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Review of Reading for Our Time: 'Adam Bede' and 'Middlemarch' Revisited

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Miller, J. Hillis, "Review of Reading for Our Time: 'Adam Bede' and 'Middlemarch' Revisited" (2013). *The George Eliot Review*. 640.

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J. Hillis Miller, *Reading for Our Time: 'Adam Bede' and 'Middlemarch' Revisited* (Edinburgh University Press, 2012), pp. xviii + 191. ISBN 978 0 7486 4669 2 (hardback), 978 0 7486 4728 6 (paperback).

As his sub-title indicates, J. Hillis Miller is returning in his latest book to the study of George Eliot, bringing to bear on *Adam Bede* and *Middlemarch* the insight and erudition acquired in a long and distinguished career as a scholar and critic. He pursues a similar line to his well-known articles from the 1970s on 'Narrative and History' and 'Optic and Semiotic in *Middlemarch*', subjecting that novel to a close and tenacious deconstructive reading that brings out the sophisticated self-qualifying nature of George Eliot's fiction. This is preceded by a shorter discussion of *Adam Bede* which shows how its celebrated commitment to realism and a mimetic theory of fictional language is accompanied by a contrasting insight into the way that language creates its own meanings, so that the novel is seen to turn back on itself and question its own assumptions.

Hillis Miller's close reading of both novels deliberately eschews the technical rhetorical terms of narratology on the attractive principle that 'it may be best to keep inside a given work, to try as much as possible to follow its own lines of self-interpretation or of self-contradiction' (p. 2); and with *Adam Bede* he is subtle and carefully incisive in his tracing of recurrent patterns of imagery that relate the human to the natural, and in his illuminating juxtaposition of four widely spaced but clearly related passages about falling in love – an experience that is related to the appreciation of natural beauty and the beauty of art and music, all of which create an oceanic sense of transcendence. The passages are examined in Miller's characteristically deconstructive fashion: just as Adam's falling in love with Hetty is based on a misunderstanding of her feelings for him, all these experiences reveal the fictional nature of the emotions involved. These moments of transcendence are all fictions, all human constructions and projections onto objects and events of values they do not themselves possess; and, extrapolating from that, all the faithful mirroring undertaken in the novel is equally ungrounded and fictitious.

If the conclusion here may seem too comprehensively dismissive – falling in love, after all, has an emotional reality that is independent of whether the love is reciprocated – Miller's deconstruction reveals the ubiquity of fiction only to insist at the same time on its necessity, following the Nietzschean principle that we have art lest we perish from the truth – the truth that is represented in this novel by the dark pool which confronts the desperate Hetty and stands for all that exceeds human comprehension. Human imagination may be prone to destructive excess, like Hetty's fatally silly fantasizing, but it is also benignly constructive, creating the basis of culture in the shared illusions that hold a community like Hayslope together.

Hetty's misreading of Arthur and Adam's of Hetty, are examples of what Miller, adapting the *Middlemarch* narrator's well-known statement about getting entangled in metaphor, terms 'the universal penchant of human beings to make mistakes in interpretation and to act fatally on the strength of them' (p. 169); and his examination of that tendency is carried over into his discussion of *Middlemarch* which is seen as developing a subtle theory of signs and interpretation. As the famous pier-glass passage spells out, all seeing is interpretation, and, in this deconstructive reading, all interpretation of signs is false interpretation in that it projects onto those signs a coherence that is not objectively present. Thus the grand coherence

of *Middlemarch* itself, with its ambition to present a comprehensive image of provincial society at a particular historical moment, is undermined by the subtle self-questioning of the novelist's practice so that the novel is at one and the same time 'one of the most persuasive affirmations of the totalizing power of the realistic novel' and 'one of the most compelling challenges to this power' (p. 36). Implied in all this is the irreducibly figurative nature of language, for *Middlemarch* is shown to illustrate in detail the well-known insight of the narrator of *The Mill on the Floss* that 'we can so seldom declare what a thing is, except by saying that it is something else' (Bk 2, ch. 1). In a series of close analyses of the play of figurative language which is one of the great strengths of this study, Miller shows how the only alternative to one metaphor is another metaphor, so that, for example, the narrator is seen to dismantle Dorothea's mistaken metaphorical reading of Casaubon not by presenting the plain truth but by recourse to an alternative set of metaphors referring to the coldness and dampness of his irremediable egoism (p. 119). The text thus emerges as a battleground of conflicting metaphors, and although one may question Miller's assertion that this amounts to 'incoherence' (p. 134), his tenaciously meticulous analysis does bring out the 'complexities and strangeness of George Eliot's language' (p. 168) and its unsettling power to question and challenge complacent certainties.

In this reading of *Middlemarch* George Eliot appears as anything but the solemn Victorian sage of early twentieth-century caricature: she is as radical in her understanding of language and epistemology as Nietzsche, as radical as Walter Benjamin in her vision of history, and as radical as Marx in exposing the dangerous power of money as supreme fiction. And it is in this respect that Miller's reading qualifies as the 'Reading for our Time' of his title, for *Middlemarch*'s dissection of the human propensity for fatally false interpretation can teach us to understand how 'human beings can be led by ideological presuppositions to act self-destructively' (p. 168), and he cites denial of climate change and the trickle-down theory of economics as examples of such misinterpretations, tenaciously maintained in the teeth of all the evidence against them. While remaining melancholically aware of the reduced number of people capable of reading, or willing to read *Middlemarch* in our time, Hillis Miller persuasively demonstrates how this great novel can speak to our most urgent contemporary concerns.

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