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Henry M. Alley

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MIDDLEMARCH : Three Italian Journeys

By Henry M. Alley, Assistant Professor of Literature
at the Robert D. Clark Honors College, University
of Oregon, U.S.A.

In Middlemarch, Dorothea's intense moment of disillusionment in Rome has been generally traced to Eliot's own Italian journey of 1860, when, as Gordon S. Haight notes (324),¹ the disappointment in many sights of the Eternal City paralleled her heroine's. The comparisons are very compelling, especially those involving the joined responses of author and heroine to the interior landscape of St. Paul's ("the lovely marble . . . was half-covered with hideous red drapery (Life 132: vol. 2, ch. 10);²

"the red drapery which was being hung for Christmas spreading itself everywhere (was) like a disease of the retina" (226; ch. 20)).³ However, the famous and almost surreal paragraph which shows, with such extraordinary power, "the dimmer but yet eager Titanic life gazing and struggling on walls and ceilings" (226)³ may, in fact, carry another, less direct reference.

At a critical moment early in Mary Stuart, Mortimer, having revealed himself as Mary's rescuer, proceeds to narrate the story of his own Roman pilgrimage, one designed to escape "gloomy Puritan conventicles" (I, vi, p. 205).⁴ What then follows is an impassioned recollection, as rich in images of aesthetic fervor as Dorothea's is in aesthetic nightmare :

..... And I Myself,
Caught up amidst the faithful multitudes
Found myself swept along to Rome --
And O, my queen!
When splendid column and triumphal arch
Arose before my eyes, and when I gazed
In wonder at the Colosseum's might, it was
As if a lofty spirit opened up
A glorious realm of wonders to my soul!
For I had never known the power of art,
The Church in which I grew knows only hate
For beauty, tolerates no images,
Adores the immaterial Word alone.
But now, imagine, as I stepped inside
The Churches, how the heavenly sound of music
Descended, and a host of figures burst
From every ceiling and from every wall;
The noblest and the highest that we worship
Was there to ravish my enchanted senses.

(I, vi, p. 205)⁴

In both narrations, figures of art acquire a life of their own, emphasising the susceptibilities of the seers; Mortimer is as ready for rapture as Dorothea is for despondency. Both characters respond to paintings and statues as a kind of population which crowds upon their minds -- one group angelic, the other demonic. Both experiences result in a Roman epiphany which, for Dorothea, as for Mortimer, fixes itself in "her memory even when she was not thinking of them (the forms), preparing strange associations which remained through her after-years" (225).³

To say Eliot had Schiller in mind when writing this passage is certainly not to speculate too far, since we do know that she had been familiar with Mary Stuart since 1840 (Letters I, 69).⁵ But the detective work of tracing influences in Eliot does not find its chief interest in "indebtedness" so much as in the prismatic effects of her allusions. When Mortimer is brought alongside the passage, we are reminded of the parallels of youth, Puritanism, and a quest for instantaneous idolatry, so that each can say "But now my prison was opened wide" (I, vi, p.206).⁴ We are also reminded of the supreme difference of response to what seems to be the same aesthetic landscape -- Dorothea the young, nineteenth century bride, terrified by "the deep degeneracy of a superstition divorced from reverence" (225);³ Mortimer the sixteenth century rebel, thrilled by the forms of a religion for which he can still be a self-styled martyr. By comparison, Dorothea's magic-lantern vision becomes even more nightmarish; her alienation deeper. Unlike Mortimer, she is separated from a time when break-neck heroism is possible, and unlike Mortimer, she is too intelligent and balanced to allow idolatry -- whether channelled toward art or her mentor -- to carry her

through to the end of her life.

W. J. Harvey⁶ once wrote, "George Eliot's mind is like the National Gallery; for every canvas on display there are two stored away in the basement" --- a statement which, while addressing her historical scholarship, can also apply to her literary allusions. Once the surface has been taken care of, the referential detective often finds buried thematic treasure. In this case, the parallels and contrasts between the youthful impressions of Rome lead us to reconsider Will's idolatry towards Dorothea, which soon follows, just as Mortimer's enraptured contemplation of Mary's portrait signals the end of his aesthetic quest. But in thinking now of Will as a reformulated Mortimer, who would rescue his captive queen, we have to think of supreme differences once again. Mortimer can play out, although tragically, his aspirations to be a knight errant; Will cannot.

And if Mr. Casaubon had been a dragon who had carried her off to his lair with his talons simply and without legal forms, it would have been an unavoidable feat of heroism to release her and fall at her feet. But he was something more unmanageable than a dragon: he was a benefactor with a collective society at his back ... (241); ch. 21).³

Thus the Schiller allusion, while heightening by contrast the infernal quality of Dorothea's revelation, also comments on the more general "embroiled medium" of the novel, in which rasher, more flamboyant action must give way to quieter, more qualified responses. Just as Dorothea refuses to exult in "the oppressive masquerade of

ages" (225),³ so she is also barred, along with Will, from any easy or immediate plan of liberation. The allusion speaks to the "particular web" of the novel, through which the potential lovers will eventually find their escape. Mortimer, however, is all hurried strategy, and like the unreformed romantic that he is, must die by the fourth act.

In her 1860 journal, it is interesting to note that Eliot records as much exultation in the sights of Rome as she does disappointment:

Let me see what I most delighted in ...
the Coliseum itself, with the view from
it; the drive along the Appian Way to the
tomb of Cecilia Metella, and the view
from thence of the Campagna bridged by
the aquaduct: the Baths of Titus, with
the remnants of their arabesques, seen
by the light of the torches, in the now
damp and gloomy spaces, the glimpse
of the Tarquin rock, with its growth of
cactus and rough herbage; the grand
bare arch brickwork of the Palace of
the Caesars rising in the huger masses
on the Palatine; the Theater of Marcellus
bursting suddenly into view from the
crowded mean house of the modern city ...

(Life 130; vol. 2, ch. 10).²

In Middlemarch, the effect of the periodic prose is inverted; the parallel clauses "check the flow of emotion" rather than find an outlet in an image which "bursts" or radiates forth. Thus in recording mixed impressions which sometimes echoed Mortimer and sometimes prepared the way for Dorothea, Eliot laid the groundwork for a momentous passage which

was to provide a pivotal point for her heroine and usher in her even more famous paragraph on "that element of tragedy which lies in the very fact of frequency" (226),³ a paragraph which in its complexity and qualification must necessarily exclude Mortimer, necessarily foreshadow the trials of Dorothea and Will -- who, ironically, move within tighter parameters but obtain greater freedom.

NOTES

- 1 Haight, Gordon S. George Eliot: A Biography. New York: Oxford University Press, 1968.
- 2 Cross, J.W., ed. George Eliot's Life as Related in Her Letters and Journals. 3 vols. New York: Harper and brothers, 1885.
- 3 Eliot, George. Middlemarch. Ed. W.J. Harvey. Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1963.
- 4 Schiller, Friedrich. Mary Stuart. Five German Tragedies. Trans. F.J. Lamport. Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1969 191-318.
- 5 ---. "To Maria Lewis." 1 October 1840. The George Eliot Letters. Ed. Gordon S. Haight. 9 vols. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954. 1: 69.
- 6 Harvey, W.J. "The Intellectual Background of the Novel: Casaubon and Lydgate." Ed. Barbara Hardy. Middlemarch: Critical Approaches to the Novel. New York: Oxford University Press, 1967. 25-37.