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Adam Roberts, *Middlemarch. Epigraphs and Mirrors*

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REFERENCES

Roberts, Adam. *Middlemarch. Epigraphs and Mirrors*. Cambridge, UK: Open Books Publishers, 2021, ISBN Digital (PDF): 9781800641600.

- 1 Seven chapters compose this 162p. essay along with an introduction, a postscript, a bibliography, a list of illustrations and an index, according to the following organization:
  1. Eliot's Double Mirror
  2. Sappho's Apple

- 3. Lydgate Winces: Characters and Realism
- 4. Hypocrisy and the Judgment of Men
- 5. Ladislaw
- 6. Myth, *Middlemarch* and the *Mill*: Out in Mid-Sea
- 7. Epigraphy: Beginnings and Ends
- Postscript: The Flute inside the Bell

- 2 Although she was not the first author to have used chapter epigraphs (writers like Scott, for instance, having done so before), George Eliot is known for her extensive use of epigraphs in her novels, some borrowed from identified sources, others coined by herself. Among her literary output, *Middlemarch* is particularly relevant when discussing the value of epigraphs. Indeed, Roberts underlines that *Middlemarch* is not just a novel containing epigraphs but one about epigraphs, which function to unravel the complexities and the richness behind the story being told. Epigraphs are much more than pedantism and gratuitous quoting, hindering comprehension rather than clarifying it, as embodied by the emblematic character of Casaubon the scholar. In the line of former studies (like David Leon Higdon's *George Eliot and the Art of Epigraphs*), Roberts advocates that epigraphs are organically linked to the body of the text, whose meaning they enrich and illuminate. He includes epigraphs in the vast pattern of interactions developed in *Middlemarch* between the small and the large, the present and the past, the part and the whole; hence he suggests a link between epigraphs and mirrors, calling to mind the multiple references made to glasswork by Eliot herself in the novel. Epigraphs are concerned with inheritance from the past, scientific minuteness and microscopic observation and a humanist apprehension of the larger world of literature. They therefore offer an original key to the understanding of Eliot's new-fangled realism.
- 3 In chapter 1, "George Eliot's Double Mirror", Roberts expands on the motif of the mirror, quoting the epigraph to Part 8, chapter 72: "Full souls are double mirrors, making still/An endless vista of fair things before,/Repeating things behind." Taking up the image of the "double mirror", Roberts studies the analogy between Eliot and French thinker Pascal's concept of "double infinity" (27) in the middle of which humanity is caught. Middleness is indeed a key notion in *Middlemarch*, which depicts ordinary life and people, but Roberts shows that unlike Pascal, there is no dread of the infinite in Eliot. Eliot's infinite is love. Above all, Eliot's mirror is no mere mimetic project aiming at an impossible total "realist" vision, but it is self-reflexive, a reflection of her own art, opening new vistas and infinite depths.
- 4 Chapter 2, "Sappho's Apple", concentrates not on an epigraph, but on an allusion to Sappho, quoted from Book 1. The point Roberts is making is that such a quotation is more than a token of Eliot's famous scholarship, it places *Middlemarch* within a rich web of intertextualities, adding an extra dimension to the work. The recurrent image of the apple throughout the novel is one of unattainable, yet potential, love (related as it is to characters like Dorothea or Mary Garth). The Edenic symbol is also one of a beginning and of further generations to come (Roberts also notes an ironic reference to Lady Macbeth), which situates the story within a line of mythical narratives (Biblical or Greek) to make it part of a framework of intertextuality. Such is, according to Roberts, the enriching function of epigraphs (or rather here, in this chapter, of allusions).
- 5 In chapter 3, "Lydgate Winces", Roberts takes up the notion of the middle as medium—a scientific term for environment—presented in the introduction, focusing on Book 2 of *Middlemarch*, in which Doctor Lydgate is introduced. Roberts explains how the allusion

to Brown's pamphlet in chapter 17 and more precisely to what has been called Brownian motion highlights Lydgate's difficult adjustment to the trivial medium of *Middlemarch*. Lydgate, like Brown's tiny grains of pollen, is constantly jostled by forces he cannot control. Making a detour via Tolstoy's fiction, Roberts suggests that Eliot has a less passive conception of her characters than the Russian writer. He establishes a parallel between Lydgate's scientific method and Eliot's scientific realism: both favouring close vision rather than wide-ranging scientific notions like evolutionary science (here Roberts departs from Gillian Beer's thesis in *Darwin's Plots*). Yet there are facets of human behaviour that are not visible even with the sharpest microscope, and this works for both scientist and novelist. Eliot, unlike Lydgate, finds a way to accommodate her vision halfway between the small and the large, between the microscopic and the macroscopic, between two infinities, that of the microscope and that of the telescope, oscillating constantly between the two to open new vistas. This might be called the author's epigraphic vision; how a tiny form may contain the vastness of the world and of life.

- 6 Chapter 4, "Hypocrisy and the Judgment of Men", is devoted to a reflection on moral middleness as compromise in *Middlemarch*, initiated by the epigraph to chapter 38: "C'est beaucoup que le jugement des hommes sur les actions humaines; tôt ou tard, il devient efficace", attributed to the French historian Guizot and pertaining to hypocrisy. Moral compromises abound in *Middlemarch* in the form of characters like Bulstrode and Lydgate, but also less obviously in Sir James, Mr Brooke and even Dorothea. All these characters, whatever their noble motives and aspirations, eventually come to reckon with the contingencies of life, when their noble ideals collide with painful reality. The characters' aspiration for something that is beyond their reach is materialised by the epigraph to chapter 10: "He had catch'd a great cold, had he had no other clothes to wear than those of a skin of a Bear not yet killed."—FULLER". One's desires are meant to confront a larger future. Here Roberts compares the relationship between one and their future to that between the epigraph and the text, between the smaller and the larger. The real challenge is to learn how to decipher the latter from the vantage point of the very small.
- 7 In chapter 5, plainly entitled "Ladislaw", Roberts explores *Middlemarch*'s relationship to epigraphy in terms of the correlation between past, tradition and originality. Are epigraphs markers of the past or markers of novelty? The tension between past and present is represented by two emblematic characters, both of foreign extraction, Casaubon and Ladislav. The former is trapped in the past, blinded by his search for a "Key to All Mythologies"; the latter is turned towards the future. Noting that mythological studies abounded in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, Roberts defends Casaubon's work as included in a long tradition of studies of the past. Many critics trying to decode *Middlemarch* have striven to find what the "key" stands for, but for Roberts what is at stake is rather Eliot's concern with "mythologies", or more precisely her will to redirect the focus from myth to life (Ladislaw and Dorothea, unlike Casaubon, are on the side of life). Epigraphs and allusions serve as a bridge from one to the other.
- 8 In chapter 6, "Myth, *Middlemarch* and the Mill: Out in Mid-Sea", Roberts further examines Eliot's relationship to myth manifested in allusions and quotations. Deriving from the epigraph to chapter 44 by Dryden ("I would not creep along the coast, but steer/Out in mid-sea, by guidance of the stars"), in which he traces a Homeric allusion

to the *Odyssey* (the motif of marital (in)fidelity indeed permeates *Middlemarch*), Roberts questions the very nature of Eliot's work in terms of the hybridity of modes. In other words, can *Middlemarch* be considered a classical epic in addition to being a realist novel with patches of melodrama? Roberts indirectly answers this question, considering *The Mill on the Floss*. In spite of Eliot's fascination with Sophocles and her attempt at transposing Greek tragedy into the modern form of the novel, Roberts demonstrates that the novel as a genre is intrinsically incompatible with classical tragedy (following, moreover, in the footsteps of critics like Ian Watts and Terry Eagleton.) *The Mill* depicts not tragic heroes, but middling, commonplace people carrying out "unhistoric acts" ("Finale"). Such is also the nature of the aptly named *Middlemarch*.

- 9 The last chapter of Roberts' essay ("Epigraphy: Beginnings and Ends") is also where he provides a detailed typology of *Middlemarch*'s epigraphs. Postponing this presentation has to do, he justifies, with the very essence of epigraphs, which can only be comprehended retrospectively. Thus, it is only after reading the whole novel that sense can be made of the initial epigraph to chapter 1: "'Since I can do no good because a woman,/Reach constantly at something that is near it.'—*The Maid's Tragedy*: BEAUMONT AND FLETCHER". Unlike the quoted source, *Middlemarch* is no tragedy and the first epigraph already adumbrates Dorothea's limitations stressed in the "Finale". Some epigraphs, much like Dorothea's jewels, could be dispensed with, but others less so. Noting the biographical correspondences between Dorothea and Marian Evans, Roberts suggests that Eliot's narrative is a reworking of an old story, and similarly epigraphs and quotations are tokens of the past turned into something new. Epigraphs act as mirrors in more ways than one: they are linear mimetic markers (imitations of the classics) as well as lenses used to apprehend a deeper and more complex reality, like fractals. They are metaphors of the "truth of a life", "not recording verifiable exteriorities but, on the contrary, capturing interior myths and fantasies" (117).
- 10 Roberts' essay ends with a postscript, "The Flute and the Bell", drawing from the epigraph to chapter 31, Eliot's own 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." Although "concurrent" is a word often ridden with negative connotations in *Middlemarch* (associated with compromise and money or *currency*), it is an apt term to characterize Eliot's art of fiction, which relies on echoing and reverberation and where a single note can evoke a whole piece of music. The bell is yet another mirror object, reflecting vibrations, and similarly in the epigraph the whole text resonates, like a sound box.
- 11 Roberts' very method is epigraphic: focusing on the very small to relate it to the very large, in order to infuse meaning and depth in it. The paradox of the epigraph lies in its brevity, which contains the largeness of the world and its significance. His object is to reveal the richness of Eliot's "mimetic mirror-work" (132) where her mirror is "a system of infinite connections" (132, quoted from Leah Price). Roberts' original approach sheds new light on hitherto little explored elements from the paratext and on their connections with the text itself. Contrary to what the title may suggest, the reader will not find an exhaustive study of the epigraphs of *Middlemarch* but a carefully chosen selection of epigraphs and quotations serving his purpose. This rich, thought-

provoking essay, sometimes inclined to brilliant digression, opens new perspectives on Eliot's art of fiction and intertextuality.

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Keywords: epigraphs, quotations, mirror, realism, intertextuality, mimesis, microscope, telescope, medium, middle, myth

Mots-clés: épigraphes, citations, miroir, réalisme, mimesis, intertextualité, microscope, télescope, milieu, mythe

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