Gen. 7:1 (King James Version).

knowledge, what he is in fact doing is laying claim to the better part of clerical authority and, in a consummate act of political resistance, relocating it within himself.

In November of 1637, Anne Hutchinson is brought before the General Court of Massachusetts Bay Colony on vague charges of heresy whose origins lie in the same brand of resistance. 1637 is an important year in early American theological history because it is the middle year of what has come to be called The Antinomian

Controversy,[28] but was at the time known as the conflict between the Covenant of Works and the Covenant of Grace. The conflict's specific theological arguments are not at issue here, and can thus be paraphrased as the conflict that emerges around how questions of Christian salvation will resolve themselves in light of the apparently contradictory covenants God has formed between Adam and Noah, the former Covenant of Works stressing the importance of righteous action, the latter Covenant of Grace stressing the importance of inherent goodness and divine election. Hutchinson is accused of spreading the heretical Covenant of Grace among women during private meetings in her home. When her interrogation begins to focus more narrowly on how it is that Hutchinson has come to believe herself entitled to assume such authority, she claims that God has given it to her directly. The exchange reads:

Mr. Nowell. How do you know that that was the spirit?

Mrs. H. How did Abraham know that it was God that bid him offer his son, being a breach of the sixth commandment?

Dep. Gov. By an immediate voice.

Mrs. H. So to me by an immediate revelation.

Dep. Gov. How! an immediate revelation.

Mrs. H. By the voice of his own spirit to my soul.[29]

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[28] Hall, *The Antinomian Controversy*, 3.

[29] Ibid., 337.

Like Savonarola, Hutchinson claims to have received, without interpretive intervention or clerical assistance, direct knowledge of God’s will, which He has personally revealed to her own soul. She assumes the right to interpret the scripture in accordance with her own mind, and to express those interpretations publicly. Moreover, in this excerpt, as well as in the rest of the transcript, she goes so far as to claim not only greater authority than the clerics presiding over the Colonial magistracy, but as much authority as Abraham and the other great Biblical patriarchs. Not surprisingly, the established political hierarchy is resoundingly displeased with her claim to its authority, and swiftly expresses its displeasure in the form of permanent banishment.

German theologian Ernst Troeltsch places the development of “freedom of conscience” and the “rights of man” on a political arc that begins with the English Puritan Revolution, ends in the American and French constitutions, and briefly passes over Rhode Island, the religiously tolerant colony founded by Roger Williams following his own banishment during the Antinomian Controversy, which comes less than two years prior to Hutchinson’s. Troeltsch’s reason for locating the genesis of these political principles in Rhode Island, even though altered versions of the principles are later and more famously espoused by Rousseau and others, is for the straightforward reason that the inviolable right of an individual to determine his or her own conscience is first explicitly realized in a governmentally constitutive form – the Rhode Island constitution – only after it is first made an absolute requirement of faith by Williams.[30] All later expressions of this requirement as a political right are subsequent to its having first been expressed by heretical Puritans in Rhode Island.

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Troeltsch, *Protestantism and Progress*, 89-127.

While certainly convincing and helpful, this conclusion is in one detail problematic. Namely, that it subverts the religious significance of Williams and Hutchinson's internal struggles to their historical and political effects. As it is for Savonarola, Hutchinson's insistence on the validity of her own religious authority, even in the face of persecution and banishment, is a watershed moment in political history precisely because it is not originally a political act. During her examination, Hutchinson is not specifically arguing for a wholesale transformation of the colony, dissolution of Biblical hierarchy, or a secular form of government. All she is arguing for, which she does in clear language, is the right to define and follow her own path to God on her own terms, to interpret the Bible and God's voice within her in accordance with principles of her own derivation. Consequently, her historical significance stems not from her link to Rhode Island and the emergence of secular political rights, but rather from the role she plays in corporeally validating the internal struggles out of which those rights emerge. Her refusal to cede her personal, religious sovereignty to worldly, political authority informs the assumption behind the impulse that gives birth to Rhode Island's later constitutional validation of individual human conscience. Anne Hutchinson is historically significant because she refuses to cede the sovereignty of her internal authority, and she is heroic because, even in the teeth of political repression, she will not be moved.

Savonarola's historical importance and heroic status consist in precisely the same qualities, and combine to form the broader arc of heroism within which Romola's smaller arc of moral progress is subsumed. Though Savonarola and Hutchinson are widely separated by time and culture, they are nonetheless valiant twins whose heroism is rooted in the simple and uncompromising refusal to allow prevailing political and religious orthodoxies to corrupt their own sense of internal authority, despite “what will happen because of it.”[31] If, with this in mind, the arc upon which Troeltsch has placed the emergence of secular political rights is applied to Savonarola’s role within *Romola*, a different picture of the novel emerges. We are no longer looking at a conventional nineteenth century novel of moral transformation, but rather at a narrative philosophical argument that would seek to locate the origins of the modern conscience in religiously inspired political resistance.

Though it is ostensibly an historical novel based in late fifteenth century Florence, the Proem’s narrator opens *Romola* from the middle of the nineteenth century, by imagining the world of Florence “More than three centuries and a half ago”. In the novel’s first paragraph, the narrator, now situated in April of 1492, imagines how the narrow streets surrounding the Loggia de’ Cerchi might have sounded to Dante’s ear. The Epilogue closes with Romola’s discussion of Lillo’s future. Perhaps a more illuminating way to imagine the true historical reach of *Romola*, then, is as an historical arc extending from Dante’s medieval ear to the future as envisioned in Romola’s eye. If Savonarola’s heroic political arc is placed alongside this even broader arc of historical vision, Eliot’s specific choice of Savonarola becomes even clearer. The medieval ear of Dante, attuned as it is so faithfully to the Church, is not the ear of fifteenth century Florence, and Savonarola’s assumption of Papal authority represents a sharp departure from medieval thought. At the same time, Eliot goes to great lengths to link Savonarola’s political resistance to a medieval type of constancy and moral certitude to which only the deeply faithful are privy, a point consistently underscored by Tito's aimless and destructive amorality. Savonarola, as an historical figure and a novelistic device, embodies the contradiction inherent in any attempt to reconcile these two sets of assumptions, one that would derive knowledge and authority from God's inherently ordered universe, and the other that would derive them from God's voice within. Romola's assumption of an ameliorated position toward religion that would allow her to retain Savonarola's virtue without the burden of his dogma represents a transformation of value begun with Dante's faith, altered politically by Savonarola's resistance, assumed as a secular philosophical assumption by Romola, and then passed on into Lillo's future. As the "immeasurable circle of light and glory" epically envisioned by the Proem's night-student reminds us, we are in *Romola* contemplating a world without end, a civilization conceived broadly enough to encompass the entire range of human development, an epic circle into which Dante's arc, Savonarola's arc, Hutchinson's arc, Romola's arc, and the arc of Lillo's future each contribute a small curve.

Aside from these wider implications, the true heart of *Romola* beats within the chest of Savonarola's political resistance. It is this resistance, which echoes that of the Puritans but even more deeply foreshadows the impulses of modern political life, around which Eliot presciently constructs her historical argument. As it does for Feuerbach and Troeltsch, whose later awareness Eliot elegantly anticipates, the essence of Eliot's political modernity consists in the power of inspired human beings to resist powerful

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[31] See note 12 above.

wrong and, in so doing, fight to progressively improve civilization. Savonarola is heroic because he resists; Eliot elects him because the modern political conscience is born from the spirit of heretical resistance.

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Romola and Savonarola

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Frederick Leighton, *Romola and Savonarola.* 6 ! x 7 " in. George Eliot, *Romola*, 2: 103.

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