Using epigraphs as a lens to open up new vistas, this study explores a wide range of connections. Moving freely between epigraphs and the main text, Roberts succeeds in throwing fresh light on the manifold ‘middleness’ of Middlemarch and the richness and sophistication of George Eliot’s realism.

In Middlemarch, George Eliot draws a character passionately absorbed by abstruse allusion and obscure epigraphs. Casaubon’s obsession is a cautionary tale, but Adam Roberts nonetheless sees in him an invitation to take Eliot’s use of epigraphy and allusion seriously, and this book is an attempt to do just that. Roberts considers the epigraph as a mirror that refracts the meaning of a text, and that thus carries important resonances for the way Eliot’s novels generate their meanings. In this lively and provoking study, he tracks down those allusions and quotations that have hitherto gone unidentified by scholars, examining their relationship to the text in which they sit to unfurl a broader argument about the novel – both this novel, and the novel form itself.

Middlemarch: Epigraphs and Mirrors is both a study of George Eliot and a meditation on the textuality of fiction. It is essential reading for specialists and students of George Eliot, the nineteenth century novel, and intertextuality. It will also richly reward anyone who has ever taken pleasure in Middlemarch.
1. Eliot’s Double Mirror

Many of the chapter epigraphs in Middlemarch are quoted from specifically attributed sources: ‘Shakespeare’, ‘Old Song’ and so on. Others come without attribution, and in these cases Eliot herself is the author—a snatch of poetry, or an excerpt from an Elizabethan-sounding play, which she is passing-off as a ‘quotation’.¹ Take, for instance, the epigraph to Part 8 Chapter 72, near the end of the novel:

Full souls are double mirrors, making still
An endless vista of fair things before,
Repeating things behind.

These words are Eliot’s own work. The image of the ‘double mirror’, though, is not original to her. It comes from Blaise Pascal, via George Sand.

This is interesting for several Eliot-related reasons. Take Sand, for example: George Henry Lewes championed the French novelist, met her in person and encouraged Eliot to read her (in 1842, Lewes wrote that Sand was ‘the most remarkable writer of the present century […] infinitely more than novelist, she is a Poet, not of the head alone, but of the heart’), advice Eliot certainly followed.² Indeed, it became something of a commonplace in contemporary critical reactions to Eliot to equate her with Sand.

When Sidney Colvin, in his discerning review of *Daniel Deronda*, remarked, ‘the art of fiction has reached its highest point in the hands of

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¹ Surveying Eliot’s complete works, David Higdon tabulates all the epigraphs (‘or mottoes as George Eliot chose to call them’) and arrives at the following numbers: ‘There are 225 of them in her works—96 of them original and 129 drawn from the works of fifty-six identified and eight anonymous authors’. ‘George Eliot and the Art of the Epigraph’, p. 128.

two women in our time’ he was merely echoing a sentiment which had been expressed many times in the preceding fifteen years.3

But while there have been journal articles and even whole PhDs, written on Eliot and Sand, there has been, to my knowledge, very little on Eliot and Pascal.4 This is strange, since we know that Eliot read Pascal’s Pensées avidly from a young age. Pascal provides the epigraph to both Middlemarch’s 33rd and 75th chapters: ‘Qui veut délasser hors de propos, lasse’ and ‘Le sentiment de la fausseté des plaisirs présents, et l’ignorance de la vanité des plaisirs absents causent l’inconstance’, respectively. One of the first things we learn about Dorothea, at the beginning of the very first chapter, is that she ‘knew many passages of Pascal’s Pensées’ by heart, passages which illuminated for her ‘the destinies of mankind […] by the light of Christianity’. And one of the reasons she considers marrying Casaubon is that she is able to persuade herself ‘it would be like marrying Pascal. I should learn to see the truth by the same light as great men have seen it by’.5 So what of that epigraph to Chapter 72, with its comparison of ‘full souls’ to ‘double mirrors, making still/an endless vista of fair things before,/Repeating things behind’?

We know that Eliot read Sand’s Lettres d’un voyageur (1837). Here’s a relevant passage from the English version of that novel:

I do not exactly know what Pascal meant by those ‘pensées de derrière la tête,’ which he reserved as a reply to polemical objections, or for denying in secret what he feigned to accept openly. This was most probably, the Jesuitism of intellect, forced to bend to outward duty, but nevertheless involuntarily rebelling against the absurd decision. To me, the expression seemed a terrible one. It has not only been met with amongst his ‘Pensées,’ but written separately on a piece of paper, and conceived somewhat in this way: ‘And I also, I shall have my “thoughts from the back of the head.”’ Oh! mournful words, drawn from a desolate heart! Alas! there are days when the human heart is like a double mirror, where one

5 Eliot, Middlemarch, ch. 3.
surface sends back to the other the reverse of those objects it has received in front.  

Sand’s image of the human heart as a ‘double-mirror’ (the original is: ‘le cerveau humain est comme un double miroir dont une glace renvoie à l’autre le revers des objets qu’elle a reçus de face’) implies facing mirrors each reflecting the other in a kind of mise-en-abîme—Eliot’s ‘endless vista’ brings this out. It’s clear that Sand’s image riffs, explicitly, on Pascal’s idea of ‘thoughts from the back of the head’, and that’s an idea that has a manifest resonance for what Middlemarch is doing as a novel.

What is at the back of Dorothea’s head, so late in the novel as chapter 72? Life has finally freed her from Casaubon, and she is independent and wealthy. ‘A husband would not let you have your plans’, Celia rebukes her, to which Dorothea snaps: ‘As if I wanted a husband!’ What plans? To aid Lydgate, caught-up in the scandal of Bulstrode’s fall, and widely thought guilty-by-association or perhaps even a co-conspirator, although believed by Dorothea blameless (as, actually, he is). Her brother-in-law and uncle, over dinner, rebuke Dorothea’s naivety, but presumably that’s not what is referred to by the ‘foil or shadow acting like an iron spring within the brain’ here. Presumably there’s something else going on. The forward part of her head is sure she wants no husband, but the back of her head knows better, and between these two mirrors her soul is cast into its amoureuse, or malamoureuse, mise-en-abîme. Dorothea wants her independence, and that independence means the power to choose the partner her heart desires, but choosing Ladislaw means sacrificing her financial security and therefore her independence just as it means acquiring, for a second time, a husband. As if I wanted a husband!

Pascal’s 72nd pensée, ‘On Man’s Disproportion’, includes his celebrated thoughts on the ‘double infinity’ that frames the human condition, caught as we are between the infinitely large and the infinitely small. Of these ‘deux infinis’ Pascal insists:

If we are well informed, we understand that, as nature has graven her image and that of her Author on all things, they almost all partake of her double infinity […] We naturally believe ourselves far more capable

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of reaching the centre of things than of embracing their circumference. The visible extent of the world visibly exceeds us; but as we exceed little things, we think ourselves more capable of knowing them. And yet we need no less capacity for attaining the Nothing than the All. Infinite capacity is required for both, and it seems to me that whoever shall have understood the ultimate principles of being might also attain to the knowledge of the Infinite. The one depends on the other, and one leads to the other. These extremes meet and reunite by force of distance and find each other in God, and in God alone.

The ‘middle’ of Middlemarch is, as we first take it, a place, a geographical locator: a town in the Midlands, the central territory of this British island. Then, as we read, we understand that the middle of this novel is its subject: neither the aristocracy nor the very poor, neither the extraordinarily virtuous nor the melodramatically wicked. The novel as an aesthetic project calibrated carefully to walk a middling path between fantasy and documentary. But there is, I think, another sense in which the novel middles its vision. In tacit answer to Pascal’s question ‘Qu’est-ce qu’un homme dans l’infini?’ Eliot says: infinite greatness and infinite divisibility both would annihilate us, and so it must be that we are where we are, in the middle between these two things. Middlemarch is neither concerned with infinitesimals and trivia, nor does it have pretensions to talk in windily cosmic terms. It is a novel about ordinary people and the ordinary things that happen to them, and in this is, precisely, its knowledge of the infinite. It has to be, as the narrator notes in one of the novel’s most famous passages, since either of Pascal’s infinities could collapse our minds: ‘if we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel’s heart beat and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence. As it is, the quickest of us walk about well wadded with stupidity’. 8

Pascal finds in our middle-ness a sign of divine providence: ‘Car enfin qu’est-ce que l’homme dans la nature?’ he asks. What then is man in nature? And he answers himself: ‘un néant à l’égard de l’infini, un tout à l’égard du néant, un milieu entre rien et tout’; he is nothing in relation to infinity, and he is everything in relation to nothingness, he is the midpoint between nothing and everything. We are where we

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8 Eliot, Middlemarch, ch. 22.
are, says Pascal, because that is where God has put us: ‘la nature ayant gravé son image et celle de son auteur dans toutes choses, elles tiennent presque toutes de sa double infinité’.\(^9\) Nature has engraved its image and that of its Creator in all things; almost everything derives from its double infinity.

Moreover, in arguing that humanity is strung between ‘two infinities’ Pascal also means that we exist between the infinite stretch of time before our birth and the time that stretches out, infinitely far, after our death. ‘When’, he says in the *Pensées*

> I consider the short duration of my life, swallowed up in the eternity before and after, the small space which I fill, or even can see, engulfed in the infinite immensity of spaces whereof I know nothing, and which know nothing of me, I am terrified, and wonder that I am here rather than there, for there is no reason why here rather than there, or now rather than then. Who has set me here? By whose order and design have this place and time been destined for me?—*Memoria hospitis unius diei prætereuntis*. It is not well to be too much at liberty. It is not well to have all we want.\(^10\)

‘The eternal silence of these infinite spaces alarms me,’ shudders Pascal. *Le silence éternel de ces espaces infinis m’effraie.* Eliot, however, is not afraid. And that, I think, says something important about her art. As a writer she’s really not very interested, as a Joseph Conrad or an Emil Cioran might be, in existential dread and terror. On the contrary: Eliot’s ‘middle’ inverts the Pascalian framing—not, as it might be, a little life surrounded on either side by terrifying infinities of lifelessness, but a little death, Casaubon’s, bookended by two zones of life, love and hope. Perhaps it looks odd to describe Dorothea’s starting point, back in the novel’s early chapters as being one of love. I suppose it’s more conventional to think of her as just misguided (although it’s pretty condescending to Dorothea as a person to tell her, ‘no my dear you’re not really in love with Casaubon, you’re just casting around for some way to express your nascent spiritual yearning’). But what if—she isn’t? Is it so impossible to believe she actually did love Casaubon? Perhaps, for all her austerity of manner, what most defines Dorothea is precisely a kind of spontaneous excess of love.

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\(^10\) *Pensées*, 205. The Latin is from the apocryphal *Wisdom of Solomon* [5:14]: the King James Version translates this line as ‘the remembrance of a guest that tarrieth but a day’.
With this Pascal-via-George-Sand verse epigraph to the first chapter of Book 8, it is instructive to look at the epigraph to Book 8’s (and the novel’s) very last chapter. From the soul as a double-mirror we shift to the heart as preserved in a miraculous supersaturation of love:

Le cœur se sature d’amour comme d’un sel divin qui le conserve; de là l’incorruptible adhérence de ceux qui se sont aimés des l’aube de la vie, et la fraîcheur des vieilles amours prolongés. Il existe un embaumement d’amour. C’est de Daphnis et Chlôe que sont faits Philémon et Baucis. Cette vieillesse là, ressemblance du soir avec l’aurore.—VICTOR HUGO: L’homme qui rit.

The heart is saturated with love as with a divine salt that preserves it; there is an incorruptible coherence to those who have loved in the dawn of their life that brings freshness to old, long-lasting loves. It is, as it were, an embalming of love. It is out of Daphnis and Chloe that Philemon and Baucis are made. In such an old age, the evening harks back to the dawn.—VICTOR HUGO: The Man Who Laughs.

This is Eliot’s inversion—her mirror image, we could say—of Pascal’s two, terrifying eternities of blankness: a life bookended by love and preserved by the connection, the reflection, of the one in the other. It’s a heartening way of looking at life, and long-term relationships; but it is also the way Eliot has chosen to frame her novel. The shape of Middlemarch is a death between two loves.

The novel’s ‘Finale’, Eliot’s epilogue, presents itself to the reader without any epigraph. But it still, by way of concluding Dorothea’s story, or more precisely by way of declining exactly to conclude her story, manages to strike a beautiful, plangent note. Ends, says Eliot, are beginnings, and neither is the terrifying eternity of silence that so affrighted Pascal. ‘Every limit is a beginning as well as an ending [...] marriage, which has been the bourne of so many narratives, is still a great beginning’. Dorothea cannot live as a grand heroic Theresa or Antigone, Eliot tells us, because ‘the medium in which their ardent deeds took shape is forever gone’—but a new, quotidian medium has come about, just as dramatically and morally engaging. ‘Medium’ in the sense of environment becomes medium in the sense of middle.

Her finely touched spirit had still its fine issues, though they were not widely visible. Her full nature, like that river of which Cyrus broke the strength, spent itself in channels which had no great name on the earth.
But the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive: for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs.\footnote{Eliot, Middlemarch, ‘Finale’.
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So I revert to my earlier question—in the middle of what?—by picking up the suggestion that one of the things this great novel mediates is a kind of mutual doubled speculum. I have already touched upon the commonplace by which ‘the mirror’ has long been a trope of art as such, and ‘realism’, that complicated term, such as Eliot writes is supposed precisely to hold, as it were, the mirror up to nature. Eliot’s self-reflexive textual mirrors, though, tend to be more complex than a simple foursquare reflection. And I have already quoted \textit{Adam Bede}’s Escher-like opening image:

\begin{quote}
With a single drop of ink for a mirror, the Egyptian sorcerer undertakes to reveal to any chance comer far-reaching visions of the past. This is what I undertake to do for you, reader. With this drop of ink at the end of my pen, I will show you the roomy workshop of Mr. Jonathan Burge, carpenter and builder, in the village of Hayslope, as it appeared on the eighteenth of June, in the year of our Lord 1799.\footnote{Eliot, \textit{Adam Bede}, ch. 1.}
\end{quote}

But the \textit{Middlemarch}-ian mirror, via its Pascalian doubling, involves a still more complex narrative strategy, because it is deliberately self-reflexive. Eliot’s novel is both a reflection, scrupulously researched, of an English Midlands town in the late 1820s and 1830s, and a self-reflection, a meditation on the scope and nature of Eliot’s own art—as in the novel’s famous last paragraphs. The impossible Pascalian ‘infinity’ that frames the project of realism (what George Henry Lewes pegged as ‘Truthism’, and which he opposed ‘not to Idealism but to Falsism’)\footnote{George Henry Lewes, ‘Realism in Art: Recent German Fiction’, \textit{Westminster Review}, 70 (1858), 493–94.} is, surely, the idea of total vision.

The perfect mirror would reflect everything, just as the perfect realist novel would capture everything. Impossibilities, both, of course. Eliot’s double mirror, though, by turning on itself shrinks that bad infinity down into itself. Eliot achieves her total vision by not attempting totality,
as when she so elegantly and deliberately steps away as narrator from the latter phase of Dorothea’s life. Fredric Jameson wonders whether ‘the bad totalization projected by Casaubon’s *Key to All Mythologies*’ isn’t ‘the caricature and distorted mirror image of Eliot’s own achieved totalization in *Middlemarch* itself’. It’s an argument with some appeal, except that a key is a different kind of thing to a mirror.

It has to do, I think, with Eliot’s deftness, the way her writing both convincingly ‘reflects’ the world she is describing (in the sense that she compels readerly belief in that world) and ‘self-reflects’ on her own practice as she goes along. Her praxis becomes part of her world, and the world becomes part of her praxis. It is a complex mimesis, I think, and richer and more compelling than the plainer Zola-esque or Gissing-y realism discussed above.

How is a key different to a mirror? Critics have explored the extent to which Eliot based her Casaubon upon her contemporary Mark Pattison, the brilliant intellect and Rector of Lincoln College Oxford whose sexless, miserable marriage and ultimate failure to capitalise upon his youthful scholarly potential find parallels in Eliot’s character. Among the harder to ignore parallels between Pattison and Casaubon is that Pattison actually published a book on Casaubon—Isaac Casaubon, that is, the sixteenth-century Swiss theologian. Pattison’s Casaubon,

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15 See for instance, H. S. Jones, *Intellect and Character in Victorian England: Mark Pattison and the Invention of the Don* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511660283 and A. D. Nuttall, *Dead from the Waist Down. Scholars and Scholarship in Literature and the Popular Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003). Early in 1869 Frances Pattison was introduced to George Eliot. Their friendship blossomed and by late summer they were on intimate terms. In November 1870, five months after a memorable visit to the Pattisons in Oxford, Eliot began work on the story of Dorothea Brooke. Since the publication of *Middlemarch*, readers and critics have speculated about the extent to which Dorothea’s arid union with Casaubon was modelled on the failed marriage of Mark and Frances Pattison. The relative ages of the partners, the husband’s prematurely withered appearance (“his deep eye-sockets, those two white moles with hairs on them, a bitterness in the mouth and a venom in the glance”), and of course the name Casaubon itself, all suggest a deliberate likeness. In public, Frances Pattison, who remained on good terms with Eliot, always denied having read the book, but Dilke stated plainly, on his wife’s authority, that “the religious side of Dorothea Brooke was taken by George Eliot from the letters of Mrs. Pattison,” and that Casaubon’s letter proposing marriage to Dorothea “at the beginning of the fifth chapter in *Middlemarch*, from what George Eliot herself told me in 1875, must have been very near the letter that Pattison actually wrote, and the reply very much the same”. Peter Thonemann, ‘Wall of Ice’, *London Review of Books*, 30.3 (2008), 23–24.
not unlike Eliot’s Casaubon, hesitated in the face of the attempt at systematic or complete knowledge, and if the historical Casaubon, at least according to Pattison, did so for reasons of more spiritual cogency than either intellectual timidity or lack of subject knowledge, the final result is not all that different.

The depreciation of his own performance, which was one of Casaubon’s mental habits, was founded on the disparagement of secular knowledge in comparison of piety. But it was further connected with that oppression of mind, which the infinity of knowledge lays upon its votaries. [...] The thought *quantum est quod nescimus* [‘how small the amount we can know’]—Heinsius’ motto—keeps him not only humble, but despondent. Even in science, some of the greatest men have shared the sense of baffled endeavour. Newton’s pebbles on the sea-shore are become proverbial. Laplace’s dying words were, ‘l’homme ne poursuit que de chimères’ [‘mankind pursues nothing but chimeras’] [...] Research is infinite; it can never be finished.16

This glosses the nature of research, but it does more: it construes the character of the researcher, and as such it speaks to another of Eliot’s prime concerns in this novel: character. In her account of the novel, Gillian Beer stresses how ‘Eliot emphasises the congruity between all the various processes of the imagination, the novelist’s and the scientist’s’, adding that she articulates an ‘imagery of transcendence’: ‘the microscope and the telescope, by making realisable the plurality of worlds, of scales and existences beyond the reach of our particular sense organisation were a powerful antidote to that form of positivism which refused to acknowledge possibilities beyond the present and apparent world’.17 It is an insight that leads nicely into an examination of the microscopic potency of Eliot’s characterisation in this novel. A key opens a door, a linear operation; a lens opens in a more fractal mode, whole new vistas and worlds: the connection not of finitude to finitude, but our mortal limitation to something infinite. A fragment is an incompleteness, but ‘it can never be finished’ is not the same thing as ‘it is mortal’, and Eliot’s focus is always on this latter and never on the potsherd, the remnant, the eighteenth-century folly. The past, for her, lives in the present, or else it is a kind of inertness.
