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WHAT IS A POLE DOING IN MIDDLEMARCH ?

by David Malcolm, University of Gdansk, Poland

"His name is Ladislaw. He is said to be of foreign extraction."

"I know the sort," said Mr. Hawley; "some emissary. He'll begin with flourish about the Rights of Man and end with murdering a wench. That's the style."¹

The first shock in Poland for a native English-speaking reader of Middlemarch is to discover that

Will Ladislaw's surname should probably be *Władysław*, and be pronounced /vwɑ:dɪswɑ:v/. Subsequently, a heightened awareness of Polish history suggests that the Polish aspect of the character of Will and his role within Middlemarch may be a fruitful object of study.

The following article is an attempt to reconstruct some of the meaning which the figure of Will had for the contemporary reader of Middlemarch in the early 1870s. Such an undertaking clearly entails major problems. The past is gone, in many ways unknowable and beyond adequate reconstruction. It is further extremely dangerous to isolate one figure from the complex structure of a novel. Nevertheless, if done with caution, the attempt to reconstruct contemporary meaning may be valid and useful.

Critical tradition has usually given Will a bad press, either criticizing some feature of his character, or simply ignoring him. R. H. Hutton in 1873 treats him with tolerant disdain - "a clever, mercurial, petulant young politician, not without good in him, but without any signal need of the help of such a woman as this (Dorothea)." ² Lord David Cecil's response is similar. ³ Joan Bennett comments that his mannerisms "seem more calculated to irritate rather than to delight", and she sums up (and partly answers) several hostile views of Will later in her study. ⁴ F. R. Leavis's denunciation of the character as a product of Eliot's own biographical yearnings is famous - "unacceptable valuations", "day-dream self-indulgence". ⁵ Arnold Kettle sees him in a similar way, as a product of a political impasse in the author's thinking. ⁶ For E. S. Shaffer presumably he is part of what is meant by the "ironies of waste" which structure the text. ⁷ None comments on Will's Polishness as a significant feature of his function in the novel, although Joan Bennett does note his foreignness.

In order to avoid one of the problems indicated above (that of isolating a character from the structure of a text), it is necessary, before considering Will's

Polishness directly, to look at the novel as a whole and see Will in textual context. Critics have noted in some detail the image of the web which dominates Middlemarch. In addition, the persistence of a connected chain of images should be registered - those of labyrinths, prisons, darkness and exploitation. Dorothea is continually seen as a figure trapped in an ill-lit labyrinth of tombs (Ch. 20, p. 220; Ch. 22, p. 253; Ch. 80, p. 844). There are numerous references to chains and fetters, while Casaubon, Bulstrode, Featherstone, and even Rosamond are associated with creatures or plants which dominate and live off others - vampires, spiders, a basil plant (Ch. 48, p. 523; Ch. 50, p. 535; Ch. 2, p. 40; Ch. 15, p. 185; Ch. 34, p. 361; Ch. 42, p. 547; Finale, p. 893).

Another well-documented feature of the text is the equivalence of national and provincial politics and life. The parallels between the Reform Bill agitation and the events of the novel are clearly established in Jerome Beaty's famous article.⁸ In addition, one should note the insistent political equivalences which the text creates. For example, Bulstrode possesses a "tyrannical spirit" (Ch. 13, p. 159). Later the reader is told that "The banker was evidently a ruler, but there was an opposition party" (Ch. 16, p. 184). He is seen by Lydgate as "prime minister" (Ch. 18, p. 208), and when he withdraws from the administration of the hospital, he makes a "ministerial explanation" to the doctor (ch. 67, p. 735). "Historical parallels are remarkably efficient", remarks the narrator (Ch. 35, p. 375), and the text supplies many of them. Both the features noted above allow one to note a structural pattern in the text of a clash of, on the one hand, conservatism, domination, control and exploitation of others, and, on the other, reform, radical change, and rebellion. This last element can be seen not only in the events connected with electoral Reform but also in the relationships of Rosamond with Lydgate, of Casaubon with Dorothea, and in the text's persistent references to social unrest (sheep-stealing, machine-breaking, poaching, resistance to the construction of the

railway) which form a background to the main events (Ch. 4, p. 62; Ch. 36, p. 388; Ch. 46, p. 500; Ch. 51, p. 540). Will plays an important role in this structural tension. He is classed as a suspect stranger in the world of Middlemarch. Chettam is concerned that "There are stories going about him as a quill-driving alien, a foreign emissary, and what not" (Ch. 38, p. 414). His Polish and Jewish origins are stressed (Ch. 71, p. 773). He is associated with radical politics, is pro-Reform (ch. 46, p. 501), looks forward to the "political work to be done by-and-by" after Reform (Ch. 54, p. 586), and attends the Mechanics' Institute (Ch. 58, p. 637). On a personal level also he rejects two of the characters who attempt to control and dominate others in Middlemarch - Casaubon (Ch. 39, p. 426-7) and Bulstrode (Ch. 61). In addition, he is himself associated with the victims of domination and exploitation, as both Casaubon and Bulstrode have, in a sense, disinherited him (Ch. 37, p. 407; Ch. 61, pp. 669-70). Finally, the novel presents him through images of light, a light which liberates Dorothea from the darkness of Casaubon's labyrinth (for example, Ch. 21, p. 237; Ch. 47, pp. 511-12).⁹

It is in respect of these features of Will's character, and his role within the structural opposition outlined above, that his Polishness acquires functional significance and contemporary meaning. It gives a further specific, politically radical aspect to his character.

Between 1772 and 1795, Poland was partitioned on three occasions by the powers which surrounded her - Prussia, the Habsburg Empire, and Russia. In the years 1830 to 1831 (the November Rising) and 1863 to 1864 (the January Rising), Poles rebelled against Tsarist Russian rule. These rebellions were both heroic, bloody, and brutally repressed.¹⁰

Middlemarch is partially set at the time of the first, and was written in the years closely following the second. On both occasions international sympathy with the Poles, and outrage against Tsarist Russia, were provoked by the rebellions. Polishness came

to be associated in Western European consciousness with rebellion and resistance to oppressive, conservative rule. In addition, the Polish cause developed working-class associations, and radical connotations within Western European societies themselves, such as Britain and France, especially in the 1860s. (The cause of Italian nationalism developed similar connotations in the same period.) This was largely because of the strength of support for the Polish cause among international and national working-class movements, such as the London Trades Council of the 1860s, the forerunner of the T. U. C., which organized demonstrations in support of the Polish rebellion.¹¹ The insurrection was a topic which was given prominence at the first meeting of the International Working Men's Association in 1864. Polishness and the cause of Polish nationalism belong firmly to what Valentine Cunningham (in a different context) describes as the "radical zone" of ideas and attitudes of the 1860s.¹² (One can easily think of similar examples from present times.) David Kynaston notes the exclusively working-class nature of support for Polish independence.¹³ Both Marx and Engels write of the importance of the Polish insurrection of 1863 to 1864 as a stimulus to working-class organization in Britain and France.¹⁴

George Eliot's awareness of these connotations of Polishness can be assumed on the basis of two sources. In a letter from 1863 to D'Albert-Durade she relates the story (also recorded in Lewes's journal) of her stepson Thornton's desire to "fight for the Poles against the hated Russians", and to join one of the "guerrilla" groups fighting in Poland.¹⁵ In a later letter from 1878 she comments ironically on the Tsarist "mission" in Asia and in Europe.¹⁶ In addition, in 1870, just before Eliot began the "Miss Brooke" story, which was to mesh with the "Middlemarch" theme she had already been working on, Edward Beesly, a prominent Positivist acquaintance, published an article in The Fortnightly Review which stresses this very connection between the Polish rebellion of 1863 and national and international working-class causes.¹⁷

Will's role within Middlemarch already indicates a politically radical aspect of his character. This is further emphasized by the radical and working-class connotations which Polishness can be seen to have within the culture of the 1860s – connotations of which it is reasonable to assume Eliot was aware. This feature of Will's character is comically confirmed when Mr. Brooke comes to announce to Sir James Chettam that Dorothea is to be married. Sir James mistakes Brooke's concern. "What is the matter? . . . Not another gamekeeper shot, I hope?" (Ch. 84, p. 872). For a reader from even modern rural England the radical connotations of this association of marrying Dorothea and shooting gamekeepers needs no explanation, although for a Polish one it might. However, both these connotations and those of Will's Polishness would be very clear to a contemporary reader of Middlemarch.¹⁸

Notes

- 1 Middlemarch, Ch. 37, p. 393. All further references to Middlemarch are to the Penguin edition – George Eliot, Middlemarch, ed. W. J. Harvey (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965) – and appear in the text.
- 2 R. H. Hutton, Rev. of Middlemarch, British Quarterly Review, 57 (April 1873), 407–29, as quoted in Critics on George Eliot, ed. William Baker (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1973), pp. 24–33 (p. 28).
- 3 David Cecil, as quoted in A Century of George Eliot Criticism, ed. Gordon S. Haight (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), p. 206.
- 4 Joan Bennett, George Eliot: Her Mind and Her Art (1948; rpt. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1966), p. 120, 175–6.
- 5 F. R. Leavis, The Great Tradition (1948; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), pp. 91–4.
- 6 Arnold Kettle, An Introduction to the English Novel (London: Heinemann, 1967), I, p. 176.
- 7 E. S. Shaffer, "Kubla Khan" and "The Fall of Jerusalem": The Mythological School in Biblical Criticism and Secular Literature, 1770–1830

- (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1975), p. 255.
- 8 Jerome Beaty, "History by Indirection: The Era of Reform in Middlemarch", Victorian Studies, 1 (1957), 173-9.
 - 9 Barbara Hardy, The Novels of George Eliot: A Study in Form (1959; rpt. London: Univ. of London, Athlone Press, 1973), p. 62 (footnote), 188 (footnote).
 - 10 For further details see: A Panorama of Polish History (Warsaw: Interpress, 1982), pp. 86-103; Norman Davies, God's Playground: A History of Poland (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1981), II, 315-31, 352-65.
 - 11 A History of the T. U. C., 1866-1966: A Pictorial Survey of a Social Revolution (London: General Council of the Trades Union Congress, 1966), p. 16; Mateusz Siuchninski, An Illustrated History of Poland (Warsaw: Interpress, 1979), p. 167.
 - 12 Valentine Cunningham, Everywhere Spoken Against: Dissent in the Victorian Novel (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1975), p. 99.
 - 13 David Kynaston, King Labour: The British Working Class, 1850-1914 (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1976), p. 24.
 - 14 Karl Marx, The Civil War in France (1871), as quoted in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, Selected Works (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1968), pp. 271-309 (p. 294); Frederick Engels, "Karl Marx" (1878), as quoted in Marx and Engels, Selected Works, pp. 365-74 (p. 369).
 - 15 Letter to Francois D'Albert-Durade, 26 November 1853, The George Eliot Letters, ed. Gordon S. Haight (London and New Haven: Oxford Univ. Press and Yale Univ. Press, 1954-55), IV, 116-18 (p. 117). For Lewes' journal entry, see: The George Eliot Letters, IV, 102-3 (p. 102).
 - 16 Letter to John Blackwood, 24 September 1878, The George Eliot Letters, VII, 67.
 - 17 E. S. Beesly, "The International Working Men's Association", Fortnightly Review, NS 47 (November 1870), 517-35 (p. 517). For Eliot's and Lewes's relationship with Beesly, see: Martha S. Vogeler, "George Eliot and the Positivists", Nineteenth-Century Fiction, 35, No. 3 (December 1980), 406-31 (p. 413).
 - 18 Geoffrey Best, Mid-Victorian Britain, 1851-70 (1971; rpt. Glasgow: Fontana, Collins, 1979), pp. 299-300.