

THE QUESTION OF AESTHETICS IN GEORGE ELIOT'S *MIDDLEMARCH*: 'A STUDY OF PROVINCIAL LIFE'

Mark Byron

MIDDLEMARCH is an experimental novel, the terms of which are described in its classic Victorian subtitle: 'A Study of Provincial Life'.¹ It is a fictional experiment, where historical and political change, and gender roles and relations, are tested by narrative time and circumstance. *Middlemarch* is also an experiment of fiction: it is an experiment concerning the novel form itself. These concerns are framed within a lengthy text that demonstrates a somewhat encyclopaedic range of cultural reference. It is only natural to ask, then, how does a reading of *Middlemarch* manage to keep hold of these discourses all at once, and how can their subtle developments and interrelations be traced? In other words, how does the reader assimilate the historical and political contexts, their narrative representations, and the formal experimentation of the narrative itself?

The larger themes and formal aspirations of the text can be developed by stepping outside of the provincial life of the village of Middlemarch and into the Eternal City of Rome. The cameo episode in Rome (Chapters 19-22) provides a way of dealing with the major discourses of the novel. Specifically, the way each character responds to art works and aesthetic ideas in those chapters indicates something about their wider social and cultural visions. Their lessons of knowledge and perception shape the novel's own structural goals, and the relative success of its organic design. This translation of ideas across the text's dimensions is a powerful hermeneutic device. John Peck even suggests that debate over *Middlemarch* is 'a continuing debate about the novel as a genre, a debate about history, and, indeed, ... a debate about the nature and function of criticism itself'.²

George Eliot had been taking notes and drawing up plans for her new prose project sporadically from January of 1869; most of the text was composed rapidly between 1871 and 1872. In his introduction to the 1986 Clarendon edition, David Carroll gives a detailed account of the novel's uneven composition and its early manifestation as two separate stories: 'Middlemarch' and 'Miss Brooke' (pp. xiv-xx). These stories had merged into the early part of the text by March of 1871.' Carroll tells us that 'the larger panoramic novel she was writing ... caused George Eliot a good deal of difficulty' (p. xxxii). This is evident in her extensive revisions throughout the manuscript and in the first edition of 1871-1872, published in *Blackwood's* magazine in Edinburgh (lxiii). The problem of authorial control of the narrative material is inflected in the readerly task of apprehending and interpreting *Middlemarch*. The tension between the need for coherent form and the desired openness of a literary experiment frames an initial view of the text's ambitions and achievements. But before exploring how the role of art objects can shape a reading of the various discourses of *Middlemarch*, it will be useful to restate very briefly some of the text's historical concerns.

Excepting the novel's postscript, or 'Finale', the action of the narrative concludes just prior to the Reform Act of 1832. This Act was seen to challenge the fabric of British political life by proposing both wider suffrage and a reformed parliament. The Act sought to give representation to the growing industrial cities of the Midlands and the north of England, such as Birmingham, Manchester, Leeds and Bradford. The second aim was to be rid of the so-called 'rotten boroughs' – sparsely populated electoral regions that subverted fair electoral contest. 'These boroughs' tiny (and sometimes imaginary) populations still elected a Member of Parliament with the same power of representation as an MP from large, populous, and often poverty-stricken, working-class boroughs in London. The passing of the Act through parliament proved difficult: two governments were dissolved between 1830 and 1832 in their attempts to pass or block each of three Bills, and widespread rioting occurred around the country in October of 1831. The divisions within society exposed by the Bill are replicated in *Middlemarch*. But rather than presenting a static portrait of current ideological differences, Eliot instead incubates them within a realist social setting, within 'limits of variation' (p. 4), in order to see what kind of effects they will have on social dynamics in the village.

Alongside the Reform Act, the so-called 'woman question' forms another aspect of Eliot's experiment in *Middlemarch*. British women

were not given the right to vote until the early twentieth century, but Eliot takes up the issue of a woman's right to self-determination. Significantly, this issue arose once again in the amendment to William Gladstone's Reform Bill of 1871. As with the theme of voting reform, this theme is also framed within the narrative experiment, where female characters negotiate their relative autonomy or react to the pressures of patriarchal control. The 'Prelude' to the novel introduces this theme by way of a brief allegory. The actions of Saint Theresa – a sixteenth-century Spanish mystic and founder of several Carmelite convents – are seen as appropriate to her *epos*, or time. Eliot's question concerns whether the women of the novel's *epos* are denied the choice of appropriate action. The narrator sounds this theme at the outset: 'Many Theresas have been born who found for themselves no epic life wherein there was a constant unfolding of far-resonant action; perhaps only a life of mistakes, the offspring of a certain spiritual grandeur ill-matched with the meanness of opportunity; perhaps a tragic failure which found no sacred poet and sank unwept into oblivion' (p. 3). This sentiment is recapitulated in the novel's 'Finale': 'A new Theresa will hardly have the opportunity of reforming a conventional life, any more than a new Antigone will spend her heroic piety in daring all for the sake of a brother's burial: the medium in which their ardent deeds took shape is for ever gone' (p. 825). The language of birth and offspring in the 'Prelude' passage quoted above indicates the curtailed role women were expected to fulfil: of child-bearing and domestic duty. It also reflects Eliot's concerns with models of organic growth, concerns closely related to the narrative or generic element of her experiment in fiction.

Middlemarch plays out a formal experiment resonant with its other discursive concerns. Eliot seeks to extend the range of the novel form from the conventions of narrative fulfilment evident in the novels of Jane Austen and Charles Dickens, and evident in her own earlier work. Although Austen has her central characters attain a new level of self-awareness within a social context, Eliot takes this a step further by having her characters' new knowledge bound into, and a part of, that social space. Several critics have pointed out that the loose ends of the plot are eventually resolved, and that this rubs against themes of the unfulfilled life and of political compromise, and even of the novel's avowed intention to experiment with models of organic form. At the level of plot, this view holds some weight, and the novel's 'Finale' does betray a muted impulse to close down its problematic narrative threads.³

However, the freshness of the novel's formal experimentation is evident at its points of self-awareness. The episode in Rome articulates this experimental vision. The treatment of artworks, and the aesthetic theories promoted by the various characters, actually demonstrate the qualified and radically open aspect of the novel itself.

The Rome episode, Chapters 19 through 22, covers the 'honeymoon' of Dorothea and Causabon, and the implication of Will Ladislaw in their lives. The characters are taken out of their home environment and are estranged from social and cultural familiarity – a kind of experiment within an experiment from the narrative point of view. The result of this estrangement is to raise the tone of both Dorothea's and Will's perceptions and emotional responses. Dorothea entertains her first doubts concerning Causabon's research, and finds herself unable to integrate her own perceptions of art into a coherent aesthetic. Will is certain of his aesthetic judgement, on the other hand, and becomes ever more aware of the waste of Dorothea's marriage. Causabon seems only dustier and even less prone to emotional response. For Dorothea (in Chapter 20), 'the large vistas and wide fresh air which she had dreamed of finding in her husband's mind were replaced by anterooms and winding passages which seemed to lead nowhither' (p. 190). As with the events in the town of Middlemarch, several themes are explored together in Rome. Dorothea's several uncertainties all share the same feature: her desire, knowledge, and self-determination are all frustrated by her gender, social position and material conditions, or as the narrator concludes in the 'Finale', the various 'channels' of her energy are blocked. The function of the artwork can help clarify these enmeshed concerns.

In Chapter 19, Will Ladislaw is first made aware of Dorothea's presence in Rome when his artist friend Naumann calls him over to observe her standing in a room of the Vatican Museum. Will has just turned his back on the Belvedere Torso. This marble sculpture fragment, headless and without limbs, is a profoundly important work in the history of sculpture, and its presence announces the serious treatment of art and aesthetics to come. The statue, a copy of a Hellenistic original, is significant within the narrative for several reasons: it begins a system of references to German aesthetics, and the modern European inheritance of Hellenistic sculpture; it functions as a visual prop for the discourse of the *paragone*, or comparison of the arts, which is soon to arise between Will and Naumann; and it sets up a

classic backdrop before which the characters negotiate their relationships. But the sculptural fragment also serves as a kind of icon for the literary text. It is not a complete representation of the male form, but merely a fragment showing the trials of its history as an object in the world. Like the other significant sculptures mentioned in *Middlemarch* – the 'reclining Ariadne' (p. 183) and the Laocöon (p. 206)¹ – this piece is Hellenistic (from the second and first centuries BC) rather than a classical sculpture from fifth-century Athens. Nevertheless, it stands in for an ideal classic form made the more attractive in its unattainable essence, and which bore significant influence upon the sculptural style of Michelangelo (among others). It is not an experiment with form, prone to internal development and change, but is altered by its environment and the slow process of decay.

Despite its apparent solidity, the statue has direct significance for Eliot's novel of organic development. In the mid-eighteenth century, the antiquarian and classicist Johann Joachim Winckelmann wrote extensively on the Belvedere Torso and other Hellenistic sculpture. Winckelmann was librarian of the Vatican and president of Antiquities, and has come to be seen as the founder of modern art history. Eliot's knowledge of his work is evident in journal entries dating from 1860 during a trip to Italy.² In his *History of the Art of Antiquity* of 1764 (*Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums*) Winckelmann defined for the first time an organic development of growth, maturity, and decline in ancient art. He also saw climate, freedom, and craftsmanship as controlling factors in artistic production. Both ideas are of central importance to Eliot's text: her response to the well-crafted plots of the nineteenth-century novel was to adopt an experimental model of organicism; and the social and political subject matter of *Middlemarch* is allowed to run its course in the 'climate' of village life rather than to follow a strictly prescribed pattern. The world of art in Rome is adapted to her use of biological tropes and organic models. Geographically, Rome stands apart from developments in the village and the discourses of the text outlined above (political reform, the woman question, and organic social theory). But it provides a means by which to test those discourses and the efficacy of Eliot's experimental prose model.

Will Ladislaw and Naumann observe Dorothea in the Vatican Museum, standing inattentively in 'the hall where the reclining Ariadne, then called the Cleopatra, lies in the marble voluptuousness of her beauty, the drapery folding around her with a petal-like ease and

tenderness' (pp. 183-184). This description is attentive to the history of the art object. Great care is taken to record a now-defunct name, Cleopatra, as part of the statue's provenance, and to describe the folds sculpted into the marble: the very feature that permits us to identify it as specifically Hellenistic sculpture.⁷ Naumann is intent on the sensuous opposition of the cold marble with Dorothea's living form. He says: 'There lies antique beauty, not corpse-like even in death, but arrested in the complete contentment of its sensuous perfection; and there stands beauty in its breathing life, with the consciousness of Christian centuries in its bosom' (p. 184). He does not give Dorothea a gendered pronoun, preferring, it seems, to rest secure in a conservative aesthetic idealism. In turn, Dorothea is oppressed by the chaotic and degraded history all around her in Rome – a 'funeral procession' of a whole hemisphere, made of 'strange ancestral images and trophies gathered from afar' (p. 187) – and finds herself ill-equipped to forge a system in which to understand it. Naumann's aesthetics instead rationalises the human, and specifically this human woman, into a perception of sensuous forms. Later, his flattery of Causabon repeats the tendency to objectify, but without the complications of gender. Causabon sits for him in his studio, as the model for the head of Saint Thomas Aquinas. Causabon having already taken on the heroic role of myth-breaker in writing the 'Key to all Mythologies', submits to this shallow mythology of representation. The arid scholar is so pleased to serve this function that he arranges for the purchase of the painting, and shows more animation in this flattery than in his marriage.

Ladislaw is aware of Naumann's tendencies and practices that seek to elevate painting and sculpture. But the effect is, for Will, to 'perturb and dull conceptions instead of raising them' (p. 186). He counters with his own *paragone*, or hierarchy of the arts, placing literature above the visual and plastic arts. Literature is both a more complete form and less merely a simple object:

Language gives a fuller image, which is all the better for being vague. After all, the true seeing is within; and painting stares at you with an insistent imperfection. (p. 186)

Will is prone to Romantic flights of idealism, but he is described by the narrator as a character in need of a 'drama to act in' (this is an ironic understatement of his new presence in Dorothea's life). Whilst his dynamism is described as often self-imposed and solitary, it does attempt to reveal and engage in action 'appropriate to his epos'.⁸

The final meeting in Rome between Will and Dorothea again centres upon aesthetic terms and the appreciation of objects. Dorothea is glad for Will's opinion concerning some cameos she has purchased for her sister Celia. His opinion is framed by his sense of aesthetic value in the objects:

there can be no great mistake about these little Homeric bits: they are exquisitely neat. And the colour is fine: it will just suit you. (p. 214)

The association of Greek epic with the cameos indicates the small but valuable role they play in a larger aesthetic field for Will, much as an Homeric epithet functions within a larger description of quest or battle. Dorothea does not hold the cameos in much esteem, however, wanting them only to be good 'after their kind'. She prefers aesthetic value in life, and avows her own modest project:

I should like to make life beautiful – I mean everybody's life. And then all this immense expense of art, that seems somehow to lie outside life and make it no better for the world, pains one. It spoils my enjoyment of anything when I am made to think that most people are shut out from it. (p. 214)

The limitations of her aesthetic sense are not simply associated with education, but to a wider issue of access and cultural franchise. This 'Saint Theresa' moment in the narrative puts art objects where they belong semantically: the prefix 'ob-' means against, and the verbal root '-ject', from the infinitive *jacere* means to throw; thus 'ob-ject' is to throw over or against, or to put at arm's length. Art for Dorothea is rather a matter of process and participation, as it is for the novel's narrator, whether in politics, women's suffrage, the organic growth of a community, or the development of an experimental text.

This kind of submerged etymological awareness can be seen in Dorothea's almost compulsive repetition of the word 'cameo'. This word derives from Old French and Medieval Latin (*camabieu* and *camabutis* respectively), and entered into currency in late-Middle English. The cameo describes a small relief carving, usually with layers of different colours forming the ground and the figures. The word's modern definitions – a short literary sketch or acted scene, or a small character part – are equally applicable in this scene: the episode itself is a cameo, separate from the 'main action' of the novel, and its focus words and its two characters play cameo parts. This double meaning takes on heightened significance when it is known

that these definitions came into use in the mid-nineteenth century (perhaps after the time of the action, but prior to the time of the text's composition).

Dorothea's aesthetic talk of the cameo might translate to a modern reader as a discourse on souvenirs. This word, from the French *souvenir* (to come into the mind) came into English usage in the late-eighteenth century to define the keepsake – an item purchased or given in order to remind the owner of a place or person. This would seem to describe exactly what Dorothea wishes her cameos to do, so why doesn't she use this word at all? The souvenir describes the art token, a false object or commodity of cultural tourism. It stands against the meaning imbued in things by Dorothea. Her world (or ideal world) is one of process and growth, not of accumulation and dissection. The cameos could not be fairly described as souvenirs, even if they are 'little Homeric bits'.

The utility of art for Will and Dorothea comes to frame their respective views of social engagement and the life as a product of certain kinds of aesthetic labour. Whilst Dorothea seeks to make life itself beautiful, Will pursues his virtue of enjoyment which 'radiates' into a shared delight (pp. 214-215). His critique of Dorothea's 'fanaticism of sympathy' overlooks her intent self-awareness. She says:

I see it must be very difficult to do anything good. I have often felt since I have been in Rome that most of our lives would look much uglier and more bungling than the pictures, if they could be put on the wall. (p. 215)

That realisation gives her a structuring principle upon which to build the 'good' life, a life honest enough to admit compromise with Causabon, but that after his death allows her to seek happiness without undue pain to others. The plot may give Dorothea the opportunity she needs to fulfil herself (and this narrative turn has been widely criticised as a weakness of the text), but she requires the strength of mind to put her practical aesthetics into action, which, in the end, she does. Gillian Beer recognises that the novel refrains from disingenuous consolation: 'As it is, the book forces us still to recognise exclusion, false consciousness and atomism as part of daily experience for women, and for men and women in their relationships with each other'.¹⁰ Another critic has noted that Dorothea's role in 'involuntary, palpitating life' allows for the treatment of organic dysfunction in a novel that openly 'articulates the dilemmas of its age'.¹¹

Eliot's intense scrutiny of the status and variety of art objects uses Rome and its cultural production for a fictionally innovative purpose. Several major characters in the novel are transposed from Middlemarch to the Eternal City, and their aesthetic reactions and opinions form the bases for future action. Particular artworks – Hellenistic sculpture and cameos – inflect upon the limits of narrative fiction and Eliot's literary project of organic development. They bring together the themes of parliamentary reform, women's emancipation, and meditations on the art of fiction, and they can do this either by serving as false icons of closed self-sufficiency or as illustrations of projects and processes open to the conditions of their time. Neat closure rubs against the point of Eliot's fiction in *Middlemarch*. The art objects at issue elucidate the very differences that separate them from Eliot's experiment.

Notes

- 1 *Middlemarch*, ed. and intro. David Carroll (Oxford: Clarendon, 1986). All quotations from *Middlemarch* pertain to this edition and will be incorporated into the text.
- 2 John Peck, 'Introduction', *Middlemarch, New Casebooks*, ed. John Peck (London: Macmillan, 1992), p. 1.
- 3 For comprehensive accounts of textual matters concerning the development of *Middlemarch* from manuscript to published text, see Jerome Beaty, *'Middlemarch' from Notebook to Novel* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1960); Beaty, 'The Text of the Novel: A Study of the Proof', *Middlemarch: Critical Approaches to the Novel*, ed. Barbara Hardy (London: Athlone, 1967), pp. 38–62; and Stanton Millet, 'The Union of "Miss Brooke" and "Middlemarch": A Study of the Manuscript', *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 79 (1980), pp. 32–57.
- 4 Sally Shuttleworth argues that Eliot is fully aware of the complexities and contradictions in organicist social theory, and by applying biological models to society 'offers no simple endorsement of theories of organic social harmony'. See *George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Science: The Make-Believe of a Beginning* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984), p. 142. Further, for Shuttleworth, the contradictions inherent in social values are inscribed within the character, dividing the self's internal organisation and development in time (p. 3, p. 19).
- 5 George Eliot read Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's *Laocöon* whilst in Berlin, during November 11–13, 1854. This text divides the arts into the spatial (sculpture, painting) and the temporal arts (music, poetry). Lessing leans towards the temporal arts in his hierarchy of value: his schema evolved into the *poétique* handed down to us today, with music at the apex of aesthetic purity.
- 6 See 'Recollections in Italy 1860', in *The Journals of George Eliot*, ed. Margaret Harris and Judith Johnston (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998), p. 347. The obscured pres-

- ence of German aesthetics echoes pointedly in Will's admonition to Dorothea: 'If Mr Causabon read German he would save himself a great deal of trouble' (202).
- 7 Roger Ling, 'Hellenistic and Graeco-Roman Art', in *The Oxford History of Greece and the Hellenistic World*, ed. John Boardman, Jasper Griffin, and Oswyn Murray (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1986), pp. 455-456.
 - 8 In Rome, Will is only coming to terms with his chosen vocation. His anger and contempt towards Causabon takes on the shape of a proposed oil sketch 'of Marlowe's Tamburlaine Driving the Conquered Kings in his Chariot' (207). This scene, from *Tamburlaine* Part One, IV, ii, presents a tableau of Tamburlaine's totalising vision of conquest. Will mocks Causabon's avowed philological project, not for the last time, by the association between the warrior and the scholar.
 - 9 Gillian Beer, 'Middlemarch and "The Woman Question"', in *Middlemarch, New Casebooks*, ed. John Peck (London: Macmillan, 1992), p. 179.
 - 10 Suzanne Graver, 'Organic Fictions: *Middlemarch*', in *Middlemarch, New Casebooks*, ed. John Peck, p. 104.