

ADAM ROBERTS



MIDDLEMARCH
Epigraphs and Mirrors



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Introduction

This short book aims to turn a modest, one might even think trivial, literary labour into something more substantial, going beyond one particular novel into broader questions of novel-writing, character and narrative. My starting point is tracking down those allusions and quotations in *Middlemarch* that have hitherto gone unidentified by scholars. Most of these quotations are located in the chapter epigraphs that George Eliot provides throughout, citing other writers or concocting her own pastiche blank verse or prose. Unpacking these epigraphs as well as the other quotations, and exploring their relationship to the body of the text, frames or grounds a broader discussion of the novel. It seems to me that these epigraphs, taken as a distinctive part of a larger network of quotations and allusions in the text, contain important resonances for the way Eliot's novels generate their meanings. For, indeed, the way the novel as such generates its meaning.

It may be that my opening paragraph comes across as defensive. We wouldn't want that. It was Eliot's practice in all her novels to add epigraphs to her chapters, some quoted from and identified as by particular authors, others created by herself in the style of a poet or an 'Old Play'. She was by no means the first author to do this, of course; popularised by Walter Scott, it is a practice that goes back into the eighteenth-century. It could be argued that the textual practice of heading a chapter with a short quoted text apes the practice of the popular sermon, just as the related habit of larding the novelistic text with quotations apes a conversational practice that does the same thing, one widespread enough that it could itself be satirised—by Scott, and others—as a mode of pretentious pedantry indicative of a lack of imagination, or even of an overcompensation for discursive unconfidence. Abel 'Dominie' Sampson in Scott's second novel *Guy*

Mannering (1815)—one of the most popular individuals from Scott's vast gallery of characters—is a key figure here. Sampson is a man ‘of low birth’, whose capacity for learning was encouraged by parents (who hoped ‘that their bairn, as they expressed it, “might wag his pow in a pulpit yet”’) prepared to scrimp and save to secure their son’s education. But he proves too shy and awkward to be a preacher—a ‘tall, ungainly figure, [with] taciturn and grave manners, and some grotesque habits of swinging his limbs and screwing his visage while reciting his task’, he ends up as tutor in Godfrey Bertram’s stately home, Ellangowan. The point is that there is something simultaneous creditable *and* ridiculous in Sampson’s learning, laughed at as he is by his fellow university students:

Half the youthful mob of ‘the yards’ used to assemble regularly to see Dominie Sampson (for he had already attained that honourable title) descend the stairs from the Greek class, with his lexicon under his arm, his long misshapen legs sprawling abroad, and keeping awkward time to the play of his immense shoulder-blades, as they raised and depressed the loose and threadbare black coat which was his constant and only wear. When he spoke, the efforts of the professor (professor of divinity though he was) were totally inadequate to restrain the inextinguishable laughter of the students, and sometimes even to repress his own. The long, sallow visage, the goggle eyes, the huge under-jaw, which appeared not to open and shut by an act of volition, but to be dropped and hoisted up again by some complicated machinery within the inner man, the harsh and dissonant voice—all added fresh subject for mirth to the torn cloak and shattered shoe, which have afforded legitimate subjects of raillery against the poor scholar from Juvenal’s time downward.¹

We’re at the other end of the scale, here, from Thomas Hardy’s *Jude the Obscure*, and not only because Scott styles his character as a comic rather than a tragic figure. Jude’s learning proves useless to his life, where Sampson at least finds a social niche as an (admittedly overqualified) tutor. His speech is a mixture of simple Scots idioms and learned allusions, his, as we would say nowadays, catchphrase ‘Prodigious!’ and various Latin tags: ‘as he shut the door, could not help muttering the *varium et mutabile* of Virgil’.² Scott, with nice irony, sometimes uses these

1 Walter Scott, *Guy Mannering, or the Astrologer* (Boston: Estes and Lauriat, 1893), ch. 2, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/5999/5999-h/5999-h.htm>

2 *Ibid.*, ch. 15.

as markers of Sampson's educational *limitations*, as when, encountering Meg Merrilies unexpectedly in Edinburgh he reveals his superstitious primitivism: “Get thee behind me!” said the alarmed Dominie. “Avoid ye! *Conjuro te, scelestissima, nequissima, spurcissima, iniquissima atque miserrima, conjuro te!!!*” Meg, with less book-learning, has more common-sense: “Is the carl daft,” she said. “What in the name of Sathan are ye feared for, wi’ your French gibberish, that would make a dog sick?”³

Scott’s next novel, *The Antiquary* (1816), tackles this same business of the allusiveness of discourse from the other side of social hierarchy. Jonathan Oldbuck, gentleman-antiquarian, embodies an obsession with the textual and material past, at once fussy and gullible. His speech is larded with Latin and he orients himself in all respects with reference to a notional past. Scott is laughing with rather than laughing at (but laughing nonetheless) when he has Oldbuck seek to reassure the unlettered beggar Edie Ochiltree: ‘don’t suppose I think the worse of you for your profession [...] you remember what old Tully says in his oration, *pro Archia poeta*, concerning one of your confraternity—*quis nostrum tam animo agresti ac duro fuit—ut—ut—I forget the Latin*'.⁴ The point of these allusions is not that we the reader should recognise them, nor even that we should chase them up (of William Lovel, also present, and also a gentleman, Scott notes that these words reach his ears ‘but without conveying any precise idea to his mind’). Rather the point is that, by their very opaqueness, they signify to us the character’s comical pedantry, as well as his blindness to his own ridiculousness. They are a kind of phatic articulation of dead learning rather than an invitation to recontextualise the passage in which they occur.⁵

Perhaps we readers and critics of Eliot ought to treat the epigraphs and allusions in *Middlemarch*, and her other novels, in a similar manner;

3 Ibid., ch. 17.

4 Walter Scott, *The Antiquary* (Boston: Estes and Lauriat, 1893), ch. 4, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/7005/7005-h/7005-h.htm>

5 It is perhaps fitting that I use a footnote to identify a third means by which Scott adds specific allusion to his texts, beyond chapter epigraphs and characters quoting old authorities—footnotes themselves, a mode Eliot herself very rarely deploys. There have been several studies of the influence of Scott on Eliot, most often concentrating on her more manifestly ‘historical’ writing: see for instance Andrew Sanders, *The Victorian Historical Novel 1840–1880* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1979), Harry E. Shaw, *Narrating Reality: Austen, Scott, Eliot* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999) and Miriam Elizabeth Burstein, *Narrating Women’s History in Britain, 1770–1902* (Aldershot, Hampshire: Ashgate, 2004).

that is to say, as meta-indicators rather than as Ariadnean threads to follow, or miniature windows to peer through. The content of the various quotations and allusions are always clear enough, and there is always a comprehensible relationship between what the epigraph says and the content of the chapter it heads-up. Perhaps I put myself as merely a Sampson or an Oldbuck by refusing to let things go at that. Of course we make an exception for the editor of a scholarly edition of the novel; she would, amongst her many textual duties, be expected to look into such things. But for a regular reader, or a critic with an eye on the larger significations of the novel, to get bogged down in such minutiae looks, surely, like a misapplication of energy, as liable only to clog and impede the larger flow.

Clearly, given the book I have here written, I don't believe so. On the contrary, it is my argument that exploring these various allusions and epigraphs *unimpedes* the rich flow of significations the novel generates—that these potsherd texts-within-the-text are keys that unlock new rooms or, to shift metaphors (and in doing so to anticipate the larger thesis of this book) mirrors that refract back upon our experience the textual vistas opening to us. Such a claim can only be evidenced by the actual work this study undertakes, and perhaps you will conclude by the end that such a claim stands unsupported. I must, at the very least, concede that the joy a scholar finds in exploring these questions may strike a less Casaubonic individual as both arid and—which is worse, in this context—atomising, disconnecting, a key to no mythologies.

That, though, is precisely the point. In her earlier novels, as in her later, Eliot weaves her text out of descriptive prose, dialogue, observations from life, data from her research, literary allusion, quotation and often obscure epigraphs. In *this* novel she does all that and also includes a character for whom abstruse allusion and obscure epigraphs are his life's passion. This situates *Middlemarch* as, amongst many other things, a novel *about* epigraphy, about identifying and deciphering quotation and allusion, as well as a novel *constituted by* those things.

There is a related question to do with, precisely, obscurity. When Scott's Oldbuck quotes a bit of Cicero so abstruse even *he*, it turns out, can't remember it, we're on safe ground reading the allusion in terms of its inaccessibility. But when Eliot cites, indirectly or otherwise, Sappho and Pascal, Homer and Lucretius, perhaps the intertexts are offered in

the tacit belief that readers will recognise and understand without the need of a prompt from an editorial footnote. Perhaps Eliot assumes an audience sufficiently au fait with their own reading as to be able to walk with her, hand in hand, through her own richly informed allusiveness. This seems unlikely, and not only because Eliot's own reading was capacious beyond most people's. Still, it may be. I'm reminded of Virginia Woolf's first broadcast by the BBC—on 29 April 1937, as part of a series called 'Words Fail Me', the only recording of her voice to have survived—in which she observed:

Words, English words, are full of echoes, of memories, of associations—naturally. They have been out and about, on people's lips, in their houses, in the streets, in the fields, for so many centuries. And that is one of the chief difficulties in writing them today—that they are so stored with meanings, with memories, that they have contracted so many famous marriages. The splendid word 'incarnadine', for example—who can use it without remembering also 'multitudinous seas'?⁶

Though we are, I think, entitled to wonder what kind of person drops words like 'incarnadine' into everyday speech, Woolf's point is a sound one. Some allusions tap into a common reservoir of collective reference and understanding. That context used to include much of Shakespeare, the more famous English poets and even a fair bit of Latin. For most of Eliot's first readers, in the 1870s it also included Scott. Nowadays a reduced set of Shakespeare quotations might still function as common cultural currency, together with a wider range of references to film and pop-music.⁷

6 Fiona Macdonald, 'The Only Surviving Recording of Virginia Woolf', *BBC Culture* (28 March 2016), <https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20160324-the-only-surviving-recording-of-virginia-woolf>

7 Howard Erskine-Hill makes a related point with respect to epigraphs: 'In a little noted epigraph Pope quotes an ancient authority as saying that poetry is no obstacle to entering into the wider world. But today an inscription of verse, or indeed prose, at the head of a wider work may seem an impediment, rather than an incitement to read on. Where learned or foreign languages are used what was once a spur has become a clog. The impatient eye glances over the bit of Latin (as it may be) with the reflection: "Oh, yes, a Latin tag; that was the old practice". The time is past when a writer might quote *quantum mutatus ab illo* and expect the reader to recognise the author, the work, the speaker and the situation'. 'Pope's Epigraphic Practice', *The Review of English Studies*, 62.254 (2011), 261–74 (p. 261), <https://doi.org/10.1093/res/hqz027>. The Latin—taken from *Aeneid* 2.274–5—makes his point for him.

So, yes: there are a number of ways we, as readers and critics, might ‘take’ an allusion or epigraph in a novel like *Middlemarch*. Since such items have, without wishing to sound merely utilitarian, a textual function, it is only courtesy to the reader that this function is still operable in the instance that said reader is not Casaubon. ‘It is tactful’, as William Empson once wrote, ‘when making obscure references, to arrange that they shall be intelligible even when the reference is not understood’. He gives an example, from a lesser-known poem by Marvell ('The brotherless Heliades/Melt in such amber tears as these'), and adds:

If you have forgotten, as I had myself, who their brother was, and look it up, the poetry will scarcely seem more beautiful: such of the myth as is wanted is implied.⁸

This is fair enough, and certainly describes Eliot’s way with quotation and epigraph. But Empson goes on:

But something has happened after you have looked up the Heliades; the couplet has been justified. Marvell has claimed to make a classical reference and it has turned out to be all right. This is of importance, because it was only because you had faith in Marvell’s classical references that you felt as you did, that this mode of admiring nature seemed witty, sensitive and cultured.

This is a deeper point, and one equally applicable to Eliot. Her extraordinary learning—all the more extraordinary given that so much of it was autodidactic—stands as a kind of pledge to her allusive textual praxis. We believe her, and when a mini-Casaubon such as myself burrows into the specifics, what we uncover, without (I think) exception, shows that our faith is justified. Christopher Ricks, quoting this passage from Empson, adds that a text ‘without being dependent on our knowing certain things, yet may benefit greatly from our doing so’.⁹ That’s a very to-the-point statement of one of the rationales of the present study.

To separate out chapter epigraphs from ‘allusion and quotation’ more broadly is to touch on a slightly different question. For one thing, the question of ‘weight’ enters the frame. Theodore J. Ziolkowski recalls that

⁸ Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, rev. edn (New York: New Directions, 1947), pp. 167–68.

⁹ Christopher Ricks, *Allusion to the Poets* (London: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 2.

In the original typescript for *The Waste Land* T. S. Eliot cited a passage from Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*—the one ending 'The horror! the horror!'—because he found it 'much the most appropriate' and 'somewhat elucidative.' But when his mentor, Ezra Pound, doubted that Conrad was 'weighty enough,' Eliot omitted those words and chose instead the more ostentatious quotation, in Latin and Greek, from Petronius's *Satyricon* that now adorns the title page. In her anthology, *The Art of the Epigraph*, Rosemary Ahern cites over two hundred further examples, mostly but not exclusively from fiction in English.¹⁰

I've never really understood why Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot believed the ludic decadence of Petronius's *Satyricon* counted as 'weightier' than Joseph Conrad's diamond-hard articulation of existential despair. Although, in saying so, I suppose I'm being a little obtuse: Pound's point is specific not to this particular text but to the larger cultural idiom. Classical literature trumps a novella published only a few decades earlier simply by virtue of its ancientness. George Eliot is not immune to this bias, such that we may intuit that for her an epigraph from an 'Old Play' outweighs one from a newer drama. It implies, at least *in potentia*, a deep-time three-dimensionality that offsets and so adds perspective and richness to the more historically specific and limited—1829–32—story being told.

The illusion of depth is part of the function of epigraphs and allusions. This is a separate matter from the more commonly perceived work of epigraphs 'to mark an aim, or strike a keynote', as Howard Erskine-Hill puts it.¹¹ There are other contexts to the tracing of unidentified quotations than pure Casaubonism, and there are other ways of conceptualising what an epigraph is. For example, we might take it as the text from which specific chapters develop a core idea, as a sermon expands homiletically upon a Biblical text—a Dorothean, rather than a Casaubonic way of treating them. Then again, we might see an epigraph as something tiny that contains, when magnified, beautiful or important microscopiana—a Lydgatean perspective. These three perspectives are not proposed merely to be facetious. Since *Middlemarch*, as a novel, remains one of the great fictional portraits of barren scholarly pedantry, and given the dangers a study such as this present one runs in trudging

¹⁰ Theodore J. Ziolkowski, 'The Craft(iness) of Epigraphs', *The Princeton University Library Chronicle*, 76.3 (2015), 519–20, <https://doi.org/10.25290/prinunivlibrchro.76.3.0519>

¹¹ 'Pope's Epigraphic Practice', 261.

a similar dry-as-dusty path, it is important to keep in mind that, for Eliot, a quotation could be something other than an iteration of abstruse learning. To remember that it could be a germ. A seed.

More recent Eliot scholars who have explored this question have, by and large, generally thought so too. But it didn't used to be that way. David Leon Higdon's fine essay 'George Eliot and the Art of Epigraphs' argues that 'the epigraphs form a continuous commentary defining and shaping the chapters. They are foreshadowing what follows, and to some degree shape, control, and condition the reader's reaction to the chapter'.¹² But he also notes how rarely (this, in 1970) Eliot's epigraphs have been considered by critics at all, and quotes a couple of negativities of judgement:

Only Henry James and J. R. Tye have considered the epigraphs in terms of conscious artistry. James dismisses them as 'a want of tact,' and Tye concentrates on the epigraphs George Eliot wrote herself. Although he concludes that they frequently make 'an illuminating adjunct to the text of her novels,' he appears mildly irritated with her for using them at all and dismisses them somewhat hastily. If in fact the epigraphs are decorative, they may be dismissed as a literary counterpart to the 'gingerbread' of Victorian architecture.¹³

I do not, any more than does Higdon, consider Eliot's epigraphs 'gingerbread', although I'm also attempting here something rather different to his reading of epigraphs and main text in terms of 'organic form'.¹⁴ It is a larger argument than can be fully accommodated here, but 'organic' seems to me exactly the wrong word to apply to an art form as consciously worked, as mannered and textual, as the novel; and doubly unfitting when applied to what are (by and large) some intricately meta-textual and intratextual patterning. If we take 'organic' as a synonym for 'functionally intrinsic' or 'non-arbitrary' or something along those lines, then it would describe better what's happening in Eliot's art

12 David Leon Higdon, 'George Eliot and the Art of the Epigraph', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 25.2 (1970), 127–51 (p. 131).

13 *Ibid.*, 19–30.

14 'The epigraphs have an organic function in her novels. This theory provides a coherence for the various artistic effects they create individually. Four major tendencies—structural allusion, abstraction, ironic refraction, and metaphoric evaluation—may be delineated. She also uses epigraphs to describe characters, to present a character's unconscious thoughts, and to argue for realistic presentation, but these epigraphs are few in number'. *Ibid.*, 134.

(although these are not, after all, what the word actually means). Then again nobody would accuse Eliot of scattering epigraphs randomly through her fiction. We can, I think, take her artistry as axiomatic. And since my focus is on the way the ‘small’ text of the epigraph (or quotation) interacts with, illuminates the ‘large’ text of the chapter (and the novel)—which is to say, the formal relationship between small and large textualities inherent in the mode—I make little distinction between those places where Eliot is quoting somebody else and where she is confecting her own faux-motto or quotation.¹⁵

I’ve already quoted from Christopher Ricks’ *Allusion to the Poets*, and it is worth touching on another point from that subtle, insightful book. For Ricks, literary allusion is always more than a matter of barren source-hunting—always more than mere scholarship for the sake of scholarship. It is, rather, a question of inheritance. His chapter on William Wordsworth (himself an important writer for Eliot) opens with the question: ‘what for Wordsworth is the central or essential inheritance? And how might this validate the inheritance that is allusion?’¹⁶ The same question stands to be answered for Eliot, and her own allusively rich fiction. That *Middlemarch* is centrally about inheritance in a legal and (as we would now say) genetic or hereditary sense is not irrelevant to this question, of course. Indeed the way Eliot’s novel negotiates its own multiple textual inheritances, and the way it explores the problematics of (for instance) Dorothea’s compromised inheritance from her dead husband, are, I would argue, complexly interwoven one with the other. Going back to the work of unpicking the specifics of allusion and epigraph in the novel is a way of elaborating this matter.

What remains to be seen, I think, is whether these epigraphs, and these myriad embedded nuggets of quotation and allusion in the body of the text, figure predominantly as Casaubonic, Dorothean

15 For a contrary view see Michael Peled Ginsburg, who finds a kind of conceptual short-circuit in Eliot’s self-authored epigraphs: ‘when an author writes his own epigraphs he [sic] presents a text (the epigraph) as a text which precedes him and the insights of which his story in some way repeats. At the same time he subverts this assertion because the epigraph is his own. Thus, by creating pseudo-epigraphs the author presents himself as his own origin and himself generates the truth which he later repeats or puts into question’. ‘Pseudonym, Epigraphs, and Narrative Voice: *Middlemarch* and the Problem of Authorship’, *ELH*, 47.3 (1980), 542–58 (p. 548), <https://doi.org/10.2307/2872795>

16 Ricks, *Allusion to the Poets*, p. 83

or Lydgateian entities. Of course, were it only the first of these, and neither of the other two, there would be little point in writing this book. But it seems to me that Dorothea's scholarphilia, her sense of herself as defined not by the quotidian logic of the other people in her ambit but by her connection with learning and theology of the past—the ground of her attraction to Casaubon—is a humanising¹⁷ of Casaubon's drier, more cerebral passion for epigraphy and quotation. What lifts the novel, the stroke of structuring genius that makes *Middlemarch* so marvellous a piece of writing, is the way Eliot balances this world against Lydgate's approach. For him the natural world is a text to be interpreted in the light of science, rather than literature, mythography or religion. It is true that Eliot traces the diminution in his ambition from achieving significant medical breakthroughs, to a society doctor 'alternating, according to the season, between London and a Continental bathing-place' who has done nothing more to advance medical science than written a treatise on gout ('a disease which has a good deal of wealth on its side', as the narrator wistfully notes), this shrinkage is neither an altogether reprehensible, nor a textually irrelevant, business. We are first introduced to Lydgate as a 'scientist' as someone interested in the very small, and the very small is wholly the tenor of Eliot's type of realism. Epigraphs are small, but they bear close attention, not in terms of Casaubonic pedantry but in terms of Lydgatean microscopy. So although the novel's final chapter records that Lydgate 'always regarded himself as a failure' since 'he had not done what he once meant to do', we as readers might wish to console him that he at least showed the way. The paragraph from which I've just been quoting concludes with the novel's last mention of Lydgate, that

[his] temper never became faultless, and to the last occasionally let slip a bitter speech which was more memorable than the signs he made of his repentance. He once called [Rosamond] his basil plant; and when she asked for an explanation, said that basil was a plant which had flourished wonderfully on a murdered man's brains. Rosamond had a placid but strong answer to such speeches. Why then had he chosen her? It was a

¹⁷ Indeed, though we are perhaps disinclined to accept that this is also part of Dorothea's reasons for marrying her first husband, we can also read it as an eroticisation.

pity he had not had Mrs. Ladislaw, whom he was always praising and placing above her. And thus the conversation ended with the advantage on Rosamond's side.¹⁸

This is elegantly oblique, the closest the novel comes to conceding what many readers, surely, have thought—that Dorothea and Lydgate ought to be together. That, in other words, there are two ways in which Lydgate ‘had not done what he once meant to’: the way of scientific research and the way of finding a mate worthy of him, as he of her. This is more than merely romantic daydreaming, since Eliot reverts the disconnection back upon Dorothea, whose yearning for a husband with a great mind was misdirected towards a man whose mind was in thrall to a dead past, rather than a man whose mind was open to the exciting possibilities of a scientific future. As between these two options Eliot brings-in a third—Ladislaw’s politics—but although *Middlemarch* is fascinated by the ‘realism’ of scholarship and by the ‘realism’ of science, it has little to say, actually, about the ‘realism’ of politics (unlike, let us say, *Felix Holt*). This is not to say that party politics is irrelevant to either the novel’s plot or its design; but that myth and science are two modes Eliot finds more eloquent for articulating her theme.¹⁹

I am going to argue, in this study, that Eliot’s epigraphs are, textually speaking, kinds of glasswork, like the lenses and mirrors that render a microscope or a telescope operable. By looking with them and through them, we see greater detail and greater scope in Eliot’s novel. Mirrors are a way in which we ‘look back’, and this is a novel deeply fascinated by ‘looking back’, as engagement with tradition, as scholarship, as tracing inheritance and also as regret. And in another sense mirrors (and lenses) facilitate the work of science, and the work of science is also the work of realism. Or to be a little more precise, what distinguishes

18 George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1871), ‘Finale’, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/145/145-h/145-h.htm>

19 On the novel’s use of science, see in particular Michael York Mason, ‘*Middlemarch* and Science: Problems of Life and Mind’, *The Review of English Studies*, 22.86 (1971), 151–69, <https://doi.org/10.1093/res/xxii.86.151>; Sally Shuttleworth, *George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Science. The Make-Believe of a Beginning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); Lawrence Rothfield, *Vital Signs: Medical Realism in Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994). On religion in the novel, see T. R. Wright, ‘*Middlemarch* as a Religious Novel, or Life without God’, in *Images of Belief in Literature*, ed. by David Jasper (London: The Macmillan Press 1984), pp. 138–52.

Eliot's humanist realism from the kinds of *le naturalisme* being practised on the Continent, is her resolution to balance the scientific (microscopic, or telescopic) observation of the world with the literary, mythic and spiritual apprehension of the same object. The differences between Eliot and a writer like Émile Zola are instructive in this context. Zola also grounds his realism in a particular iteration of a medical-scientific idiom:

To the second edition of his first major novel, *Thérèse Raquin*, Émile Zola added a famous preface in which he sought to make his intentions clear against accusations of immorality: 'my objective was first and foremost a scientific one. I simply carried out on two living bodies the same analytical examination that surgeons perform on corpses'. To those who claimed he had an unhealthy interest in moral and human decay, he retorted that he had become 'engrossed in human rotteness, only in the same way as a doctor lecturing to students about disease'. These medical images persist right through his accounts of his own work; over twenty-five years later, he would say of *Doctor Pascal* (1893), the last volume of his epic Rougon-Macquart novel sequence, 'it is a scientific work, the logical deduction and conclusion of all my preceding novels', adding that his aim has always been '*to show all so that all may be cured*'. The protagonist of that novel, Dr Pascal, is clearly modelled on Zola himself, from his obsessive tracing of the Rougon and Macquart families' genetic inheritance to his passionate relationship in middle age with a much younger woman. Doctors play pivotal—and generally positive—roles in *A Love Story* (1878), *Nana* (1880), *Pot Luck* (1882), *The Bright Side of Life* (1884), *The Earth* (1887), and *The Debacle* (1892). When Zola publishes his collection of essays arguing for Naturalism, his title *The Experimental Novel* (1880) refers not to artistic but to medical experiments.²⁰

But despite writing a doctor as a major character, Eliot's approach in *Middlemarch* is considerably less surgical than this. She does not want to cut open or eviscerate, but she does want to observe, to gather and to sift data, and that's the kind of physician Lydgate is. The microscopic focus is fitting, the epigraphs and quotations appended to this great novel are mirrors, and can be read as mirrors, and can shine lights on Eliot's achievement.

To those who think it strange to construe Eliot's realism through epigraphs and quotations, rather than through (say) the accumulation

²⁰ Dan Rebellato, 'Sightlines: Foucault and Naturalist Theatre', in *Foucault's Theatres*, ed. by Tony Fisher and Kélina Gotman (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019), pp. 147–59 (p. 148), <https://doi.org/10.7765/9781526132079.00020>

of pseudo-documentary representations of aspects of life as it is lived,²¹ I could make the perhaps over-obvious rebuttal—that for Casaubon, epigraphs *are* his lived experience—in order to expand upon it. After all, our lives are not some string of purely-accessed pearls of Dasein, or are not *only* that. Our lives are also not only determined but to an extent constructed by the texts we read and remember, the plays we have seen, the poems we have read. Wisdom is lived, but also mnemonised as proverbs and quotations. Any strategy of literary realism that did not include quotation and epigraphy would be jejune.

We might say that books (like *Middlemarch*) are texts, whereas human beings are texts only by analogy. But several of the epigraphs of *Middlemarch* return to the idea of people *as* books. The first chapter of Book 2, 'Old and Young', begins with an Eliotic pastiche, a snatch of dialogue from an ersatz Elizabethan or Jacobean play:

1st Gent. How class your man?—as better than the most,
Or, seeming better, worse beneath that cloak?
As saint or knave, pilgrim or hypocrite?

2d Gent. Nay, tell me how you class your wealth of books
The drifted relics of all time. As well
Sort them at once by size and livery:
Vellum, tall copies, and the common calf
Will hardly cover more diversity
Than all your labels cunningly devised
To class your unread authors.

There's something odd about this epigraph. On its face, it seems straightforward. The First Gentleman poses an important question: how do we judge human beings? Indeed this is, arguably, the key question, for Shakespeare who returns to the disjunction between seeming and being over and over ('there's no art to find the mind's construction in the face' and so on)—and of course for Eliot too. But Eliot's phrasing in this confected epigraph is strangely ambiguous between 'how do you

²¹ There has been a good deal of scholarship that has taken this approach of course. See for instance Anna Theresa Kitchel, ed., *Quarry for Middlemarch* (Riverside: University of California Press, 1950); Lilian R. Furst, 'Not So Long Ago: Historical Allusion in Realist Fiction', in *Through the Lens of the Reader: Explorations of European Narrative* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), pp. 133–48; Kate Flint, 'The Materiality of *Middlemarch*', in *Middlemarch in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. by Karen Chase (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 65–86.

judge men in general?' and 'what is your judgment with respect to *this* specific man?' 'He' dresses in fine clothes, but does his character match his outward array? When rephrased that way the answer is obvious: of course not. It would be as ridiculous, as the Second Gentleman says, in words that glance at the old proverb about not judging books by covers, to arrange one's library by size, or binding. Different books bound in the same kind of covers will of course contain many different kinds of content. Indeed, it's an observation so facile that it must send us back to the original epigraph. Is that all it's saying? Well, no. For one thing, there is the—strange, surely—styling of books in a library as 'the drifted relics of all time'. Not living things, brought alive with every reader, but inert fossils. A 'relic' is something left behind, something we have left behind: the Latin *reliquiae*, 'remains, relics', is from *relinquō*, 'I leave behind, abandon, relinquish'. Books are here relinquished as texts with which to engage—'unread authors'—whilst simultaneously being assembled, collected, sorted into library shelves. When we think of it like that, the point of the epigraph shifts ground. It becomes not about how we 'read' people (indeed, it is very specifically about how we don't 'read' people), but instead how we dispose of them after we have 'collected' them.

What kind of person 'collects' other people? It speaks, perhaps, to a particular, objectionable kind of character: the sort of person who assembles friends and acquaintances not for the sake of those relationships, or out of genuine interest or affection, but because those friends and acquaintances are (perhaps) famous, wealthy, or aristocratic, as social adornments or for their social utility rather than as people. Whether we would necessarily call such a person a hypocrite (although they might, of course, be a hypocrite) is uncertain. But perhaps their 'problem' is rather the reverse of this, a too bald acceptance of the conventions of society on their own terms, a position pharisaical rather than common-garden hypocritical perhaps. This is because Eliot is using this epigraph to set-up the first meeting of Lydgate and Bulstrode, and therefore to foreshadow the banker's eventual fall. It is Bulstrode, in this exchange, who seems better but is worse beneath his cloak.

The banker's speech was fluent, but it was also copious, and he used up an appreciable amount of time in brief meditative pauses. Do not imagine his sickly aspect to have been of the yellow, black-haired sort: he had a pale blond skin, thin grey-besprinkled brown hair, light-grey eyes, and a large forehead. Loud men called his subdued tone

an undertone, and sometimes implied that it was inconsistent with openness; though there seems to be no reason why a loud man should not be given to concealment of anything except his own voice, unless it can be shown that Holy Writ has placed the seat of candour in the lungs. Mr. Bulstrode had also a deferential bending attitude in listening, and an apparently fixed attentiveness in his eyes which made those persons who thought themselves worth hearing infer that he was seeking the utmost improvement from their discourse. Others, who expected to make no great figure, disliked this kind of moral lantern turned on them [...] Mr. Bulstrode's close attention was not agreeable to the publicans and sinners in *Middlemarch*; it was attributed by some to his being a Pharisee, and by others to his being Evangelical. Less superficial reasoners among them wished to know who his father and grandfather were, observing that five-and-twenty years ago nobody had ever heard of a Bulstrode in *Middlemarch*. To his present visitor, Lydgate, the scrutinizing look was a matter of indifference: he simply formed an unfavorable opinion of the banker's constitution, and concluded that he had an eager inward life with little enjoyment of tangible things.²²

Lydgate, immune to the moral lantern, makes a judgement based on medical ('the banker's constitution') rather than social or conventional grounds. Nonetheless his assessment is not so far removed from that of wider *Middlemarch* opinion. Bulstrode performs acts of charity, and collects friendships—"I shall be exceedingly obliged if you will look in on me here occasionally, Mr. Lydgate," the banker observed, after a brief pause—not for their own sake but for the lustre they cast upon his reputation. He does not enjoy the things in themselves, he bolsters his own ego, knowing as he does his own fundamental unworthiness.

The thing is, a doctor is another kind of person who 'collects' or assembles people. Physicians collect patients in order to attend to their health (and in order to earn money) but also less for their own sakes and more as iterations of medical symptoms. The question for such a collection becomes not 'is this person a saint, knave, pilgrim or hypocrite?' but 'what is their pathology and how might I address it?' with, in the case of many doctors, Lydgate included, 'how shall I turn this person into a data-point in my research?' I am the son of two doctors. I know from personal experience the extent to which they observed people, and chatted to one another, in terms of a congeries of potential symptoms. Family journeys by car would be the two adults

22 Eliot, *Middlemarch*, ch. 13.

in the front saying things like: ‘what about her, by the roundabout? A thyroid complaint, do you think?’ ‘Hashimoto’s disease, perhaps? But what about *him*? Ehlers-Danlos, maybe?’ They were, I believe, typical of their profession in this regard.

And, of course, there is a third kind of person who ‘collects’ people: the novelist, that individual whose friendship is always compromised, to one degree or another, by observational apprehension of real people as a resource for future writing.

The larger point, it’s worth drawing out, is that if all of our relationships with other people are as instrumental as this—as denuded as this—then we are not living as full a human life as we could, or should. Such people are living smaller than they should, and are missing the chance to enlarge their lives. It is one of Eliot’s great themes, of course: Silas Marner, by limiting his life to gold, endures a pigmy existence; and when he loses his gold and gains Eppie his life enlarges in all the important ways a life can enlarge. I do not suggest the comparison out of mere facetiousness when I say: precisely this step-up from small to large, from suggested-at potential to expansive experiential fulfilment is enacted by the shift from epigraph to actual chapter, and more fully from epigraph to whole novel. The really significant thing is that this dynamic, this small reflection to larger reality, also describes the way we can turn from novels—even great and profoundly insightful novels like *Middlemarch*—to life as it is lived. We do not, or at least (Eliot is saying) should not, live only in books. The idea that art is a kind of mirror is the fundamental of literary mimesis as such. Eliot’s mirrors are usually small, and are often coded for narcissism—Rosamond’s existential smallness, Eliot implies, is a function of such narcissism. We may use mirrors only to admire ourselves, but equally we may use mirrors for more admirable purposes, and the smallest of Eliot’s mirrors is also one of the most revealing, in her beautifully compacted metaphor for the writer’s art with which *Adam Bede* opens:

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 1799.²³

23 George Eliot, *Adam Bede* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1859), ch. 1, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/507/507-h/507-h.htm>

Indeed, *mirror* and *admirable* are, marvellously enough, versions of the same word (they both descend etymologically from the transitive Latin verb *miror*, ‘I am astonished at, marvel at, admire, am amazed at, wonder at’).

Mirrors distort of necessity, by giving us a smaller, inverted simulacrum in place of the larger, richer reality; and some mirrors distort—through spotting on their surface, or curves in their shape—more than others. Then again, for some people precisely those distortions are what make mirrors valuable: as (two topics to which I return in the book that follows) telescopes, or microscopes. And if Eliot is quite properly suspicious of distortion in her art, she is not so dogmatic a mimetic artist as not to realise how worthwhile it can be, in the right circumstances. Early in *Middlemarch*, Dorothea believes herself the mere distorting mirror of a world that Casaubon apprehends *in toto*:

‘He thinks with me,’ said Dorothea to herself, ‘or rather, he thinks a whole world of which my thought is but a poor twopenny mirror. And his feelings too, his whole experience—what a lake compared with my little pool!’²⁴

By the end of the novel, Dorothea’s twopenny mirror is, we realise, a better lens—more like Eliot’s own drop of mirroring ink—than Casaubon’s desiccation. The final gesture of the novel, when it abdicates representation of Dorothea and Ladislaw’s life altogether, replaces the representation through a glass, darkly, with a nothingness that allows us to imagine their face-to-face. The epigraph to the chapter in which Dorothea’s tuppenny mirror is mentioned is interesting too. It takes its lines from *Paradise Lost*, book 7:

‘Say, goddess, what ensued, when Raphael,
The affable archangel . . .
Eve
The story heard attentive, and was filled
With admiration, and deep muse, to hear
Of things so high and strange’.²⁵

Admiration again: linked with *muse*. By ‘deep muse’, John Milton presumably means deep thought, pondering and considering the

24 Eliot, *Middlemarch*, ch. 3.

25 Ibid.

angel's words; but we can perhaps take the words, as recontextualised in this novel, at this point, as saying something more. Because it does not stretch matters, although it does entail a rather striking gender inversion from the literary norm, to see Casaubon as Dorothea's muse: as the figure whose idealised form inspires her to her characteristic action, and so imparts motion to the whole of Eliot's story. Milton reoccurs in the novel's next mention of a mirror; this time not Dorothea's tuppenny glass but Casaubon's spoon. Eliot, adopting the narrator's voice, cautions her readers against any 'too hasty judgment' with respect to the old scholar:

If to Dorothea Mr. Casaubon had been the mere occasion which had set alight the fine inflammable material of her youthful illusions, does it follow that he was fairly represented in the minds of those less impassioned personages who have hitherto delivered their judgments concerning him? I protest against any absolute conclusion, any prejudice derived from Mrs. Cadwallader's contempt for a neighbouring clergyman's alleged greatness of soul, or Sir James Chettam's poor opinion of his rival's legs,—from Mr. Brooke's failure to elicit a companion's ideas, or from Celia's criticism of a middle-aged scholar's personal appearance. I am not sure that the greatest man of his age, if ever that solitary superlative existed, could escape these unfavourable reflections of himself in various small mirrors; and even Milton, looking for his portrait in a spoon, must submit to have the facial angle of a bumpkin.²⁶

The mirror here is both spoon-small and as large as society as such: we see ourselves mirrored in the opinions of others, and one of the things Eliot offers here is a psychologically plausible reason for Casaubon's withdrawal from the larger world. Then again, the comparison with Milton—a man intimately engaged in the great events of his time, after all—undercuts Casaubon's rather ridiculous *amour propre*. It is very delicately done by Eliot, I think.

The claim that mimetic art is a mirror of life veers, by its generality, towards platitude. Eliot is always interested in the particular, and her mirrors—her tall standing mirrors in wealthy Middlemarchers' houses, her tuppenny hand-mirrors, her spoons and drops of ink—are all specifying and individuating, even in their distortions and creative rescopings. It is in such terms, I think, that we had better think of the kinds of mirrors, or lenses, that Eliot's epigraphs are.

26 Ibid., ch. 10.

One last point, here about epigraphy and the use of quotation and allusion more broadly, concerns originality. *How to be original* is a challenge modern writers face in a way older writers did not. Walter Jackson Bate's venerable study remains a valuable account of the large shift in aesthetic philosophy, from a pre-Romantic belief that the artist was to be judged by its *fidelity* to a set of canonical prototypes, to a Romantic and post-Romantic valorisation of 'originality'. From, that is, an understanding of art as essentially emulative and determined by tradition to one that prizes progress and novelty. By the end of the eighteenth-century, according to Bate:

The whole concept of 'originality' had both deepened and spread—deepened as a hold on the conscience and spread horizontally among the literate, and the peripheries of the literate, as something desired *per se*. Back in the 1730s and 1740s, when the neoclassic had begun to reconsider its own self-limitations, the idea of 'originality' had understandably been plucked out into prominence [...] it meshed with some many other things in life aside from the arts (especially the concept of progress in the cumulative sciences, social and historical as well as physical) that the conscience was trapped by it, as it had earlier been trapped by the neoclassic use of the classical example.²⁷

Bate notes that “‘originality’ in the arts need not imply vigour, range, or even openness of mind—or power of language or anything else of a qualitative nature.’ What it does, he thinks, is ‘lift the burden of the past’, or at least attempt to do so.

Do we think of *Middlemarch* as an ‘original’ novel? Let’s say: yes in terms of its scope and achievement, for there had been nothing like it in English before. Then again, perhaps we run the risk of undermining the work’s own textual commitment to fidelity by putting too much emphasis on originality, for the counter-argument would be: *Middlemarch* takes its places gladly in a tradition of novel-writing, aiming not at newness for the sake of newness but on the contrary excavating the past, working older modes of wisdom—it is, according to its own logic, a history. And certainly *Middlemarch* is not ‘original’ in the way that (say) James Joyce’s *Ulysses* is—although *Ulysses* is also, in its way, profoundly imbricated in the logic of realism. Nonetheless, it is hard to think of a novel more

27 *The Burden of the Past and the English Poet* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1971), pp. 104–05.

concerned with ‘the burden of the past’ than *Middlemarch*, conceived in political, religious and scientific terms, and actualised emotionally in the plot via Casaubon’s mortal attempt to control Dorothea from beyond the grave.

The fabric of Eliot’s novel is pinned to its board by a large number of meaningful quotations and epigraphs. We could read these as gestures towards regrounding Eliot’s stories in the past from which those micro-texts are sourced; as, that is to say, a strategy at odds with the modern will-to-originality. The claim that Eliot has here written a traditional novel does not, on its face, do any violence to common sense. Nonetheless, the alternative is more compelling, even including the counter-intuitive claim that these epigraphs and quotations are themselves markers of originality, rather than the reverse.

The contrast with *Ulysses* might look forced, but it is worth remembering that not everybody greeted the publication of Joyce’s novel gladly. D. H. Lawrence famously, or notoriously, dismissed the novel in a letter to Aldous Huxley in pungent terms:

My God, what a clumsy *olla putrida* James Joyce is! Nothing but old fags and cabbage stumps of quotations from the Bible and the rest, stewed in the juice of deliberate, journalistic dirty-mindedness—what old and hard-worked staleness, masquerading as the all-new!²⁸

What’s interesting here is that Lawrence uses the fact that *Ulysses* is an intensely allusive, quoteful text—which it certainly is—to rebut the notion that it is ‘all-new’ and original. The one, it seems, negates the other. Never mind the formal, stylistic and mythographic innovation of the novel, Lawrence is saying: how can a work so comprised of fag-end, cabbage-stump quotations pretend to *newness*? The rhetoric shows Lawrence’s thumb in the balance, of course: not quotations as such—which might be fragrant yet-to-be-smoked cigarettes, or fresh cabbage leaves ready for cooking—but the leftovers of quotations, the unusable portions here added to the book’s metaphorical ‘recipe’ from sheer perversity, or dirty-mindedness. Even if this were true of Joyce (and I don’t think it is) it would not apply to Eliot, whose ‘traditional’ formal and stylistic textual strategies are enhanced by her epigraphy—much of

²⁸ Quoted in Anthony Beal, ed., *D. H. Lawrence: Selected Literary Criticism* (New York: Viking Press, 1956), p. 148

which is original writing by Eliot herself—in a way that discloses, rather than encloses, meaning.

Colin Burrow argues that ‘what has tended to be marginalised in the more recent history of imitation is the aspect of it that was most central to the rhetorical tradition’, namely ‘that is the view that the imitator learns from an *exemplum*: a practice rather than a series of texts or a sequence of words, and that the end of imitation is the acquisition of a habituated skill, rather than a specific set of actions or phrases’. He is less interested in *imitatio*, the strict or even slavish copying of some old master, and more in what he calls *hexis*, the kind of spontaneous skill that comes after long practice and imitation: the way years of scales and laboriously worked-through practice of Beethoven and Chopin finds fruition with the pianist who can so fluently, and seemingly effortlessly, move her hands over the piano keyboard; the expert judgement of the experienced surgeon’s cut, or the perfect in-the-moment contact between striker’s foot and football to score a goal.²⁹ Burrow does not discuss *Middlemarch*, though the terminology seems peculiarly fitting to Eliot’s mature fiction. On the one hand, Eliot draws, in a distinctly post-Romantic manner, on what we might call ‘nature’. Walter Jackson Bate imagines Romantic artists, compelled by a nagging sense that imitation was mere plagiarism, despairing of ever being able to free their texts from intertextuality: ‘nature—life in all its diversity—is still constantly before us. Cannot we force ourselves to turn directly towards it?’³⁰ There’s no question but that Eliot, in writing her novel, drew on her own experience of life in the Midlands, and the people she had encountered. But of course she also drew deeply on literature and literary convention. In part this was a matter of reading novelists themselves informed by the complex Romantic shift from a broader aesthetic of *imitation* to originality: Goethe, Scott, Austen, Dickens, De Staël, George Sand and the like. But she tends to draw her epigraphs, and to make specific intertextual

29 Burrow adopts the term from Aristotle, who describes *hexis* as ‘an entrenched psychic condition or state which develops through experience rather than congenitally’, glossing: ‘the successful imitator does not simply learn rules or vocabulary from his master, but acquires through imitation the ability to speak with an instinctive appropriateness’. *Imitating Authors: Plato to Futurity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 5–6, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198838081.001.0001>

30 Bate, *Burden of the Past*, p. 111. His own answer to this rhetorical question is, of course: no—though in the case of Wordsworth, his main focus, a compelling and revolutionary kind of poetic no.

reference, less to these figures than to an older pre-Romantic tradition, older English poetry, Elizabethan-Jacobean drama, Classical literature. In this she is not being derivative so much as she is crediting the larger school at which she honed her *hexis*. Later in his study Burrow defines *hexis* as a ‘habit of healthy fluency’ and ‘a stably possessed power and disposition to do.’³¹ This neatly encapsulates the end-product of Eliot’s immersion in literary antecedence. She works her originality (and for the avoidance of doubt, let me say I believe *Middlemarch* is a profoundly original novel) *through* her intertextual inhabitation of *imitatio* of the classics. The latter informs the former.

What we call ‘originality’ in literature, we call in politics ‘revolution’, or at the very least ‘reform’; and in science we call ‘progress’, an advance in efficacy or accuracy upon what has gone before. In these senses *Middlemarch* not only works originally, it leverages its originality through its metatextual concurrences. It is a cleverly self-referential meditation upon the very notion of originality itself: originality in religion, in science, in politics and, ultimately, in love.

Adam Phillips quotes Jean Cocteau: ‘true originality consists in trying to behave like everybody else without succeeding’. His point, a pertinent one for a novel like *Middlemarch* (although that’s not what Phillips is discussing), is that originality is actually a function of a kind of community, or more specifically as a kind of falling away from community: ‘it was once,’ he argues, ‘characteristically modern to idealise originality, and to conceive of it as a form of failure. The fittest as those who didn’t fit’. He continues:

The Romantic concept of genius, after all—the apotheosis of originality—was itself a kind of elegy for a lost community. All the solitary, disillusioned moderns—Baudelaire, Kafka, Eliot, Beckett—are preoccupied by their sociability: its impossibility, its triviality, its compromises, its shame. For these writers ambition without irony flies in the face of the evidence; a successful life was a contradiction in terms, because the Modernist revelation was that lives don’t work. A certain revulsion was integral to their vision.³²

Revulsion overstates Eliot’s approach, of course; but she certainly shares this insight that the opposite of originality is not ‘tradition’ so much as

31 Burrow, *Imitating Authors*, p. 92.

32 Adam Phillips, ‘Getting Ready to Exist’, *London Review of Books*, 19.4 (1997), <https://lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v19/n14/adam-phillips/getting-ready-to-exist>

social conformism. As a novel *Middlemarch* construes what another writer might portray as stifling and procrustean about the restrictive dynamics of polite Middlemarchian society in warmer, often comic ways. But that's not to say there's any mistaking them for the claustrophobia-inducing limitations that they are.

The most acute 'originality' in this novel, then, is not Lydgate's failures as a medical researcher, nor Casaubon's failures to revolutionise the study of comparative mythology, both of which lead both men further *into* the thickets of social conformity and convention. It is rather the way Dorothea and Ladislaw are able, at the end, to slip out of the net of the novel's textual society, and therefore out of textuality itself, altogether. It is an original way to end a novel in the bald sense—in the sense that no other writer had thought to in-effect erase their protagonist as the denouement of their story—but more than that, in a deeper sense, it achieves originality through a kind of fidelity, or at least through the assertion of such: for all we are told about Dorothea is that she lives *faithfully* a hidden life, and rests in unvisited tombs. The fidelity is itself pointed up by a literary allusion, to Herodotus, that is as much mythic as it is historical, an allusion discussed below. The larger point is that such quotation and epigraphy are not merely recidivist. On the contrary, they construe a path into a kind of newness, as I argue in what follows.

