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Review of Monomania: The flight from everyday life in literature and art

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Marina van Zuylen, *Monomania: The flight from everyday life in literature and art* (Cornell University Press, 2005), pp. x + 238. ISBN 0 8014 8986 5

The obvious monomaniac in *Middlemarch* is Casaubon, determined and devoted to writing his 'Key to All Mythologies'. This, his *idée fixe*, orders his world and certainly his relationship with his wife Dorothea, who seems an unwitting victim of his obsession and his coldness. But in Marina van Zuylen's *Monomania*, Dorothea becomes the focus of attention: in a chapter on *Middlemarch*, Miss Brooke's persistent 'urge to sublimate' her will to Casaubon's is read as monomania, with compelling results.

Van Zuylen's interdisciplinary study surveys incarnations of monomania beginning in nineteenth-century Europe; she constructs monomania as an obsession whose psychical function is to keep the mundane and quotidian at bay. Chapters examine monomania from clinical, creative, and literary perspectives, drawing examples from Pierre Janet's psychological case studies, the creative processes of Flaubert and Sophie Calle, and characters from works by Baudelaire, Thomas Mann, and Elias Canetti in addition to *Middlemarch*. In each case, she outlines the ambivalence of the obsession, focusing on what is gained for the monomaniac in addition to what is lost. Monomania, 'abstraction as an antidote to the vapidness of life' (p. 24), provides a way for those stuck in the ordinary to transcend it by diverting their desires or anxieties. The monomaniac trades a world she perceives as a prison for a psychical world that alleviates the pain of the *horror vacui*, even though to an outsider the swap may appear to be one prison for another. But this construction explains, for example, why the bored housewife enters into a consuming affair with a man who treats her horribly – drama, even violence, is a preferable alternative to the emptiness of the everyday. One of Janet's patients provides a typical complaint about her husband: 'He does not know how to make me suffer a little. You cannot love somebody who is unable to make you suffer' (p. 30).

This comment connects Janet's patient 'Simone' with Dorothea, who desires qualities in a potential husband that would give any reader trepidation: 'The really delightful marriage', Dorothea muses, 'must be that where your husband is a sort of father, and could teach you even Hebrew, if you wished it'. By applying the paradigm of the monomaniac to *Middlemarch*, van Zuylen achieves a reading of Dorothea that focuses on an often overlooked element of her personality – her desire to eradicate the physical, the bodily, and the mundane from her life. She views Dorothea's marriage to Casaubon as a means of escape from her extraordinary empathy, as 'an antidote to the vulnerability brought about by sympathy' (p.102). By invoking Wilhelm Worringer's essay *Abstraction and Empathy*, van Zuylen emphasises the extremes that Dorothea goes to in her acceptance of Casaubon's flaws, reading them as if they were the hair shirt that would grant her salvation and a form of 'ascetic escape'. Dorothea's repudiation of her desire is thus a 'defense mechanism against the unpredictability of life' (p.103). Taken out of the context of the novel, Dorothea's tolerance of and even admiration for Casaubon's flaws (his hairy moles, his deep-set eyes, his pedantry) became remarkable in their fervour: 'The more she can give, endure', writes van Zuylen, 'the less she will have to weather her own selfhood' (p.108).

Despite the gravity of its topic, *Monomania* is a pleasure to read because, in addition to its clearly rendered arguments and jargon-free prose, van Zuylen constantly delights in the wit of

the works she analyses. Eliot is, the author notes, 'mercilessly witty' in her descriptions of Dorothea's self-sacrificial ideas. After citing Dorothea's comment that she would have married 'John Milton when his blindness had come on', van Zuylen responds, 'The blinder, the better!' (p. 108). Noting that Dorothea 'views her riding bliss as "an indulgence ... she felt that she enjoyed it in a pagan sensuous way, and always looked forward to renouncing it"', van Zuylen comments parenthetically, 'she *plans* to renounce *life* the way others might renounce chocolate' (p. 118). This sense of humour balances a reading that could otherwise regard Dorothea as pure masochist. Instead, the reading portrays Dorothea's underlying anxieties as 'fear of the superfluities that might detract from meaning' (p. 100) and thus an element of her larger desire for good, for empathetic extension that will result in edification for all concerned.

Of course, it is this empathy that usually receives critical attention. In van Zuylen's analysis, readers see that Dorothea *first* conflates empathy with self-denial. Unlike many of van Zuylen's subjects, however, Dorothea is eventually able to overcome her *idée fixe*. Embracing the empathetic nature that had been sublimated to Casaubon's design, Dorothea finally accepts Will Ladislaw and accepts her own will: 'Dorothea's continuous need to outstrip the real with the ideal can finally stop once she realized that it is perhaps in the very incomplete nature of experience, in the trivial manifestations of the familiar, that lies not the key to all mythologies, but the key that will unlock the radiance of everyday life' (p. 119). While noting this transformation, van Zuylen does not explain *how* Dorothea moves out of the monomaniacal state – one imagines that the disappointment with her assumptions would be part of the equation, as would Casaubon's death. *Middlemarch* is read as 'an extraordinary voyage from abstraction to empathy, from the ideal to the real' (p. 199), although because the mechanisms of the voyage remain unclear within the novel, they remain unclear in van Zuylen's study.

Because of its scope, *Monomania* shows that the self-inflicted austerity that made Dorothea singular within her community of Middlemarch is in fact a more common phenomenon, experienced by many. It offers a paradigm for thinking about Dorothea's actions not as peculiarities, but as a psychical means for apprehending a world she cannot yet bear. By wisely choosing Dorothea as her subject (and not the acknowledged monomaniacal Casaubon), van Zuylen demonstrates that obsession of the *idée fixe* kind comprises the dual motivation of helping the other and denying the self; the reading contributes to an ever-more-nuanced appreciation of the novel and its characters.

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