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DOROTHEA AND THE 'KEY TO ALL MYTHOLOGIES'

By Daniel Tyler

In *Middlemarch*, the 'dead hand' of Edward Casaubon, which seeks to take hold of his wife's future, is applied by two documents. The first is the codicil to his will which endeavours to prohibit Dorothea marrying Will Ladislaw by imposing the condition that to do so she must relinquish her inheritance. The second is the 'Synoptical Tabulation' in which he expresses the intention to have her continue his work on the 'Key to all Mythologies'. As early as 1873, it was observed by Henry James that the subsequent narrative is dominated by the repercussions of the codicil: 'Mr Casaubon's death befalls about the middle of the story, and from this point to the close our interest in Dorothea is restricted to the question, will she or will [she] not marry Will Ladislaw?'¹ The interest of the astute reader should engage with both aspects of Casaubon's 'dead hand' however. While Dorothea's relationship with Ladislaw may dominate the literal narrative, this essay proposes to show that the possibility of her continuing her first husband's research exists as a quiet undercurrent throughout the novel until it begins to re-emerge in the Finale, at which point it is hinted that she finally determines to complete the 'Key to all Mythologies'.

Dorothea's potential for authorship finds a model in Saint Theresa, whom the Prelude establishes as at once a symbol and a point of contrast for the *Middlemarch* heroine. Saint Theresa wrote several books, but Eliot neglects these, preferring to focus on the Saint's founding of convents. There is just one revelatory moment, in a passage concerning Casaubon's scholarship, when the significance of Theresa's writing in relation to Dorothea is foregrounded. Of the latter it is speculated, 'If she had written a book she must have done it as Saint Theresa did, under the command of an authority that constrained her conscience'.² The prologues of all Theresa's major works claim that she has been charged to write by a (male) spiritual director.³ At a central moment in the novel, Dorothea receives a similar order. The crucial question of whether she lives up to the model provided by Saint Theresa thus tacitly asks whether she realizes her potential for authorship, whether she accepts Casaubon's command to complete the 'Key to all Mythologies'.

The suggestion that the issue of Dorothea's response to Casaubon's request remains open is discordant with a critical tradition which allows Rosemary Ashton in her biography of Eliot to assert that Dorothea 'refused' to finish the worthless work of her distrustful husband'.⁴ This seems to epitomize the general reading of this aspect of the novel. It is widely accepted that the search for a 'Key to all Mythologies' is a futile project which Casaubon's death releases Dorothea from having to continue.⁵ But the death is not so much a release from an oppressive task as it is a release from the need to make an immediate decision whether to continue the 'Key'. It is described in terms which show the impossibility of Dorothea furnishing Casaubon with any answer now: 'But Dorothea never gave her answer' (453), 'But the silence in her husband's ear was never more to be broken' (453). Even the posture he has assumed when she finds him dead is one which he adopts when he is listening to her speak, as if he is waiting for an answer; 'she had seen him take that attitude when she was reading to him' (453).

There is just one moment when Dorothea appears to make a definite rejection of that aspect of

Casaubon's 'dead hand' which commands her to continue his 'Key'. On this moment rests the current critical understanding of Dorothea's future.

The pity which had been the restraining compelling motive in her life with him still clung about his image, even while she remonstrated with him in indignant thought and told him that he was unjust. One little act of hers may perhaps be smiled at as superstitious. The *Synoptical Tabulation, for the use of Mrs Casaubon*, she carefully enclosed and sealed, writing within the envelope, 'I could not use it. Do you not see now that I could not submit my soul to yours, by working hopelessly at what I have no belief in? – Dorothea.' Then she deposited the paper in her own desk. (506-7)

The traditional implicit investment of significance into this moment is immediately seen to be at odds with the dismissive tone of the narratorial comment, 'one little act of hers may perhaps be smiled at as superstitious', which offers to the reader a vastly different interpretation of this scene. The act itself seems to be the product of the 'indignant thought' which is distinct from 'pity'. Such an unsympathetic response is unlikely to be tenable in a heroine of Eliot's. The epigrammatic end to the paragraph, 'then she deposited the paper in her own desk', seems to undercut the functionality of the note's direct address. By pointing to the absence of reception, the decision is internalized and made less permanently binding.

The most profound inadequacy of Dorothea's decision, as it is indicated here, is that it is based on problematic grounds. She rejects Casaubon's project because she has no 'belief' in its viability. Dorothea's personal response to it, evident here and more immediately after Casaubon's death, has become embroiled with the mistaken attitudes of Middlemarch society towards the 'Key' and most particularly, that of Will Ladislaw. He had hurt her by implying 'that the labour of her husband's life might be void' on the basis that 'the Germans have taken the lead in historical inquiries, and they laugh at results which are got by groping about in woods with a pocket-compass while they have made good roads' (194). Typically, critics have allied themselves with Ladislaw's opinion that Casaubon's project is one of 'futile scholarship'.⁶ This seems to be based on a failure to appreciate the extent to which the narrative voice, which is similar to Ladislaw's, might be inadequate in relating Dorothea's plight and the distance between it and the voice of the author.

The latter is less disguised in Eliot's critical writings. She praises R. W. Mackay's *Progress of the Intellect*, which attempts to find a 'master key', which lies at the heart of the material and moral world, a pursuit untroubled by the fact that 'England has been slow to use or to emulate the immense labours of Germany in the departments of mythology and biblical criticism'.⁷ This reinforces the legitimacy of Casaubon's enterprise, as does the fact that Mark Pattison, a probable source for Casaubon,⁸ and advocate of the theory that different strands of mythology 'each retained a modification of the belief of the parent stock',⁹ was a very successful scholar.¹⁰ These approaches rescue the concept of a key to all mythologies from a derisory critical tradition, in which there are but rarely any redemptive readings.¹¹

The sterility of the project does not stem from any inherent flaws in the theory, but from the inadequacy of the mind which seeks to arrange the data to support it. For this reason the 'Key'

is ideally suited to the fresh approach a new mind might bring to the enterprise. For all the humour, it is perhaps significant that George Henry Lewes characterizes his great work, *Problems of Life and Mind*, in terms of the 'Key', at a moment when illness makes him personally deficient in pursuing his task. 'The shadow of old Casaubon hangs over me and I fear my "Key to all Psychologies" will have to be left to Dorothea!'¹² Perhaps it is also significant that he invokes Casaubon's 'Key' as he makes the serious and prophetic point that his work may be bequeathed to Eliot. There is no sense for all this that he is implying any criticism about the viability of the project itself.

By calling Eliot 'Dorothea' in this letter, Lewes is humorously pointing out the similarities between the two. As he writes elsewhere, Dorothea 'is more like her creator than anyone else and more so than any other of her creations'.¹³ That he sees this similarity in relation to the respective Keys is striking because there is a marked contrast between Dorothea's supposed rejection of her husband's work and Eliot's predictable diligence in executing the duty bequeathed her. Her attitude to her task, for all the differences between Lewes and Casaubon, still suggests that she might desire a reaction from Dorothea different from the immediate one which critics have assumed to be changeless.

In the Finale, the path Dorothea has chosen for herself on the back of this early rejection of duty is increasingly understood to be unsatisfactory. She feels 'that there was always something better which she might have done, if she had only been better and known better' (782). As one can deduce from the comparison with Eliot and from the model provided by the idealized Saint Theresa, this better duty lies in the acceptance of her husband's intention that she complete his great work. The Finale draws attention to the absence of any direct mention of the 'Key' in Dorothea's future, by including in the futures of many other characters writing which is often unanticipated by the preceding narrative. This is certainly the case with Fred's celebrated work on the 'Cultivation of Green Crops and the Economy of Cattle-Feeding' and Mary's 'little book for her boys, called "Stories of Great Men, taken from Plutarch"' (779). It is less surprising, though equally as significant, that Lydgate's future includes a financially successful treatise on Gout (781).

In this context, the 'Key' starts to emerge beneath the literal level of the narration. The specific reference of the statement, 'and she had now a life filled also with a beneficent activity which she had not the doubtful pains of discovering and marking out for herself' (782) is slightly uncertain. It relates to Dorothea's second marriage and, it seems, the support she gives to Ladislaw. The ambiguity arises from the uneasy alliance between the ongoing, multi-faceted aspect of her 'wifely help' and the singularity of 'a beneficent activity'. It hints at a specific task, which begins to allow the inclusion of a particular text into the reading of Dorothea's future. It is supported by the echo in 'discovering and marking out' of the 'path-finding' image Ladislaw used earlier to characterize Casaubon's enterprise as the 'groping about in woods with a pocket-compass while [the Germans] have made good roads'.

This paragraph in the Finale ends with another evasive and vague statement.

But no one stated exactly what else that was in her power she ought rather to have done – not even Sir James Chettam, who went no further than the nega-

tive prescription that she ought not to have married Will Ladislaw. (783)

The grounds for Sir James's opposition to the marriage are those which constituted Casaubon's 'dead hand'. He opposed Dorothea's marriage to Ladislaw, then, because her first husband had actively resisted it. The suggestion that he could have gone further but didn't can be understood with respect to the positive element of the 'dead hand' that Dorothea should continue the 'Key to all Mythologies'. Given that the 'Key' is anathema to Middlemarch society, the reasons why Sir James 'went no further than the negative prescription' are understandable. It is clear that behind the narrative awareness of the inadequacy of Dorothea's chosen path stands the 'Key to all Mythologies' as a viable and superior means for fulfilment of duty. In another such moment, the Finale hints at the validity of the 'Key': 'great feelings will often take the aspect of error...' (784). It is only the pervasive social disparagement, the persistent characterization of Casaubon's belief as an 'error' that prevents the narrative from directly locating Dorothea's duty in the completion of the 'Key', and prevents Dorothea accepting this duty.

Rather than just allowing the 'Key' to re-emerge into a narrative from which it has typically been shut out, the Finale also provides ample evidence that Dorothea begins to realize the merits of Casaubon's project and goes on to continue his work on it. Its opening claim that 'every limit is a beginning as well as an ending' (779) provides the grounds for a reading of the Finale as a new beginning. The general nature of the claims which follow in the first paragraph prevents the immediately ascribed context of Dorothea's second marriage being their only application.

For the fragment of a life, however typical, is not the sample of an even web: promises may not be kept, and an ardent outset may be followed by declension; latent powers may find their long awaited opportunity; a past error may urge a grand retrieval. (779)

The first claim that any 'fragment of a life' will provide a distorted impression of the whole from which it is extracted undermines the claims of certainty regarding Dorothea's future based on the narrative of the chapters subsequent to Casaubon's death. Her passionate rejection of the 'Key' in chapter LIV cannot be assumed irrevocable, after all, 'promises may not be kept, and an ardent outset may be followed by declension.' The next claim that 'latent powers may find their long awaited opportunity' recalls the less hopeful comment in the Prelude concerning the 'later-born Therasas', who were the 'offspring of a certain spiritual grandeur ill-matched with the meanness of opportunity' (3), but implies that Dorothea finally finds a suitable vocation. To do so she must correct her ill-founded rejection of the 'Key'; 'a past error may urge a grand retrieval'.

The novel ends with a sentence which generalizes from the particulars of Dorothea's life into a comment on those who 'lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs' (785). The idea that Dorothea lives a 'hidden life' at all reveals the extent to which the medium is limited or incomplete and justifies the search for detail concerning her future that the novel might not be able directly to assert. Meanwhile her 'faithfulness' requires an object, and the word's marital connotations narrow the possibilities. The easy assumption that this is her present husband is confounded, of course, by the Key's emergence in the Finale as a means of executing

her duty to her dead husband. In chapter fifty, soon after his death. Dorothea identifies its 'supreme use' as being the 'consecration of faithfulness' (463). The same chapter also provides the novel's final word 'tombs' with a meaning other than the obvious reference to the inevitable death of Dorothea and those like her. The narrative voice recalls that Casaubon

willingly imagined her toiling under the fetters of a promise to erect a tomb with his name upon it. (Not that Mr Casaubon called the future volumes a tomb; he called them the Key to all Mythologies.) (463)

Here the link between the word 'tomb' and Casaubon's project is secured, after it had earlier been established when, before Casaubon's death, Dorothea was struggling under the vision of a future in which she was expected to continue a work she thought was futile:

She longed for work which would be directly beneficent like the sunshine and the rain, and now it appeared that she was to live more and more in a virtual tomb, where there was the apparatus of a ghastly labour producing what would never see the light. (446)

The meaning of the word 'tomb' in *Middlemarch* is too unstable for the final line to maintain a solely literal reading. The invocation of the 'Key to all Mythologies' must be accepted. This application also lends a greater significance to the euphemistic use of the word 'rest' to deny the death of its subject, for in this case, her death is not the issue. It is untenable to hold that Eliot would end her novel on a word which the narrative voice so conspicuously reapplied the last time it was used, without being conscious of its lately assumed context. Nor is it feasible to maintain that this line cannot be legitimately read as the revelation that Dorothea finally found her least inadequate occupation by executing her duty to her first husband in continuing the 'Key to all Mythologies'.

Notes

- Henry James, 'George Eliot's *Middlemarch*', in Gordon S. Haight (ed), *A Century of George Eliot Criticism* (London, 1965), 80-6; 83.
- 2 George Eliot. *Middlemarch*, ed. David Carroll (Oxford, 1998), 80; all subsequent references to the novel are to this edition and are incorporated in the text.
- 3 *The Complete Works of Saint Teresa of Jesus* (3 vols), translated and edited by E. Allison Peers (London, 1946), I, 9; I, 306; II, 1; II, 199; II, 357; III, xxi.
- 4 Rosemary Ashton, *George Eliot: A Life*. (London, 1996), 366.
- 5 The nature of the claim means that one can often only point to derisory attitudes to the 'Key' and the persistent absence of any reference to it in Dorothea's future, in works which deal with either the 'Key' or the ending of *Middlemarch*. Notable examples are: F. R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition: George Eliot, Henry James, Joseph Conrad* (London, 1948); Barbara Hardy, 'Implication and Incompleteness in *Middlemarch*', in *Particularities. Readings in George Eliot*, (London, 1982), 15-36; Kate Flint. 'George