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‘AND HER WINGS FALL FROM HER AND SHE DROPS TO THE GROUND’: READING ELIOT’S MR CASAUBON THROUGH BENJAMIN JOWETT’S *PHAEDRUS*

By Royce Best

In the scene describing Casaubon’s pathetic mental state prior to his heart attack in Chapter XXIX of *Middlemarch*, the narrator makes an enigmatic reference: ‘Doubtless some ancient Greek has observed that behind the big mask and the speaking-trumpet, there must always be our poor little eyes peeping as usual and our timorous lips more or less under anxious control’.¹ It seems odd to conclude this powerful passage, long read as a telling example of the hazards of over-study without meaningful application, with a reference to ancient Greek drama. Yet, perhaps not enough attention has been given to the indebtedness of *Middlemarch* to ancient Greece. In particular, I would like to suggest that this fuller passage describing Casaubon’s depression is distinctly Platonic.

While Plato is most often remembered for his ideas, his mastery of the dialogue form is as much a literary marvel as a philosophical one. In his introduction to *The Dialogues of Plato* (1871), Benjamin Jowett plays up the Greek meaning of ποιησις (poiesis) calling Plato ‘the poet or maker of ideas’.² Eliot’s realist project, epitomized perhaps by *Adam Bede*’s narrator: ‘So I am content to tell my simple story, without trying to make things seem better than they were; dreading nothing, indeed, but falsity, which, in spite of my best efforts, there is reason to dread’,³ was thought of by her as at least having the potential to reach for the Truth in a Platonic sense. In this paper, I would like to suggest that Eliot was much more interested in Platonic philosophy and literature than has previously been recognized, and that her reading, in particular of the Middle Dialogue the *Phaedrus*, both reveals new ways of reading Mr Casaubon and is reflective of Eliot’s own state of intellectual depression in and around the years in which she was writing *Middlemarch*.⁴

Eliot’s Rev. Edward Casaubon is a portrait of the character type of the scholar. He has long been read as a ‘Key’ with which we might better understand the larger structure of the novel. Sally Shuttleworth in *George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Science* (1984) contends that these characters ‘[hold], mistakenly, that meaning actually inheres in external form’.⁵ Avrom Fleishman believes that Casaubon’s quest for the Key to all Mythologies is doomed not because Eliot herself distrusts totalizing systems, but instead because Casaubon is unable to view his own religion as one of the mythologies he is studying.⁶ An examination of Eliot’s language in the pages just before Casaubon’s heart attack reveals that the metaphor she uses seems to come directly from Plato’s *Phaedrus*, and in this light we might reexamine the entire novel.

Eliot’s narrator describes Casaubon as follows:

He had not had much foretaste of happiness in his previous life [before marrying Dorothea]. To know intense joy without a strong bodily frame, one must have an enthusiastic soul. Mr Casaubon never had a strong bodily frame, and his soul was sensitive without being enthusiastic: it was too languid to thrill out of self-consciousness into passionate delight; it went on fluttering in the swampy ground where it was hatched, thinking of its wings and never flying. (p. 262)

This language, through its discussion of enthusiasm and the winged soul, is clearly drawing on the allegory of the charioteer and the fallen soul in the *Phaedrus*:

[Socrates:] The soul or animate being has the care of the inanimate, and traverses the whole heaven in divers forms appearing; – when perfect and fully winged she soars upward, and is the ruler of the universe; while the imperfect soul loses her feather, and drooping in her flight at last settles on the solid ground – there, finding a home, she receives an earthly frame which appears to be self-moved, but is really moved by her power; and this composition of soul and body is called a living and a mortal creature. (p. 580)⁷

Casaubon is likened to the unfortunate soul who is made to return to his mortal self. He has had a glimpse of the heavens, but has been forced back to the mortal plane of earth. Where once his scholarship was enough to keep him gazing on the heavens, now it seems that it is not. Plato also emphasizes the ‘pangs of new birth’, for once a soul has fallen from the heavens and been made man ‘as he warms, the parts out of which the wing grew, and which has been hitherto closed and rigid, and had prevented the wing from shooting forth, are melted ...’ (p. 585), and ‘during this process the whole soul is in a state of effervescence and irritation, like the state of irritation and pain in the gums at the time of cutting teeth; in like manner the soul when beginning to grow wings has inflammation and pains and ticklings’ (p. 585). This is all implied by Eliot’s use of the word ‘hatched’ and works in conjunction with the following portrait of his pain and depression in the remainder of the chapter. The image of the ground, either as ‘damp’ and ‘saturating’ or as ‘swampy’ both indicate either too much water or a stagnation of water, which is representative of his learning. In the case of Casaubon, he has too much learning with not enough love – a fundamental error according to the *Phaedrus*.

Much of Eliot’s reading and understanding of Plato was due in part to her relationship with Benjamin Jowett, the Master of Balliol College from 1870, whose academic specialty was Platonic dialogue. Jowett, in his own life time, had a better reputation as a teacher than he did as a philosopher or translator. Being made Master of Oxford’s Balliol College in 1870 is proof of the former, but Evelyn Abbott and Lewis Campbell in *The Life and Letters of Benjamin Jowett, M.A.* (1897) maintain that ‘[h]e was not in truth at any time of his life a philosopher in sense that he had a theoretical system’.⁸ They suggest that ‘he grasped truth intuitively, rather than discursively, vividly apprehending one aspect of it after another, but hardly making any effort to trace their logical connexion’ (p. 8). His translation of Plato was more highly regarded as a literary work than as a work of philosophy (II, 6-7). Thus it seems that Jowett’s Plato thrived amongst everyday readers, while being avoided by scholars and critics. This may have been due to the fact that this was the first comprehensive translation of Plato since the eighteenth-century into English. It is possible that there might well have been a general aversion to his translation by classicists of allowing the general public license into their, until then, closed world of erudition. Interestingly, in a footnote, Abbott and Campbell mention only women amongst those who seemed to enjoy the translation (II, 7, n. 2), thus suggesting an ‘effeminate’ and ‘common’ quality to his work. All of this is at odds with the fact that, according to *The Oxford Classical Dictionary* (2003), Jowett’s translation remains to this day the only ‘authoritative translation of all the dialogues by a single person’.⁹ Its perseverance suggests that people liked it, and if nothing else so did George Eliot.

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enthusiasm for his work, but he has somehow lost it. We can compare Casaubon's state to the love of research that Tertius Lydgate is described as having in Chapter XV. Eliot's narrator explains how Lydgate first 'felt the growth of an intellectual passion' (p. 135). She says,

Most of us who turn to any subject with *love* remember some morning or evening hour when we got on a high stool to reach down an untried volume, or sat with parted lips listening to a new talker, or for very lack of books began to listen to the voices within, as the first traceable beginning of our *love*. (emphases mine, p. 134).

In using the word 'love', Eliot, obviously not talking about erotic love, describes the *pleasure* that a scholar feels during a fruitful session of study. In the following paragraph, Eliot points out how '[w]e are not afraid of telling over and over again how a man comes to fall in love with a woman and be wedded to her, or else be fatally parted from her' (p. 135), and that we never tire of hearing troubadour songs more generally. Placed in such close proximity to Eliot's discussion of scholarly love, the narrator seems to ask the reader to compare these two types of love. In doing so, one can imagine the scholar reading his (or her) 'untried volume' in a Platonic light where the soul is gaining its wings and starting to fly up toward the dome.

But the *Key to all Mythologies* and 'the difficulty of making [it] unimpeachable weighed like lead upon his mind; and the pamphlets – or "Parerga" as he called them [...] were far from having been seen in all their significance' (pp. 262-3). One might recall that early in the *Phaedrus*, Socrates suggests that wrestling with the truth-value of myths is not worth his time. Phaedrus asks Socrates if he believes the myth in which Boreas is said to have carried off Orithyia. Socrates responds that the answers that 'the wise' have given 'are very nice, but he is not to be envied who has to give them' for once one myth has been explained away, he will necessarily have to go on to another and another and another (p. 563). Socrates simply does not have time for this, he says, 'I must first know myself' (p. 563). As Jowett puts it in his introduction, citing Pope: 'The proper study of mankind is man' (p. 544). Casaubon's *Key to all Mythologies* is in direct contrast to Socrates' position. The narrator also points out the impossibility of Casaubon's theory which 'floated among the flexible conjectures no more solid than those etymologies which seemed strong because of likeness in sound until it was shown that likeness in sound made them impossible' (p. 450). It is probably more noxious coming from the mouth of Will Ladislav, who, thinking about scholars such as Max Müller and the Grimms, says, 'I have been thinking about it; and it seems to me that with Mr Casaubon's leaning he must have before him the same materials as German scholars – has he not?' (p. 207). Prone to egoist, non reality-based, thinking, Casaubon jumps to the conclusion that even 'the consolations of the Christian hope in immortality seemed to lean on the immortality of the still unwritten Key to all Mythologies' (p. 263).

It is important, nonetheless, not to forget that Casaubon's heart attack was occasioned by a letter received from Will. Will and Casaubon are in distinct opposition to one another in terms of how they understand the world. In contrast to Casaubon's philosophical and empiricist view of things, Will, according to Felicia Bonaparte, 'is the figure in whom art is embodied'.¹⁵ In the *Phaedrus*, when a soul falls from the realm of the gods it becomes a man, and as Jowett explains in his introduction to the third edition, '[M]en in general recall only with difficulty the things of another world, but the mind of the philosopher has a better remembrance of them'.¹⁶ It is, nonetheless, according to Plato the 'visible beauty' of earth that enables the philosopher's remembrance. This valuing of the visual is why artists are also included amongst the first

degree of fallen souls. Once beauty has been recognized on earth is when 'the stiffened wing begins to relax and grow again' (p. 398), and the soul gains another chance at permanently entering the heavens.

Neither Casaubon nor Will is in the heavens, however. Casaubon lacks 'enthusiasm' because he is seeing little success with his *Key to all Mythologies*, and Will, as Bonaparte points out, is a regrettably weak character who many found 'disappointing, too insubstantial, [and] too effete, especially when compared to Lydgate' (p. xix). Yet it is only their 'beloved' (philosophy for Casaubon and art for Will) that can cure their pain: the beloved is the soul's 'physician who can alone assuage the greatness of his pain' (p. 586). Reaching the heavens permanently requires a conflict between the charioteer and his steeds in which he must finally pull upon the bridle of the untamed horse with such might that his mouth fills with blood (p. 399). Only then does 'the soul of the lover [follow] the beloved in modesty and holy fear' thus consummating bliss (p. 399). Neither Casaubon nor Will has done this.

However, there is a way in which Will, perhaps because of his youth, seems closer to the heavens. And this is why Will in many ways seems to supply what was missing in Dorothea's marriage to Casaubon. Unlike Casaubon, Will is able '[to paint] to himself what were Dorothea's inward sorrows as if he had been writing a choric wail' (p. 339). Most telling of all (and most Platonic) is the scene when Casaubon is at the Archdeacon's and Will and Dorothea are finally able to be alone together. Eliot invokes particularly potent language:

'I remember them all,' said Will, with the unspeakable content in his soul of feeling that he was in the presence of a creature worthy to be perfectly loved. I think his own feelings at that moment were perfect, for we mortals have our divine moments, when love is satisfied in the completeness of the beloved object. (p. 341)

This last line directly mirrors Plato's idea of consummating bliss. It is a perfection which parallels the ultimate goal of life for Plato. Also crucial is the timing of this scene. Eliot does not present us with a 'perfect' moment of love again during the novel. It takes place here at a distinctly imperfect time: Dorothea is still married to Casaubon, Casaubon will be returning any minute, and Middlemarch's general opinion of Will is just about to turn sour. Yet it is in this and not in any other moment that the 'perfect' and 'divine moment' takes place. We get the sense that if like the 'true mystic' they would just 'fall down and worship' the beauty of this love 'then the stiffened wing would begin to grow again' (Jowett, 1st ed., p. 547), but because of the requirements of society, because they don't want to be thought of as mad, they do not do so.

Some contemporaries of Eliot's thought that Casaubon was actually based on George Henry Lewes. Lewes once told John Blackwood that '[t]he shadow of old Casaubon hangs over me and I fear my "Key to All Psychologies" will have to be left to Dorothea!' (*Letters*: V, 291). However, in a letter to Harriet Beecher Stowe, Eliot explained

But do not for a moment imagine that Dorothea's marriage experience is drawn from my own. It is impossible to conceive any creature less like Mr. Casaubon than my warm, enthusiastic husband, who cares much more for my doing than for his own, and is a miracle of freedom from all author's jealousy and all suspicion. I fear that Casaubon's tints are not quite foreign to my own mental complexion. At any rate I am very sorry for him. (*The George Eliot Letters*: V. 322)

This letter establishes a firm connection between Eliot and Casaubon. The narrator of *Middlemarch* uses the exact same line: 'For my part I was very sorry for him' (p. 263). This connection between letter and novel is striking, especially considering that Eliot herself seems to have been dealing with emotions quite similar to Casaubon's during the writing of *Middlemarch*.

In her journal entry for 27 October 1870, Eliot writes,

During our stay at Limpsfield I wrote the greater part of 'Armgart,' and finished it at intervals during September. Since then I have been continually suffering from headache and depression, with *almost total despair of future work*. I look into this little book now to assure myself that this is not unprecedented. (*Letters*: V, 119-20. My emphases)

Jerome Beaty in *Middlemarch from Notebook to Novel* (1960) informs us for the entry 20 March 1870: 'novel languishing'.¹⁷ Lewes's second son, Thornton (Thornie), had died in October of 1869, and Eliot took it especially hard writing in her journal that Thornie's death 'seems to me the beginning of our own' (*The Journals of George Eliot*, p. 139). Considering that we know Eliot had just read the *Phaedrus* a couple months earlier, it makes sense that she might consider her own suffering in light of Socrates' allegory, and therefore Casaubon's suffering can be likened to her own. Moreover, the fact that Plato is notoriously difficult and demanding on the reader may well have led to Eliot's 'despair of future work'. The suggestion that Plato makes through his allegory that one needs to master her/his steeds in order to traverse into the heavens is a very burdensome demand to ask of the reader. As a metaphor, it seems simple, but when applied to real-life situations its application can seem more complicated and daunting. How exactly are we, the readers of the *Phaedrus*, supposed to master our steeds? What, in a real life situation, does this actually mean? It is very possible that Eliot, much like Casaubon, was indeed struggling with this herself as she was reading Jowett's Plato.

A quick glance through Eliot's *Middlemarch Notebooks* also reveals that Eliot was in fact interested in many of the same subjects that Casaubon was interested in.¹⁸ For his *Key to all Mythologies*, Casaubon drew from a wide range of materials including Hebrew, Greek, Latin, Biblical scholarship, and classical antiquity. Religious and philosophical systems were also at the top of Eliot's items to wrestle with in her own notebooks. Yet, as Shuttleworth affirms, 'Unlike Casaubon, George Eliot was actually up-to-date in her mythological research' (p. 166). Indeed, Eliot's notebooks include entries in German and even in Sanskrit. She, therefore, would not have fallen victim to Will Ladislav's conviction of Casaubon for not knowing German and not being an orientalist (p. 207). However, it is still very possible that she might have been very conscious of the fact that no matter how much she came to know and understand there would always be something else that she was missing. Read in this way, the scene where Will reveals to Dorothea Casaubon's failings may very well represent real intellectual anxieties that Eliot herself was feeling, and she may well have thought about them in terms of Jowett's *Phaedrus*.

By reading the *Phaedrus* alongside *Middlemarch*, this paper has attempted to situate itself amongst recent George Eliot scholarship that is focused on Eliot's intellectual life. Eliot's reading of Jowett's *Phaedrus* during the years that she was writing *Middlemarch* undoubtedly influenced the various interpretations of love, philosophy, and writing more generally that are featured as themes throughout the novel. As such, considering the *Phaedrus* alongside *Middlemarch* is illuminating both in terms of ideas and literary form and content. This also

further reveals the importance of Eliot's reading of Jowett's *Dialogues of Plato*. Finally, the *Phaedrus* references surrounding Mr Casaubon's mental breakdown and heart attack can be read autobiographically as a result of various stresses on Eliot's life both emotional, resulting from Thornie's death, and intellectual, given her own *Key to all Mythologies* work found in her notebooks and journals.

Notes

- 1 George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, ed. David Carroll (New York: Oxford World's Classics, 2008), p. 263. All subsequent quotations from the text will be from this edition.
- 2 Plato, *The Dialogues of Plato*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, I (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1871), p. ix.
- 3 George Eliot, *Adam Bede*, Project Gutenberg, ibiblio, 2006.
- 4 Scholarship on Eliot's interest in Platonism, especially in *Middlemarch*, is limited. Richard Jenkyn's chapter, 'George Eliot and the Greeks' in *The Victorians and Ancient Greece* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980) does not mention Plato. Carol S. Gould in 'Plato, George Eliot, and Moral Narcissism', *Philosophy and Literature*, 14.1 (1990), pp. 24-39 perceptively lines up Eliot's thinking regarding egoism with Plato's thinking in the *Republic*; however, Gould's analysis remains on the level of ideas and does not delve into the literary. Some work has been done on Eliot's use of Plato (and other classical scholarship) in *Romola*, such as in Lesley Gordon's 'Greek Scholarship and Renaissance Florence in George Eliot's *Romola*', *George Eliot and Europe*, ed. John Rignall (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1997) in which she connects Eliot's newfound interest in Greek with the renaissance of the classics in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Florence. Eliot's interest in ancient Greece, though, flourished, as later works such as 'A College Breakfast-Party' (1874), which in her journal entry from 19 May 1874, she calls 'a *Symposium*', and *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* (1879), which is largely indebted to Theophrastus' (371-287 BCE) study of human behaviour, *Characters*.
- 5 Sally Shuttleworth, *George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Science: The Make-Believe of a Beginning* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 146.
- 6 Avrom Fleishman, *George Eliot's Intellectual Life* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 6.
- 7 This and all quotations from the *Phaedrus* are from Jowett's first edition. While minor differences may in fact exist between this version and the 'proof sheet' version which Eliot was reading, at this stage in the translation process a work is usually pretty close to finality.
- 8 Benjamin Jowett, *The Life and Letters of Benjamin Jowett, M.A.*, ed. Evelyn Abbott and Lewis Campbell, 2 vols (London: Oxford University Press, 1897), II, 8.
- 9 Simon Hornblower and Anthony Spawforth, eds, *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 'Plato', p. 1193.

- 10 Nancy Henry, *The Life of George Eliot: A Critical Biography* (Singapore: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), pp. 188-9.
- 11 George Eliot, *The George Eliot Letters*, ed. Gordon S. Haight, 9 vols (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1956-78), VI, 406-7.
- 12 Eliot is talking about the Franco-Prussian war, which had broken out in July.
- 13 Walter Hamilton, Introduction, *Phaedrus and Letters VII and VIII*, by Plato (London: Penguin, 1973), p. 7.
- 14 The archangel Raphael, who has just narrated to Adam and Eve the story of Satan's rebellion in *Paradise Lost*, Book VI (David Carroll n. 22 p. 788).
- 15 In the Oxford World Classics publication, p. xix.
- 16 Plato, *The Dialogues of Plato*, 3rd edition, trans. Benjamin Jowett, I (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1892), p. 398.
- 17 Jerome Beaty, *Middelmarch from Notebook to Novel: A Study*, Illinois Studies in Language and Literature, 47 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1960), p. 131
- 18 George Eliot, *Georgé Eliot's Middelmarch Notebooks: A Transcription*, ed. John Clark Pratt and Victor A. Neufeldt (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979).