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NOTES ON MIDDLEMARCH AND ROMOLA
By Rodney Stenning Edgecombe

Rereading Middlemarch and Romola recently, I was struck by some unrecorded musical and literary parallels, none of them substantial enough (or indeed sufficiently interconnected) to be woven into an integrated article, but having, I hope, enough intrinsic interest to warrant my presenting them here as so many Casaubonic ‘leavings’ that might or might not be incorporated into future work on the author.

A Schubertian Moment in Middlemarch
George Eliot’s enthusiasm for the Lieder of Schubert is attested by a letter written in October, 1859 – ‘Schubert’s songs, I especially delight in’ (Letters, III:178) – and our knowledge of that fact allows a partially concealed allusion to surface in Middlemarch. The ‘sound track’ for the meeting of Lydgate and Casaubon shortly before his death comprises ‘the cawing of the rooks, which to the accustomed ear is a lullaby, or that last solemn lullaby, a dirge’ (Ch. 42, 459) – an idea picked up and developed at the point where the clergyman is forced to contemplate his mortality as an immediate rather than a theoretical fact:

When the commonplace ‘We must all die’ transforms itself suddenly into the acute consciousness ‘I must die – and soon’, then death grapples us, and his fingers are cruel; afterwards, he may come to fold us in his arms as our mother did, and our last moment of dim earthly discerning may be like the first. (461-62)

Subtending both passages is the text (and to some extent, the actual music) of Schubert’s setting. Here is the lyric that was furnished by Mathias Claudius:

Vorüber, ach, vorüber,
Geh’ wilder Knochenmann!
Ich bin noch jung. Geh’ lieber!
Und rühre mich nicht an.

Gib deine Hand, du schön und zart Gebild!
Bin Freund, und komme nicht zu strafen.
Sei gutes Muts! Ich bin nicht wild.
Sollst sanft in meinen Armen schlafen. (I:221)

[Pass by, oh, pass by,
You savage man of bones.
I still am young. Pass, rather,
And leave me be.

Give me your hand, you lovely, frail thing.
I come as friend, not punisher.
Be reassured! I am not fierce.
You shall sleep gently in my arms.]
Schumann’s subdivision of his own personality was no mere romantic extravagation. A letter to his mother in May 1832 reveals acute awareness of the opposing claims of his inner spirit and the practical, everyday world. (33)

These impulsive (Florestan) and reflective (Eusebius) personae are no less apparent in the construction of Lydgate’s character.

**A Debt to Pope’s ‘Epistle to Burlington’**

Analysing Lydgate’s character in Chapter 15 of *Middlemarch*, Eliot terms the ‘generalities’ before her more forthright criticism ‘the periphrases of a polite preacher, who talks of Adam, and would not like to mention anything painful to the pew-renters’ (179). This owes something to a standard apologia for satire that views its attacks *ad hoc* rather than *ad hominem* – ‘Why who cries out on pride, / That can therein tax any private party’ (*As You Like It*: 2.7.70-71) – but, more distinctively, it also refracts a couplet from Pope’s ‘Epistle to Burlington’:

> To rest, the Cushion and soft Dean invite,  
> Who never mentions Hell to ears polite (593)

– and, in the distant background, these lines from Night IV of Young’s *Night Thoughts*:

> What smooth Emollients in Theology,  
> Recumbent Virtue’s downy Doctors preach,  
> That Prose of Piety, a lukewarm Praise? (107)

The pew-renters, being rich and powerful, have chosen instruction from one of their own, a preacher whose politeness, like the ‘soft Dean’s’ and ‘downy Doctors’’, is partly a function of the way they insulate their congregants from disagreeable truths, and partly a function of their belonging to ‘polite’ society. Such sermons, Eliot implies, not only skirt the discomfort of *ad hominem* attack, but also acquiesce to the status quo. Their generalities, being soft or smooth, have no mordancy, and therefore no hope of stinging their auditors into action.

**A Debt to Keats in *Romola***

Lord Houghton’s biography of Keats, which, according to the editor of George Eliot’s letters, ‘was in [her] library’ (VI: 389n), published for the first time the poet’s gnome about the actuating power of fantasy: ‘The Imagination may be compared to Adam’s dream: he awoke and found it truth’ (45). The idea clearly lodged in Eliot’s mind, and lies behind Tito’s night visit to Tessa in *Romola*:

She had probably heard the opening of the door as part of her dream, for he had not been looking at her two moments before she opened her eyes. She opened them without any start, and remained quite motionless looking at him, as if the sense that he was there smiling at her shut out any impulse which could disturb that happy passiveness. But when he put his hand under her chin, and stooped to kiss her, she said, –

> ‘I dreamed it, and then I said it was dreaming – and then I awoke, and it was true.’ (269; ch. 34).

Here the erotic romance formula that turns wishes into reality receives a further impulse from
Keats’s ‘Eve of St Agnes’, for Porphyro bridges inner and outer reality in much the same way:

    Beyond a mortal man impassion’d far
    At these voluptuous accents, he arose,
    Ethereal, flush’d, and like a throbbing star
    Seen mid the sapphire heaven’s deep repose;
    Into her dream he melted … (205)

Works Cited


