AdAm Roberts

MIDDLEMARCH

Epigraphs and Mirrors

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.

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Adam Roberts

Epigraphs and Mirrors
Middlemarch’s thirty-first chapter opens with a conversation between Lydgate and Rosamond about Dorothea.

Lydgate that evening spoke to Miss Vincy of Mrs. Casaubon, and laid some emphasis on the strong feeling she appeared to have for that formal studious man thirty years older than herself.

‘Of course she is devoted to her husband,’ said Rosamond, implying a notion of necessary sequence which the scientific man regarded as the prettiest possible for a woman; but she was thinking at the same time that it was not so very melancholy to be mistress of Lowick Manor with a husband likely to die soon. ‘Do you think her very handsome?’

‘She certainly is handsome, but I have not thought about it,’ said Lydgate.

‘I suppose it would be unprofessional,’ said Rosamond, dimpling.¹

There’s quite a lot going on here, and it is not especially flattering to Lydgate. At the heart of this brief exchange are two different modes of cause-and-effect. Lydgate, ‘the scientific man’, assumes a ‘billiard-ball striking another billiard-ball’ model, a conception of necessary sequence. A woman agrees to marry a man. Ergo the woman loves the man. But Rosamond’s ‘of course’ is not so mechanistic or sequential as this, and Eliot’s point is that we, as readers, take the force of her rather than his understanding. Rosamond’s ‘of course’ indexes social convention, not the motion of the heart, and stands-in for the material rather than the emotional satisfactions of the union. Not that Rosamond ignores the way actual desire, for a person rather than for social standing or material wealth, factors-in to human relationships. Her next statement,

¹ Eliot, Middlemarch, ch. 31.
though styled as a question, actually figures by way of a mild accusation: ‘you find her attractive, of course?’ Lydgate’s answer is, we presume, perfectly ingenuous: for his desire runs on rails in a way not true of his wife. His effective denial is then parried by Rosamond: I suppose it would be unprofessional, delivered with that tell-tale dimple, means: naturally you desire her—for she is, as you have conceded, attractive—but you repress that desire for professional and socially-conventional reasons.

Rosamond is over-reading her more simply constituted suitor, just as he is under-reading his more complexly constituted inamorata. It is a perfect encapsulation of their relationship, a more nuanced psychologically-grounded portrait of marital incompatibility than the one offered by Dorothea and Casaubon. In their case the mismatch is external, something the whole world can see; where Lydgate and Rosamond appear, to all external observers, to be very well matched indeed. That glint of steel in Rosamond’s character implicit in ‘it was not so very melancholy to be mistress of Lowick Manor with a husband likely to die soon’ recruits empathy—for Rosamond is thinking herself into Dorothea’s situation—to a materialist ruthlessness of feeling, and therefore of affect. It is a little thing that resonates significantly in terms of our understanding of Rosamond’s character. Which is to say: it acts, as it were, epigraphically, smallness achieving a mode of largeness in the more capacious context of the novel as a whole.

The epigraph to this chapter is a piece of Eliotic verse:

How will you know the pitch of that great bell
Too large for you to stir? Let but a flute
Play’neath the fine-mixed metal: listen close
Till the right note flows forth, a silvery rill:
Then shall the huge bell tremble—then the mass
With myriad waves concurrent shall respond
In low soft unison.

This versifies a phenomenon well-known to campanologists, and often discussed during this period. Indeed, Eliot’s little section of verse

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2 ‘I was anxious to ascertain what relation the secondary tones of a large bell bore to its fundamental note, and for this purpose I availed myself of the excellent musical ear of my friend, Mr. Dodd, during his too short sojourn with me, and we went accompanied by a flute to the large bell of Salisbury Cathedral’. Charles Tomlinson, ‘Mr Tomlinson’s Experiments and Observations on Visible Vibration’, Records of General Science, 2 (1835), 124–33 (p. 128).
describing this acoustic peculiarity was itself widely quoted and copied, especially in books about bell-ringing or acoustics.3

So widely quoted, in fact, did Eliot’s short poem become that it began to be discussed on its own merits. Several commentators understood the passage in a theological sense, as (for instance) saying that our individual and mortal faith, though small in an absolute sense, might nonetheless resonate with the vastness of the Godhead.4 More recently, Evan Horowitz has read the epigraph as being about ‘social form’.5 To read it as I propose here, as a more self-reflexive gesture on Eliot’s part, a gloss as much on the realist novelist’s apprehension of the nature of cause and effect in human character and interpersonal relation, is not to dismiss such takes, of course. Still, the epigraph in situ speaks more directly to questions of which effects are followed by causes, introducing the less obvious influences with the more direct hammer-strike—like Wallace Stevens’s celebrated, if perhaps rather opaque, distinction

3 J. Solis Cohen’s The Throat and the Voice (London: Ward, Lock, & Co., 1880) compares human vocalisation to campanological acoustics: ‘Heavy bells are started by commencing with gentle impulses in rhythmic accord with the proper oscillation of the bell’, adding: ‘To quote from an excellent novel, Middlemarch …’ and citing the epigraph (p.123). The fifth chapter of Frank E. Miller’s The Voice (New York: G. Schirmer, 1910), ‘The Physiology and Psychology of Voice-Production’, begins: ‘Above this chapter I might well have placed the following lines which George Eliot wrote above Chapter XXXI of Middlemarch …’, then quoting the epigraph (p.180). The anonymously authored article on ‘The Bell’ in The Southern Review, 22 (1877), 372, follows a lengthy prose account of campanological acoustics with the words: ‘this is matter-of-fact prose, dealing with bells in the rough. Now listen to this perfect poetry from George Eliot, which by its magic touch transforms the bell into a thing of life’, quoting the lines.


5 ‘If it is not immediately clear that these lines are about social form, rather than, say, the acoustics of bells, the evidence is nonetheless there—most directly in that pointed word “mass”, and most profoundly in the final cadence, where the “mass” is made a chorus of individuals singing in “low soft unison.”’ Evan Horowitz, ‘Industrialism and the Victorian Novel’. Evan Horowitz, ‘Industrialism and the Victorian Novel’, in The Oxford Handbook of the Victorian Novel, ed. by Lisa Rodensky (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), https://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199533145.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780199533145-e-021373. The moral he draws is: ‘though the whole of society may seem overgrown or unwieldy, the right cause, the right ideal, the right note will show its resounding harmony.’
between the beauty of inflections and the beauty of innuendoes.⁶ We are, according to the idiom ‘struck’ by another person’s beauty, like a bell being struck by its clapper. Rosamond and Dorothea are both beautiful, and Lydgate is struck by both; but, considered in terms of cause and effect, one has a more insinuating, resonant effect upon him than the other. Why might this be? To answer such questions we turn, perhaps, to the character, perhaps even the subconscious subjectivities of the individual effected; but to do so in this context is to realise how rich the ironies of Eliot’s characterisation are. Lydgate, who believes in a simple chain of cause-and-effect, is actually to be acted upon with a more flute-line trembling. What we feel we ought to desire and what we actually desire rarely align.

That this is so is picked out in the chapter’s eighth paragraph, following this brief and flirtatious exchange from Lydgate’s courting of Rosamond. Before he leaves, Lydgate lifts and smells Rosamond’s perfumed handkerchief ‘as if to enjoy its scent’ (why as if? Is Eliot hinting at a less self-evident motive?) The narrator continues:

But this agreeable holiday freedom with which Lydgate hovered about the flower of Middlemarch, could not continue indefinitely. It was not more possible to find social isolation in that town than elsewhere, and two people persistently flirting could by no means escape from ‘the various entanglements, weights, blows, clashings, motions, by which things severally go on.’

The line quoted is neither identified in the text, nor is its provenance particularly obvious.⁷ It is, though, germane to this question of human motivation, of cause and effect, that is shaping Lydgate’s personal, and the novel’s collective, narrative. The quotation is Lucretian, from a section of the De Rerum Natura describing how the primal nature of matter as a ‘state of discord’ led to all the atoms in the universe ‘joining battle, disordered their interspaces, passages, connexions, weights,
blows, clashings, motions, because by reason of their unlike forms and varied shapes they could not all remain thus joined together nor fall into mutually harmonious motions’.\(^8\) It is, of course, a radically materialist vision of the universe, although Lucretius’s actual account of cause-and-effect is rather more nuanced and complex than is sometimes assumed.\(^9\) If Lydgate were to take fully to heart the implications of living in this clashing tempest of interactions he would, we can presume, be less complacent. There’s a leaven of humour here too, of course: describing this one Midlands town in the 1830s in terms of a cosmic downpour of clashing Lucretian atoms. But it touches on something that some critics of Eliot have argued persuasively: that one of her distinctive attributes as a writer is precisely her repudiation of linear cause and effect.\(^10\)

To return to Eliot’s epigraphic bell: the particular phraseology in this short piece of verse is significant. Blow upon your flute, under the giant metal structure, and ‘the mass/With myriad waves concurrent shall respond/In low soft union’. That word—concurrent—is an important one for *Middlemarch*. It first occurs during an exchange between Bulstrode and Lydgate, indicative of the difference in their respective world-views.

‘I am aware,’ [Bulstrode] said, ‘that the peculiar bias of medical ability is towards material means. Nevertheless, Mr. Lydgate, I hope we shall not vary in sentiment as to a measure in which you are not likely to be actively concerned, but in which your sympathetic concurrence may be an aid to me. You recognize, I hope; the existence of spiritual interests in your patients?’

‘Certainly I do. But those words are apt to cover different meanings to different minds.’\(^11\)

\(^8\) This is H. A. J. Munro’s translation, *De Rerum Natura Libri Sex*, 2 vols (Cambridge: Deighton Bell & Co., 1866), vol. 2, p. 126. The Latin is: *discordia quorum/intervalla vias conexus pondera plagas/concursus motus turbat proelia miscens/propter dissimilis formas variasque figuras,/quod non omnia sic poterant coniuncta manere* [*De Natura Rerum*, 5:436–38].


Sympathetic concurrence, here, mediates between Bulstrode’s spiritual apprehension of the universe and the physical, Lucretian connections of Lydgate’s materialism. The word appears again at the meeting Bulstrode chairs to determine whether the ‘scientific’ Vicar Farebrother or the more conventionally religious Tyke (‘a man entirely given to his clerical office’) be given the lucrative position of secretary at the new hospital—Tyke, of course, being Bulstrode’s man:

Lydgate was late in setting out, but Dr. Sprague, the two other surgeons, and several of the directors had arrived early; Mr. Bulstrode, treasurer and chairman, being among those who were still absent. The conversation seemed to imply that the issue was problematical, and that a majority for Tyke was not so certain as had been generally supposed. The two physicians, for a wonder, turned out to be unanimous, or rather, though of different minds, they concurred in action.\textsuperscript{12}

The Doctor is ‘more than suspected of having no religion’ by Middlemarch society—though this fact is not held against him (‘it is certain that if any medical man had come to Middlemarch with the reputation of having very definite religious views, of being given to prayer, and of otherwise showing an active piety, there would have been a general presumption against his medical skill’). He and his colleagues concur in preferring the more scientific Farebrother. Lydgate, though it makes him wince to be believed to be kowtowing to Bulstrode—and although Farebrother is his friend—votes for Tyke. His anxieties have some grounding in reality. ‘Mr. Wrench and Mr. Toller’, the narrator says, ‘were just now standing apart and having a friendly colloquy, in which they agreed that Lydgate was a jackanapes, just made to serve Bulstrode’s purpose’. But this passage goes on to point up the mild social hypocrisy of these gentlemen, for ‘to non-medical friends they had already concurred in praising the other young practitioner’. \textit{Concurrence}, once again, speaks not to harmonious unanimity but rather to more practically-minded compromises.

The next use of the word is again associated with Lydgate: this time chapter 30’s interview between the doctor and Dorothea over Casaubon’s failing health. Informing her that Casaubon ‘may possibly live for fifteen years or more, without much worse health than he has had hitherto’, at which news ‘Dorothea had turned very pale, and when Lydgate paused

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., ch. 18.
she said in a low voice, “You mean if we are very careful”. Her point is that ‘he would be miserable if he had to give up his work’ and Lydgate’s reply is less lucid than it first seems:

‘I am aware of that. The only course is to try by all means, direct and indirect, to moderate and vary his occupations. With a happy concurrence of circumstances, there is, as I said, no immediate danger from that affection of the heart, which I believe to have been the cause of his late attack. On the other hand, it is possible that the disease may develop itself more rapidly: it is one of those cases in which death is sometimes sudden. Nothing should be neglected which might be affected by such an issue.’

The ‘happy concurrence’ to which Lydgate here refers is a notional congeries of eventualities that will, somehow, protect Casaubon’s fragile heart.

As the story goes on, Bulstrode’s interference in the management of the hospital threatens to sink it (the narrator speaks of ‘the outburst of professional disgust at the announcement of the laws Mr. Bulstrode was laying down for the direction of the New Hospital, which were the more exasperating because there was no present possibility of interfering with his will and pleasure’),

Lydgate gives up part of his practice to be able to devote more time to the project (‘I must work the harder, that’s all, and I have given up my post at the Infirmary’) and Bulstrode assures him: ‘Mr. Brooke of Tipton has already given me his concurrence, and a pledge to contribute yearly: he has not specified the sum—probably not a great one’. This concurrence is a fancy way of saying: he has agreed to give me some money (though not much money)—the pun on currency is right there—and marks a further debasement on what ‘concurrent’ might signify. Money also haunts the next connection of Lydgate with concurrence. During Rosamond’s post-miscarriage convalescence Lydgate finds himself ‘unable to suppress all signs of inward trouble’, and as her health recovers he meditates ‘taking her entirely into confidence on his [financial] difficulties’. There are too many tradesmen’s bills, and they need to retrench financially: but ‘how could such a change be made without Rosamond’s concurrence?’

By the time we get to chapter 71’s
account of Bulstrode’s downfall it is no surprise to see the same word utilised. Hawley addresses the meeting:

In what I have to say, Mr. Chairman, I am not speaking simply on my own behalf: I am speaking with the concurrence and at the express request of no fewer than eight of my fellow-townsmen, who are immediately around us. It is our united sentiment that Mr. Bulstrode should be called upon—and I do now call upon him—to resign public positions which he holds not simply as a tax-payer, but as a gentleman among gentlemen.\[\textsuperscript{16}\]

This concurrence is a collective outflanking, and marks the end of Bulstrode. The other bigwigs of Middlemarch are running together, as a pack (the Latin \textit{concurro} has the primary meaning ‘I run with others, I flock’, and only subsequently came to mean ‘I concur, I coincide’: \textit{curro} means ‘I run’). If \textit{currency} is one punning association of concurrence, the canine or lupine \textit{curs} is another. Wolves; people; money.

It says little to note that Eliot ‘runs together’ her storylines. We could say the same about most writers. But Eliot has a closer eye than most to the way ‘running-together’ is both a kind of \textit{currency} and a kind of influence—not a billiard ball striking another, but a more subtle penetration of influence from individual to individual. It is to create a whole world through the creation of a single flute-note, by sounding your finer instrument inside the canopy of the bell. Currency means money (hospitals don’t run without money; younger relatives’ debts aren’t quitted without money; wives with expensive tastes aren’t satisfied without it). Currency also means contemporaneity (‘current affairs’), a more complicated relationship for this novel set pre-Darwin but very much written by a sensibility formed post-. And, to return to the beginning of this chapter, there’s a particular, quasi-musical concurrence chiming, or sounding, through this novel.

Bells summon the faithful to church, and summon children to school, which is to say: they are instruments of congregation. In chapter 77 the widowed Dorothea on the pretext of attending to the donation of a bell to a school, calls on Lydgate—this at the time of collective suspicion regarding his closeness to the disgraced Bulstrode—hoping to reassure him. Her mind is also running on her burgeoning love for Ladislaw. This ‘fine-toned bell’—

\[\textsuperscript{16}\] Ibid., ch. 71.
Dorothea had another errand in Lowick Gate: it was about a new fine-toned bell for the school-house, and as she had to get out of her carriage very near to Lydgate’s, she walked thither across the street, having told the coachman to wait for some packages.17

—leads to an unexpected congregation:

She found herself on the other side of the door without seeing anything remarkable, but immediately she heard a voice speaking in low tones which startled her as with a sense of dreaming in daylight, and advancing unconsciously a step or two beyond the projecting slab of a bookcase, she saw, in the terrible illumination of a certainty which filled up all outlines, something which made her pause, motionless, without self-possession enough to speak.

Seated with his back towards her on a sofa which stood against the wall on a line with the door by which she had entered, she saw Will Ladislaw: close by him and turned towards him with a flushed tearfulness which gave a new brilliancy to her face sat Rosamond, her bonnet hanging back, while Will leaning towards her clasped both her upraised hands in his and spoke with low-toned fervour.

‘Dorothea’, says Eliot, ‘after the first immeasurable instant of this vision’ retreats. She ‘walked across the street with her most elastic step and was quickly in her carriage again’. The shock of the encounter, the vibration of this suspicion, is described by Eliot in terms of a crowd, a ‘throng’ (‘she had seen something so far below her belief, that her emotions rushed back from it and made an excited throng without an object’), or as she later says when her sister intuits she is upset, a global population: in reply to Celia’s question ‘has something happened?’, Dorothea asserts that ‘a great many things have happened [...] all the troubles of all people on the face of the earth’. This abrupt erosion of lover’s faith is another kind of concurrence.

That it proves a misunderstanding does nothing to defang this moment, a kind of second disappointment, or loss of innocence, for Dorothea. The failure of her marriage to Casaubon indexed her own naivety (for Casaubon was always exactly what he seemed to be); but this hints that her love for Ladislaw might have fixed itself on an inconstant and unworthy object. A few chapters later these feelings are renewed, and again Eliot connects it to the bell. At a loose end, and somewhat agitation, Dorothea

17 Ibid., ch. 77.
walked straight to the schoolhouse and entered into a conversation with the master and mistress about the new bell, giving eager attention to their small details and repetitions, and getting up a dramatic sense that her life was very busy.  

From here to the parsonage, where Dorothea’s agitation is increased by the guileless Miss Noble, who has a ‘German box’, a present from Ladislaw, and whose ardent feelings are the subject of jolly gossip.

‘If Henrietta Noble forms an attachment to any one, Mrs. Casaubon,’ said [Farebrother’s] mother, emphatically,—‘she is like a dog—she would take their shoes for a pillow and sleep the better.’

‘Mr. Ladislaw’s shoes, I would,’ said Henrietta Noble.

Dorothea made an attempt at smiling in return. She was surprised and annoyed to find that her heart was palpitating violently, and that it was quite useless to try after a recovery of her former animation. Alarmed at herself—fearing some further betrayal of a change so marked in its occasion, she rose and said in a low voice with undisguised anxiety, ‘I must go; I have overtired myself.’

That’s another function of a bell, of course: as with the tolling bell of Donne’s ‘no man is an island’ sermon, it recalls us to our mortality, or, in Dorothea’s case, the death of her hopes. That these late misdirections are linked by Eliot to Dorothea’s school bell is a mild irony. We could say: its chime is schooling her in the depth, and precarity, of her own feelings. Her grief after her visit to the priory rings her like a bell: “Oh, I did love him!” Then came the hour in which the waves of suffering shook her too thoroughly to leave any power of thought’. Sound waves, emotional waves, passing out and influencing the world.

This flute-note concurrency is illustrated by the scene that follows, in which Dorothea goes to Rosamond to ‘save’ her—that is, to dissuade her from having an affair with Ladislaw—and Rosamond, intuiting the direction in which her delicately circumlocutionary phraseology is going, steps in when the words stop coming. The moment is articulated in terms not only of mutual vibration, a spontaneous concurrency of feeling that leads to intimacy, but also of what the epigraph to chapter 31, with which this chapter began, calls ‘a low soft unison’:

The waves of her own sorrow, from out of which she was struggling to save another, rushed over Dorothea with conquering force. She stopped
in speechless agitation, not crying, but feeling as if she were being inwardly grappled. Her face had become of a deathlier paleness, her lips trembled, and she pressed her hands helplessly on the hands that lay under them. Rosamond, taken hold of by an emotion stronger than her own—hurried along in a new movement which gave all things some new, awful, undefined aspect—could find no words, but involuntarily she put her lips to Dorothea’s forehead which was very near her, and then for a minute the two women clasped each other as if they had been in a shipwreck. ‘You are thinking what is not true,’ said Rosamond, in an eager half-whisper.20

How will you know the pitch of that great bell/Too large for us to stir? Breathe upon your flute, and listen close/Till the right note flows forth, a silvery rill:

Then shall the huge bell tremble—then the mass With myriad waves concurrent shall respond
In low soft unison.

I have one last observation with respect to the six-and-a-half lines of Eliot’s bell verse. The relative eclipse of reputation of Friedrich Schiller—in Britain, I mean—between the nineteenth-century and the present day occludes the most obvious intertext for Eliot’s short ‘bell’ poem: Schiller’s lengthy ‘Das Lied von der Glocke’ (1798). Eliot, a dedicated reader of Schiller, was certainly aware of this ‘Song of the Bell’.21 Schiller traces the life of the bell from raw materials, through its casting to its transportation and hanging—this a collective activity, Tausend fleißge Hände regen/helfen sich in munterm Bund, ‘a thousand hands, busy in motion, help in cheerful union’—until the bell is finally sounded, and named ‘CONCORDIA’, whose chime brings all people’s together, and sings-out with a star-bright sound:

20 Ibid., ch. 81.
21 ‘As Mary Sibree, to whom she taught German, records it: ‘Placing together one day the works of Schiller [...] Miss Evans said, “Oh, if I had given these to the world, how happy I should be!”’ (Cross, p. 53). Although her reading of Schiller was at its most intense in the early 1840s, the ‘thrill’ she felt at the sight of his house in Weimar in 1854, as well as references to him as late as in Middlemarch and Daniel Deronda, show that her attraction to his work remained strong throughout her life. The impact of his work on her own is considerable’. Deborah Guth, ‘George Eliot and Schiller: Narrative Ambivalence in Middlemarch and Felix Holt’, Modern Language Review, 94.4 (1999), 913–24 (p.). See also Guth’s book-length study, George Eliot and Schiller: Intertextuality and Cross-Cultural Discourse (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing, 2003).
This joyous, ingenuous peroration to the ‘unison’ that Eliot’s bell also sounds is one of Schiller’s most famous poems. Even more famous is his essay Über naive und sentimentalische Dichtung (1795–96), ‘On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry’.\(^{22}\) And it has sometimes seemed to me that Eliot’s novel sets out, playfully enough but with a serious purpose for all that, to upend Schiller’s distinction. We could put it this way: Dorothea at the beginning of *Middlemarch* is naïve, whereas at the end, as she realises how easily her sensibility—her genuine love for Ladislaw—could capsize her, she becomes sentimental. But her naivety is not a Schillerian unity of subject and object; it is, on the contrary, an intensely self-considered, self-conscious setting of herself a goal for her life, where her sentimentality is so spontaneous that it eventually moves her, and the object of her love, out of the artificiality of the fiction that is *Middlemarch* altogether. In *The Book on Adler* (1872), Søren Kierkegaard claims that ‘though it is indeed by writing that one justifies the claim to be an author, it is also, strangely enough, by writing that one virtually renounces this claim. To find the conclusion it is necessary first of all to observe that it is lacking, and then in turn to feel quite vividly the lack of it’.\(^{23}\) The coming-together of Dorothea and Ladislaw feels to some

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\(^{22}\) German original available at [http://www.zeno.org/Literatur/M/Schiller,+Friedrich/Theoretische+Schriften/%C3%9Cber+naive+und+sentimentalische+Dichtung](http://www.zeno.org/Literatur/M/Schiller,+Friedrich/Theoretische+Schriften/%C3%9Cber+naive+und+sentimentalische+Dichtung). James Wood prefers ‘simple’ as an Englishing of the German naïve: ‘Schiller argues that the ancient writers, especially the Greeks, were at one with nature, combining thought and feeling, while the modern writer can only seek or aspire to nature, worshipping or elegising what he no longer possesses simply. Schiller finds in the Greeks “a character of calm necessity. Their impatient imagination only traverses nature to pass beyond it to the drama of human life.” The modern poet, by contrast, is always sentimental about nature, like a sick man yearning for health. Indeed, the sentimental poet idealises nature much as we (including, self-confessedly, Schiller) sentimentalise the Greeks themselves. The problem for modern literature of this loss of innocence is that, in contrast with the ancient simple poet, we never see “the object itself”: instead, the modern poet is always reflecting on the impressions he receives from nature, always “a spectator of his own emotion”. Schiller’s examples of simple poets are Homer and Shakespeare; of sentimental poets, Milton and Kleist’. James Wood, ‘Buckets of Empathy’, *London Review of Books*, 22.7 (2000), [https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v22/n07/james-wood/buckets-of-empathy](https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v22/n07/james-wood/buckets-of-empathy)

Postscript: The Flute inside the Bell

readers like a conclusion as well as a consummation, but Eliot is canny enough to understand that it actually represents the lack—the rather vivid lack—of a conclusion. Or to put it another way: a hammer strike meeting the bell’s metal might be simple, but there is more haunting and spiritual unison in the flute-song, sentimental though it be, inside the bell’s hood.

A bell is revealed as—if this isn’t too bizarre a way of putting it—an auditory mirror: our action upon it, direct or inferential, is bounced back resonantly to us. The chiming of bells is a preliminary, a kind of aural epigraph, to a church service; and a short text, an epigraph, is the verbal preliminary to the sermon at the heart of the service. Such items stand not as models of the larger, or longer, work to which they append themselves so much as fractal ratio minores, encapsulations that reflect, like the drop of ink at the end of the pen with which Eliot opens Adam Bede. We can see in them, and through them, and what we can see are the vistas Eliot’s great novel opens to us.

It would, however, be perverse to end a study that proposes to read Eliot’s novel via mirrors and lenses with a bell. After all, Middlemarch is not lacking in deictic pointers to its own specular design. This is how chapter 27 opens:

An eminent philosopher among my friends,24 who can dignify even your ugly furniture by lifting it into the serene light of science, has shown me this pregnant little fact. Your pier-glass or extensive surface of polished steel made to be rubbed by a housemaid, will be minutely and multitudinously scratched in all directions; but place now against it a lighted candle as a centre of illumination, and lo! the scratches will seem to arrange themselves in a fine series of concentric circles round that little sun. It is demonstrable that the scratches are going everywhere impartially and it is only your candle which produces the flattering illusion of a concentric arrangement, its light falling with an exclusive optical selection. These things are a parable. The scratches are events, and the candle is the egoism of any person now absent—of Miss Vincy, for example.

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24 It is tricky to prove, but nonetheless likely, that the ‘eminent friend’ referred to here was scientist William Edward Ayrton (1847–1908), who lectured to the Royal Society on mirrors and electric illumination, and was involved in a number of advances in arc-lights, electrical communication and other things. Eliot befriended Ayrton’s daughter Hertha in the early 1870s, and helped her gain a place at Girton.
This ‘parable’ has been widely discussed by Eliot’s critics, although given how assiduously Eliot herself spells-out its meaning, elaboration runs the risk of being supererogatory. For J. Hillis Miller, the crucial thing here is the way Eliot describes her own mimetic mirror-work, as novelist, in parabolic terms: as the ‘parable’ lays clear the lines of sight that are gathered, on parabolic trajectories, by this mirror. \(^\text{25}\) Barbara Leckie, with perhaps greater penetration into Eliot’s craft, focuses instead on the way her mimetic reflectivity is augmented (rather than, as we might think, compromised) by the ‘cross-hatching of scratches’ here identified: ‘the cross-hatching of scratches also signal one of the novel’s central organising motifs: the web. That is, the pier glass is at once a reflective surface and a surface that invokes a web; it represents the mirror not as a straightforward reflection but rather, as Leah Price puts it, “the mirror as a system of infinite connections”’.\(^\text{26}\) It is a web, and a bell, and both are in some sense a mirror—the mimetic art in which a small, distorted thing reflects back to us the large, beautiful thing.

The chapter with which this passage opens pre-begins with this epigraph:

> Let the high Muse chant loves Olympian:  
> We are but mortals, and must sing of man.

This is Eliot’s translation of the following two lines from Theocritus:

> Μούσαι μὲν θεαὶ ἐντί, θεοὺς θεαὶ ἀείδοντι:  
> ἄμμες δὲ βροτοὶ οἵδε, βροτοὺς βροτοὶ ἀείδωμεν.\(^\text{27}\)

A more literal rendering might go: ‘the Muses, though, are gods and being gods do sing of gods; we who are here (οἵδε) are mortals, and as mortals let us sing of mortals.’ Eliot loses something by condensing the

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\(^\text{25}\) “‘Parable’ means, etymologically, “thrown beside,” from the Greek para, beside, and ballein, to throw. A parable is set or thrown at some distance from the meaning which controls it and to which it obliquely or parabolically refers, as, in its definition, a parabolic curve is controlled, across a space, by its parallelism to a line on the cone of which it is a section [...] the parabola creates that line in the empty air, just as the parables of Jesus remedy a defect of vision, give sight to the blind, and make the invisible visible’. Joseph Hillis Miller, \textit{Reading for Our Time: Adam Bede and Middlemarch Revisited} (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), p. 65.


thrice-repeated θεαί (goddesses) and thrice-repeated βροτός (mortal men) that balance it, not least the gender distinction between female goddesses and mortal men.

Theocritus’s poem turns out to be about how far men have fallen (into love of money and other things) and yet how it remains possible that they can be redeemed, and open their houses to the Χάριτες—the ‘Graces’: Aglaea (‘Shining’), Euphrosyne (‘Joy’) and Thalia (‘Blooming’). Grace (Χάρις) has an important place in Christian thought, of course; as do ‘parables’. And Theocritus’s poem says that though we are broken, scratched as in Eliot’s ‘parable’ of the mirror, grace can still enter in. It is hard not to wonder if Eliot, by invoking this gracious poem, is not inviting us to see rose-blooming Rosamond as Thalia, spiritually-illuminated Dorothea as Aglaea and, smaller than the other two in terms of the space the novel allows her, but surely just as important in terms of what she says about the lineaments of female happiness, quietly joyful Mary Garth as Euphrosyne.

And even this, I would say, modest unpacking of a particular epigraph entails the lensing, or flute-resonance, that Eliot’s epigraphs so often do. Her choices as a translator, by de-gendering and de-repetitising a gendered, triply-insistent original, universalise and render less insistently rhetorical the underlying sentiment. Most of all, by translating the original triad of Muse-Graces as a single ‘Muse’, Eliot gestures, delicately enough, at the unifying vision she is attempting in her novel.

Here, for comparison, is a roughly-contemporaneous Victorian translation of the opening lines of Theocritus’s sixteenth idyll:

This is ever a care to the daughters of Jove, ever to poets, to hymn immortals, to hymn the glories of brave men. The Muses indeed are goddesses; goddesses sing of gods: but we are mortals here; let us mortals sing of mortals. Yet who of as many as dwell under the bright dawn, will open his doors, and graciously welcome in his home our Graces, and not send them away again unrewarded?

The translator here adds a footnote, glossing Χάριτες as ‘i.e. his poems. For a similar prosopopoeia see Horace’s Epistle 1:20 where he compares

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his book with a damsel desiring to go forth in public’. Theocritus’s poem, in other words, is a poem about poetry, a self-reflexive text, not in a hermetically sealed or inward manner but, on the contrary, in the sense that poetry goes out into the world. Eliot’s novel, similarly, refracts its textualities dialectically between epigraph-small and chapter-, and novel-, large. This specular epigraphy is a line of sight that combines the microscopic and the telescopic, that shines upon the mirror’s scratches in order not to overlook or occlude them but rather to transform them in the brilliancy of Eliot’s imaginative reconfiguration into something as beautiful as true. That *Middlemarch* is a novel that balances the small and the large is hardly a new critical observation of course. Back in 1975, J. Hillis Miller argued that Eliot’s configures *Middlemarch* such that

a fragment is examined as a ‘sample’ of the larger whole of which it is a part, though the whole impinges on the part as the ‘medium’ within which it lives, as national politics affect Middlemarch when there is a general election, or as the coming of the railroad upsets rural traditions. Eliot’s strategy of totalization is to present individual character or event in the context of that wider medium and to affirm universal laws of human behavior in terms of characters.29

This strikes me as both an over-emphasis on ‘totalization’ as Eliot’s aesthetic strategy, and an over-emphasis on such in-world events as elections and railway development. The refractive epigraphy I am arguing for here as constitutive of the novel is less lineally accretive than Miller’s model. In *Middlemarch* we look through the epigraphs, as through a lens; and also back at the quoted text (as in a mirror), and both directions, one gesturing telescopically at the larger, the other condensing attention microscopically upon the former—and by

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29 J. Hillis Miller, ‘Optic and Semiotic in *Middlemarch*’, in *The Worlds of Victorian Fiction*, ed. by Jerome Buckley (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), pp. 125–45 (126–27). For Miller, the optical is only one of three ‘totalizing metaphors’ that construe the novel, and is moreover subordinated in his reading to the more prominent ‘textual’ metaphors (fabric, web and so on) and metaphors of ‘flow’ or ‘stream’. He also, in passing, suggests a meta-metaphor, describing these three as ‘a family of intertwined metaphors and motifs’ and glossing his own comment in a footnote: ‘what, exactly, is the nature of the resemblance which binds together the members of this family and makes it seem of one genetic stock? Why, if Eliot’s goal is to describe what is “really there,” objectively, must there be more than one model in order to create a total picture?’ Miller, ‘Optic and Semiotic’, p. 134. Like jesting Pilate he does not stay for an answer to these question.
extension, one inviting us to view the whole of this middled England as a vista or panorama, the other inviting us to zero-in on the minutiae that constitute this life-vista, as minutiae constitute all our lives. In all this Eliot is beautifully aware of the textuality of lived experience, not just in the sense that texts (like books and paintings) have a large role in creating and shaping us as human beings, but in the sense that life is a process of reading and re-reading other humans, and their situations, and life as such. In that, the radicalism of the epigraph is its insistence that such reading is always close-reading, actually; that the smallest of expressions or gestures may embody the largest of significances. The delicate sound of a flute resonates all the bell-like universe into contrapuntal music.

Towards the end, Ladislaw finds that he cannot pour out his heart to the (now widowed) Dorothea and that he is constrained to a brevity of expression. This, though, is presented in the novel as no bad thing.

That simplicity of hers, holding up an ideal for others in her believing conception of them, was one of the great powers of her womanhood. And it had from the first acted strongly on Will Ladislaw. He felt, when he parted from her, that the brief words by which he had tried to convey to her his feeling about herself and the division which her fortune made between them, would only profit by their brevity when Dorothea had to interpret them: he felt that in her mind he had found his highest estimate.30

Brevity is the highest mode of communicating with the expansive simplicity of fulness—and vice versa: in a nutshell, it’s the whole novel.

30 Eliot, Middlemarch, ch. 77.