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Rignall, John, "Middlemarch and the Franco-Prussian War" (2015). *The George Eliot Review*. 670.
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MIDDLEMARCH AND THE FRANCO-PRUSSIAN WAR

By John Rignall

By the early summer of 1870, George Eliot's work on *Middlemarch*, then consisting of the Vincy, Lydgate and Featherstone material, seemed to have stalled. In a journal entry of 20 May, George Eliot confessed that she was not hopeful about future work: 'I am languid, and my novel languishes too'.¹ And in fact the last references to *Middlemarch* in her journal date back to the previous September: on 11 September she had reached page 50 and the end of chapter 3, and then on the 22nd she maintained that she was stuck: '*im Stiche gerathen*' (*Journals*, 138). There followed a series of distractions: the writing of 'The Legend of Jubal' from early October; the final illness and death of Thornton Lewes on 19 October; continuing depression and poor health; Lewes's equally poor health in the aftermath of his son's death; and an eight-week journey to Germany and Austria from the middle of March 1870 which involved a hectic round of social engagements and further illness for the novelist. The hoped-for tonic effect of the journey on Lewes's health seems not to have materialized, for, after an agreeable visit to Oxford towards the end of May staying at Lincoln College as guests of the rector Mark Pattinson and his much younger wife (a visit that may, of course, have played its part in the development of *Middlemarch*), he was still unwell and unable to work. The couple then decided to act on doctor's advice that Lewes's health would best be restored by a complete rest and bracing sea air, and set off for Cromer on 15 June. After two weeks on the North Norfolk Coast, they moved on to Harrogate to take the waters on their way to Whitby, and it was just before they left the spa for the coast that the news reached them which is recorded in Lewes's journal for 16 July as 'War declared between France and Prussia'.

The words are underlined, as are all the subsequent references in his journal to the main events of the war (the surrender of the emperor after Sedan; the surrender of Strasburg, and the capitulation of Metz etc.), and I think it important to underline how momentous and profoundly disturbing, even traumatic, this news of war was for both Lewes and George Eliot. After a European peace which (with the exception of the geographically remote Crimean War) had lasted all their lives, they were forced to witness the sight of the two European countries they knew best and with whose literature and culture they were most deeply familiar, tearing each other apart with all the hideous machinery of modern warfare. Only a few weeks previously they had been warmly welcomed in Berlin and Vienna, in Munich, Würzburg and Heidelberg, and had returned to England via Strasburg and Paris, cities which had now become part of the theatre of war. It was not surprising that they quickly became entirely preoccupied by the war, reading two newspapers, the *Times* and the *Daily News* every day, and talking, thinking and even dreaming of it. Towards the end of August Lewes confessed in a letter that 'The dreadful war absorbs our waking thoughts. Nor does it end there. Troops march & countermarch through my dreams'.² And in a letter to Cara Bray of 12 September George Eliot makes a similar admission: 'We think of hardly anything but the War, and spend a great portion of our day reading about it'.³ What must have been so appalling about the conflict was that it struck at the roots of George Eliot's meliorism, her sense of the 'growing good of the world'. After the fall of Sedan at the beginning of September, the 'horrible carnage' was bad enough but the future looked even bleaker as, with acute prescience, she seemed to foresee the bloodshed of the Paris Commune: 'And every day now one shudders in expectation of what may happen in Paris: the people flying at each other's throats will be worse than the enemy's shells' (*Letters*: V, 114).

On the face of it this terrible war, so close to home and unfolding its horrors just across the Channel on territory the couple knew well, was another powerful distraction from George Eliot's work on her novel. She did undertake some writing in the first months of the war, starting her verse drama 'Armgarth' in August 1870 and finishing it in September. The story of the German opera-singer Armgarth who loses her voice appears to bring together two pressing preoccupations of the time – her own sense of fading creative power and, indirectly, the war itself in so far as her early sympathy for the German cause is implied in the way that the drama, set in the Prussian capital Berlin, honours the musical tradition of German culture which she prized so highly. 'Armgarth' can be seen as a tribute to what she refers to in a letter to Barbara Bodichon of 25 August as 'the great contributions the German energies have made in all sorts of ways to the common treasure of mankind' (*Letters*: V, 113). After the German victory at Sedan at the beginning of September those energies appeared to take a progressively more questionable form, and her early sympathy for Prussia gave way to criticism as in this letter to Oscar Browning of 18 October: 'Our sympathies were entirely with the Germans in the beginning of the War, but I cannot help admitting to myself now, that if they had been in a higher moral condition – I mean the whole nation and its government – the War might not have reached this hideous stage' (*Letters*: V, 118). 'Hideous' is a recurrent epithet applied to the war in her correspondence at this time: 'O what a lovely autumn is shining on those hideous guns which are being hauled along to Paris!' (*Letters*: V, 117-8) on 10 October; and 'All human goodness & love seemed more precious to me since this most hideous of wars began' on 21 October.⁴ In early January 1871 she refers in a letter to Sara Hennell to 'the endless forms of suffering created by this hellish war' and observes in relation to the Germans that 'No people can carry on a long fierce war without being brutalized by it, more or less' (*Letters*: V, 131-2), while other letters repeatedly lament the plight of the French and the devastation of their country: 'Alas, alas for the sorrows of poor France' (*Letters*: V, 125).

Between 21 July 1870, when she first mentions 'this grievous war' (*Letters*: V, 110) and 27 January 1871, the day before the armistice is signed between France and Germany, George Eliot's letters and journals reveal, then, her profound and painful preoccupation with the War which, she claims to François d'Albert Durade on 27 January, 'has been a personal sorrow to every human creature with any sympathy' (*Letters*: V, 134); and it is right in the middle of this six month period, around the beginning of November, that she started writing a story that had been in her mind for years. It bore the title 'Miss Brooke' and, as we know, was the story of Dorothea and her ill-fated marriage which, sometime in early 1871, was incorporated into the existing fabric of *Middlemarch*. With 'Miss Brooke' she seemed to overcome the writer's block that had afflicted the novel and from this point *Middlemarch* began to move purposefully ahead.

So the question I wish to address is what relationship might there be between the painfully absorbing historical context in which she began to work on what was to become a central part of *Middlemarch* and the finished novel itself? Are there any significant traces of that context in the novel, or was George Eliot, rather, taking refuge from the hideous present by returning imaginatively to a world at peace lying forty years in the past? Was she like the poet Cowper, who could write in Book IV of 'The Task':

I behold

The tumult and am still. The sound of war
Has lost its terrors ere it reaches me;
Grieves but alarms me not. (ll.99–102)⁵

And also like Walter Scott and Jane Austen, whose ‘vision of life’, or so Virginia Woolf maintained, ‘was not disturbed or agitated or changed by war’. ‘That immunity from war’, Woolf claimed, ‘lasted all through the nineteenth century’.⁶ All the evidence suggests George Eliot was not like any of these. She was neither still nor immune to the terrors of the conflict, and if her vision of life was not changed by the war, it was certainly disturbed and agitated by it.

In a letter of 18 November, written after she had begun writing ‘Miss Brooke’, she shows herself to be acutely aware of the challenge the disturbing historical events present to creative work and the life of the mind. The letter is to Sara Hennell to whom she puts a question pertinent to her own situation: ‘Have the great events of these months interfered with your freedom of spirit in writing?’ (*Letters*: V, 122). She follows this with a reference not to the progress of her own work but rather to Lewes’s, stating that he has got ‘so interested in various parts of his revision’ of his *Biographical History of Philosophy* that he has had to make ‘alterations which he had not contemplated’ (*Ibid*), implying that he at least had managed to set the war to one side by becoming productively engrossed in his work. She continues with a reflection that is framed in general rather than directly personal terms: ‘One has to dwell continually on the permanent, growing influence of ideas, in spite of temporary reactions however violent, in order to get courage and perseverance for any work which lies aloof from the immediate wants of society’ (*Ibid*). Goethe’s ‘contempt for the Revolution of ’30, compared with the researches on the Vertebrate Structure of the Skull’ is then cited as an example of this kind of commitment to the intellectual life in defiance of historical events, but its relevance to the present day is immediately subjected to qualification: ‘But the changes we are seeing cannot be doffed aside in that way’ (*Letters*: V, 123), and with that the letter ends.

To what extent the events of these months had interfered with her own freedom of spirit in writing is not stated, but the stress on the ‘courage and perseverance’ required for any work that transcends the disturbing present and at the same time on the impossibility of simply doffing aside the momentous historical changes taking place before her eyes, point to a pressing personal dilemma. The writer’s need for detachment from historical events seems to conflict with an obligation to respond to, and take account of them. Thus as she continues to work on the story of Dorothea she is beset with an acute sense of her own powerlessness to have any influence on the terrible course of contemporary history: ‘The pain is that one can *do* so little’ (*Letters*: V, 132). This is underlined by the closing lines of her journal for the war-torn year of 1870. Mention of the coldness of the weather on 31 December reminds her of more severe hardships: ‘the papers tell of still harder weather about Paris where our fellow-men are suffering and inflicting horrors’, she continues, and then closes with an anguished question: ‘Am I doing anything that will add the weight of a sandgrain against the persistence of such evil?’ (*Journals*, 141).

There is something in the tone and urgency of that question that is reminiscent of the heroine she was engaged in bringing to life: Dorothea, with her ‘desire to make her life greatly effective’, asking ‘What could she do, what ought she to do?’⁷ or ‘What do we live for, if it is not to make life less difficult to each other?’ (72, 723). And I wish to argue that one important

trace of the War in *Middlemarch* is the way George Eliot has projected onto her heroine a version of her own dilemma of being torn between necessary detachment and a felt need to engage with historical events, with a world of hardship and suffering. Of course Dorothea's detachment is of a different sort: not that of the middle-aged writer struggling to draw on the apparently failing spring of her imagination and maintain a creative flow, but that of a young woman set apart by wealth and class from the poor and needy she wishes to help. Nevertheless, I discern a faint parallel between the novelist looking across the Channel in helpless dismay at the carnage in France which strikes at her faith in human nature and the possibility of progress, and the young idealistic Dorothea, unsure of her capacity to do good in any way since 'Everything seems like going on a mission to a people whose language I don't know' (3, 28); or Dorothea as a member of the country gentry of old time who 'lived in a rarefied social air' and 'from their stations up the mountain looked down with imperfect discrimination on the belts of thicker life below', which leaves her feeling ill at ease 'in the perspective and chillness of that height' (34, 322). Or again Dorothea in those window scenes where she views the world from her 'luxurious shelter' (80, 776), most famously when she resolves not to be 'a mere spectator' (Ibid) as she looks out on those emblematic figures of the rural working-class with whom she can never have any real contact, a woman carrying her baby, a man with a bundle on his back, and a shepherd with his dog, in the pearly light of dawn (Ibid). Dorothea's enforced detachment from the lives of the less fortunate and at the same time her desire to overcome it, can be seen to have some affinity with the uncomfortable position of her creator in relation to the War in France.

George Eliot knew people who did take active, Dorothea-like steps to mitigate the suffering caused by the War, as she mentions in the letter of 27 January 1871 where she declares that the conflict 'has been a personal sorrow to every human creature with any sympathy'; and it is even more so 'to those who have gone out to see and help the sufferers. Several of our friends have been among the latter' (*Letters*: V, 134). Among these latter Gordon Haight identifies Willie and Mary Cross, who helped Henry Bullock, the husband of the late Elizabeth Cross, 'set up a soup kitchen at Sedan for the relief of the peasant victims' of the War.⁸ Such actions could be said to have added considerably more than a sandgrain against the evil of the War, so that France is not only a place of appalling bloodshed compared with peaceful England but also a stage for nobly altruistic attempts at alleviating the resulting hardship and suffering.

An implied comparison between France and England occurs in an interestingly related way near the beginning of *Middlemarch*, when the young Dorothea naively imagines that marriage to Casaubon might be like marrying Pascal. It would lead her to know what to do, so that 'I should see how it was possible to lead a grand life here – now – in England' (3, 28). Not here – now – in Tipton, or Middlemarch, but England, and reference to her national rather than local or parochial location, implies, of course, a comparison with France. The France of Pascal and the *grand siècle* is for Dorothea, it would seem, the natural stage for a grand life, while to attempt the same in nineteenth-century England clearly poses a challenge. There is some echo here of the contemporary historical context: France is the setting for grand deeds, if mainly horrible ones, and the telling phrase 'here – now – in England', with its implicit prefixed question of 'what can I do?', is resonant of the novelist's own predicament as she looks across the channel at the end of 1870 and questions the value of her own professional life. More importantly, perhaps, this moment in the novel reveals an essential aspect of Dorothea's

character: she is the first of George Eliot's heroines to be alert, as she incipiently is here, to her place in history, raising that question of woman's role in the historical development of humankind that is an important concern of *Middlemarch* and one that is still left open at the end of the novel. The incorporation of historical consciousness into the life of the central female character in *Middlemarch* may be another important residue of the disturbing historical context in which she was conceived.

Among those of George Eliot's friends who responded to the War with determined altruistic activity, not in France but 'here – now – in England', was one of those women who have been cited as real-life models for Dorothea: Jane, or Jeanie, Nassau Senior, the sister of Thomas Hughes the novelist. Sybil Oldfield in her recent biography, *Jeanie, an 'Army of One'*, has made a strong case for the importance of Jeanie Senior as an influence on the conception of the heroine,⁹ and a focus on the context of the Franco-Prussian War in which Dorothea was conceived can only strengthen that case. Jeanie Senior had first met George Eliot in October 1866 and by the autumn of 1870 had become a valued friend, having lent warm and much-appreciated support during the final illness of Thornton Lewes in the autumn of 1869. On 12 November 1870, when work on 'Miss Brooke' must have just begun, George Eliot wrote to her asking her to call: 'Can you find time to get to our corner of the universe? Your sweet face would be a welcome bit of harmony with one's struggling hope and trust in these bad times'.¹⁰ (I take 'struggling hope and trust' to mean hope and trust in humanity and its capacity for good, severely under threat in these bad times). The association of this 'struggling hope and trust' in these 'bad times' with Jeanie Senior was more apt than George Eliot may have known, for Jeanie had responded to the War with her characteristic humanitarian compassion and resolute energy and by this time was running the Ladies Committee of the National Society for the Sick and Wounded in War (soon to become the British Red Cross), responsible for collecting and dispatching surgical, medical and relief material to France from its headquarters in St Martin's Place. In an earlier pre-War letter of 13 March 1870 George Eliot had referred to Jeanie's Dorothea-like 'diffusive life' and 'longing for a wider existence' (*Letters*: V, 83), and in response to the War this Dorothea figure had indeed achieved that wider existence and was playing a direct rather than diffusive humanitarian role 'here – now – in England'.

In the first weeks of the War, on 25 August, George Eliot observed that it was 'in some respects a conflict between two differing forms of civilization' (*Letters*: V, 113), and both of these civilizations can be seen to play some part in the complex fabric of *Middlemarch*. France is the land of science, in particular medical science, and also of sexual passion and its consequences, while in the case of Germany the novelist is true to the historical setting of her novel and presents, not Bismarck's militarized autocracy, but an older Germany of 'Dichter und Denker', or, more precisely, of art and learning and scholarship. Ladislav, who has studied in Heidelberg, is aligned with that culture while Lydgate, who has studied medicine in Paris and fears being overtaken in his research by 'some plodding fellow of a German' (36, 320), is aligned with the other. The opposition, or juxtaposition, is a peaceful one, and although George Eliot saw the War as ushering in 'The Period of German Ascendancy' (*Letters*: V, 112), it would be fanciful to attribute any geo-political significance to the fact that at the end of the novel Ladislav is in the ascendant and Lydgate has died having failed to realize his youthful high ambitions. But there is an intriguing connection of France with violence and trauma: it is in Paris that the one violent death in the novel occurs and where Lydgate is struck by his violent passion for the actress/murderer Laure, the residue of which is a form of lasting trauma in that

his madly impulsive behaviour in pursuing and proposing marriage to her is to be fatally repeated in his impulsive proposal to Rosamond.

The bulk of chapter fifteen in which all this occurs was written in 1869, but the fact that the last two pages of the manuscript were written on different paper has led Jerome Beatty in his famous study of the genesis of *Middlemarch* to conjecture that they might have formed part of the bridging material written in early 1871 (ie after the War) when 'Miss Brooke' was connected up to the existing fabric of the novel.¹¹ These pages include Lydgate's pursuit of Laure and her confession of murder, so there may be the faintest possibility of some reflection of the historical violence in Lydgate's experience in Paris; but if we are looking for influences George Eliot and Lewes's extensive reading of Balzac (in particular *La Cousine Bette*, which includes uncontrollable sexual passion and murder) in the summer of 1870 just before the War began, might be more compelling. But whether the Parisian episode has more affinity with lurid French fiction than violent French history, it does remain an anomaly in *Middlemarch*, written in a different register and located on foreign territory in more than the literal sense. The 'hideous' events in Paris in 1870-71 can only have strengthened the novelist's sense of the city's foreignness to the peaceful English provincial drama she was writing.

I began by asserting that, for George Eliot, reading about and witnessing from afar the suffering and bloodshed of the Franco-Prussian War was a profoundly unsettling, even traumatic experience, striking at the foundations of her 'meliorism, her faith in human nature and its capacity for progress; and in that respect (to use Virginia Woolf's terms) it certainly disturbed and agitated her vision of life. One symptom of this disturbance is, I would argue, that feature of *Middlemarch* that many of its early reviewers remarked upon: its melancholy. The *Saturday Review* referred to it;¹² Sydney Colvin in the *Fortnightly Review* found in the outcome of Dorothea's life 'a sense of sadness' and indeed 'a deep depression' (*CH*, 337); and R. H. Hutton in the *Spectator* entitled his review of Book IV 'The Melancholy of *Middlemarch*', finding the deepest symptom of that melancholy in its tendency to 'draw the most reflective and the most spiritual characters as the least happy' (*CH*, 299).

A melancholy note is also struck on those occasions when the narrator steps back from the complex web of provincial life forty years previously and compares 1830 with the present day, as in relation to Lydgate's intellectual ambitions: 'Perhaps that was a more cheerful time for observers and theorizers than the present' (15, 145); and to Ladislav's activity at the end of the novel as an MP, 'working well in those times when reforms were begun with a hopefulness of immediate good which has been much checked in our days' (Finale, 819). Hopefulness and cheerfulness seem to be features of the past rather than the present. And although in that letter to Sara Hennell quoted earlier, George Eliot maintained that one has to dwell on the permanent growing influence of ideas to find courage and perseverance for any intellectual creative work, the one figure in *Middlemarch* who devotes his energies to the progress of ideas, Lydgate, experiences the frustration of his intellectual efforts and an attendant misery that the narrator describes with manifest fellow-feeling: 'Only those who know the supremacy of the intellectual life [...] can understand the grief of one who falls from that serene activity into the absorbing soul-wasting struggle with worldly annoyances' (73, 727). Melancholy attends Lydgate's life, and Dorothea's too, not only in her marriage to Casaubon, but in the tension between her idealistic yearnings and restricted circumstances which is never entirely dispelled. Thus Hutton sees the scene where Dorothea expresses to Ladislav her private faith – 'by desiring what is perfectly good [...], we are part of the divine power against evil – widening the

skirts of light and making the struggle with the darkness narrower' (39, 387), as 'exquisitely truthful and exquisitely melancholy' (CH, 301). And then he adapts Dorothea's words to describe her creator: George Eliot 'takes side gallantly and nobly with the power that wars against evil. The hope she can do something on that side is part of her life. She has found it out and cannot part with it. But she has very poor hope of the issue' (CH, 301). He concludes that she is 'a melancholy teacher, – melancholy because sceptical' (CH, 302).

Siding with the power that wars against evil, she could be said to be engaged in a struggle against the very evil she had seen at work in the War, the evil whose persistence she had lamented in her journal at the end of 1870. That evil must have fed both the depression that her journal for the autumn of 1870 more than once alludes to, and the melancholy that colours the novel, but I doubt that she would have concurred with Hutton's description of her as a melancholy teacher. In March 1872, when the fourth book of the novel which he reviewed under the title of melancholy was already in print, she wrote to Alexander Main to state that: 'I need not tell you that my book will not present my own feeling about human life if it produces on readers whose minds are really receptive the impression of blank melancholy and despair' (Letters: V, 261). Melancholy is clearly not the whole story of *Middlemarch*, and its completion could be termed an overcoming of, rather than a succumbing to despair.

Perhaps, therefore, George Eliot's most important response to the War was the act of writing *Middlemarch* itself, which involved creating a heroine who represented the opposite pole of human potential to that displayed on the battlefields and in the besieged cities of France. George Eliot beheld the tumult and was not still, but resolutely active with her pen; and if melancholy was never overcome, it was contained, and her vision of life, however much it had been disturbed, was ultimately reaffirmed. By the end of the novel she was able to write movingly and persuasively of 'the growing good of the world' in relation to Dorothea's life, however restricted by gender and social circumstances it may have been. It is the completed novel, then, that finally does weigh more than a sandgrain against the evil manifest in the Franco-Prussian War.

Notes

This article began life as a paper at the *Middlemarch* Conference at the Institute of English Studies, Senate House, University of London, 22 November 2014.

- 1 *The Journals of George Eliot*, ed. Margaret Harris and Judith Johnston (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 139. Further page references to the *Journals* will be given in the text.
- 2 *The Letters of George Henry Lewes*, ed. William Baker, 2 vols (Victoria BC: University of Victoria, 1995), vol. II, p. 155.
- 3 *The George Eliot Letters*, ed. Gordon S. Haight, 9 vols (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1954-78), vol. V, p. 114. Further references to the volume and page of *Letters* will be given in the text.
- 4 William Baker, 'New George Eliot and G. H. Lewes Letters' in *Redefining the Modern: Essays on Literature and Society in Honor of Joseph Wiesenfarth*, ed. William Baker and Ira B. Nadel (London: Associated University Presses, 2004), pp. 89-114 (p. 100).

- 5 *The Poetical Works of William Cowper*, ed. H. S. Milford, 3rd edn (London: Oxford University Press, 1926), pp. 184-5.
- 6 Virginia Woolf, 'The Leaning Tower', *Collected Essays*, vol. II (London: Hogarth Press, 1966), p. 164.
- 7 *Middlemarch*, World's Classics, ed. David Carroll (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), ch. 3, p. 27. Further references to the chapter and page of this edition will be given in the text.
- 8 Gordon S. Haight, *George Eliot: A Biography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), p. 430.
- 9 Sybil Oldfield, *Jeanie, an 'Army of One': Mrs Nassau Senior, 1828-1877, The First Woman in Whitehall* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2008): see especially ch. 9, 'George Eliot's Dorothea', pp. 131-43.
- 10 Baker, 'New George Eliot and G. H. Lewes Letters', p. 100.
- 11 Jerome Beaty, '*Middlemarch*' from *Notebook to Novel: A Study of George Eliot's Creative Method* (Urbana II: University of Illinois Press, 1960), pp. 26-7.
- 12 See *George Eliot: The Critical Heritage*, ed. David Carroll (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971), p. 317. Further page references to the *Critical Heritage* (CH) are given in the text.