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A.G. van den Broek

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CONFERENCE REPORT

Annual George Eliot Conference: *Middlemarch*, Institute of English Studies, 22 November 2014.

By A. G. van den Broek

Only by combining papers on *Romola* and *Felix Holt*, did the 2013 George Eliot Conference manage to attract a tolerably-sized audience; no such problems for the 2014 Conference on *Middlemarch*. This excellent event was oversubscribed and had to be moved to the biggest room in the Institute of English Studies at the University of London. Barbara Hardy (Birkbeck, London and Swansea) and Louise Lee (Roehampton) yet again organized everything, bringing together a group of speakers who made us think about widely differing issues to do with Eliot's occasional uncertainty, Eliot and Mrs Gaskell, the sex lives of young nineteenth-century women, Eliot's indebtedness to Hegel's phenomenology, Eliot and Gothic literature, the pitfalls of authorship, horses as metaphors, Eliot's evolving humour, and the 1994 BBC adaptation of *Middlemarch*.

Following words of welcome from Barbara Hardy, John Rignall (Warwick) offered '*Middlemarch* & The Franco-Prussian War', a paper reflecting on how that war coincided with the halting development of the novel. The horrors of that war, he argued, especially Prussia's militarism, influenced her spirit of writing. For Eliot, it was a 'hideous present', a serious distraction, not least because war challenged her faith in meliorism. Eliot's letters of the period show her questioning the validity of writing under such dreadful circumstances, and that uncertainty, Rignall argued, is reflected in the characterization of Dorothea. The latter's 'enforced detachment' resembles Eliot's: just as her creator worried about French bloodshed, so Dorothea frets about how best to help local people combat abject poverty. She is the first of Eliot's women characters searching for a useful role in life. The theme of melancholy pervades the novel, Rignall said, but that does not mean Eliot was melancholic herself. *Middlemarch* does find solutions for people, despite overwhelming adversities, illustrated by Dorothea's eventual destiny, which was shaped by her 'finely-touched spirit'.

Next, Barbara Hardy's paper, 'Elizabeth Gaskell in *Middlemarch*', considered similarities of character, simile and scenes. Recalling Eliot's long acquaintance with Gaskell's writing, Hardy drew attention to old Timothy Cooper, the anti-railway spokesman in *Middlemarch*, who shares his name with Gaskell's half-witted farm labourer in *Cousin Phillis* (1864). Similarly, the Solomon simile in chapter 80 of *Middlemarch*, used to describe Dorothea's anguish over finding Ladislav and Rosamond together, recalls the use of the same simile in chapter 37 of *Wives and Daughters* (1864-6), where we hear of Molly Gibson's desperate prayer for Roger Hamley's safety, which came from 'a heart as true as that of the real mother in King Solomon's judgment'. Lastly, there are important parallels between *Middlemarch* and *North and South* (1855), involving Dorothea and Margaret Hale sitting in windows, looking out at the world beyond. These common enough tropes occur throughout literature and the visual arts, Hardy said, but in these novels they function as symbolic ideas to do with self-abnegation, women seeking compromises, turning away from the needs of self to the needs of others. So did Eliot plagiarize? No, certainly not, Hardy argued. What we have are instances of Eliot's 'unconscious assimilation' of Gaskell's ideas, brought about by her affinity and deep regard for Gaskell's writing.

Marianne Burton (Royal Holloway, London) presented ‘How Much Did Dorothea and Celia Know?: Sexual Ignorance and Knowledge among Unmarried Girls in *Middlemarch*.’ This paper explored what nineteenth-century girls knew about sex and more general sexual topics such as the differences between men and women, menstruation, illegitimate babies, breast-feeding. Burton argued there is an assumption that girls of that time were largely unaware, yet her research suggests many knew a good deal. The *British Medical Journal* of the day, for instance, complained girls discovered too much from bad sources. *Middlemarch*’s Mary Garth and Rosamond Vincy must have known about, say, genital differences, if only from their brothers and/or Peter Featherstone, Burton said. However, it is difficult to say whether or not either knew about penetration. Celia and Dorothea lived even more sheltered lives, but then Dorothea read the Bible and Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, and both have references to sexual activities. Did the sisters learn more when they were at private school? Most sexual information, Burton said, came from other women: sisters, girlfriends, gossiping servants. Dorothea would have resisted much of what she might have heard, preferring academic learning above all else. But then Dorothea’s tragedy with Casaubon, Burton concluded, was in part due to her misapprehending that marriage would involve sex. In the Question and Answer session, that old chestnut, did Dorothea and Casaubon consummate their marriage, was keenly debated, demonstrating that topics to do with sex continue to enjoy rude health.

Isobel Armstrong (Birkbeck, London) gave us ‘*Middlemarch*: The “Yoke”, Philosophy, George Eliot’s Reading’, which took into account the pattern of power struggles found in Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel’s Master-Slave Dialectic, which in turn forms part of that philosopher’s *Phenomenology of the Spirit* (or, if you prefer, *of the Mind*) (1807). There is not much direct evidence that Eliot and Lewes read Hegel, Armstrong conceded, but they nevertheless assimilated his work. Eliot was very interested in how power struggles play out, Armstrong said, and the Master-Slave stages described in Hegel’s Dialectic are detected in various *Middlemarch* relationships: Dorothea and Casaubon, Peter Featherstone and Mary Garth, Bulstrode and Lydgate, Lydgate and Rosamond, Bulstrode and Mrs Bulstrode, Dorothea and Ladislav, and it is even seen in the incident of Mr Brooke being ridiculed at the hustings. In all cases, we see ‘masters’ exerting power over ‘slaves’ and then gradually losing power as ‘slaves’ gain the upper hand. With this dynamic in mind, how should we see Dorothea? Well, we should take her politics seriously, Armstrong said, and not see her as *simply* making the best of poor hands dealt to all women of Dorothea’s time. Instead, Eliot portrays her heroine as ‘slave’ who systematically shapes her own political views and determinedly slips the yoke of Casaubon’s – and Ladislav’s – expectations. Eventually she becomes her own ‘master’. In the Question and Answer session, Armstrong accepted the Master-Slave Dialectic is not the only shaping force in the novel. Sympathy, for instance, is another. However, she went on to say, Hegel’s Dialectic is frequently detected in *Middlemarch*’s subtle portrayals, yet it is often overlooked or not taken seriously enough.

John Burton, our Chairman, then spoke about the Fellowship’s many activities, trips and achievements throughout 2014, and the many more planned for 2015. He told us the Fellowship is in very good health, and he warmly invited anyone in the audience not already a member to join.

After lunch, Royce Mahawatte (Central Saint Martins) read “‘Beautiful Lips Kissing Holy Skulls and Other Emptinesses Ecclesiastically Enshrined”’: Gothic Plots in *Middlemarch*.’ Mahawatte argued that although Eliot’s writing may seem far removed from Gothic imagery

and ideas, you do not have to look far to find them. Eliot read Gothic novels with interest, and aspects of the genre flavour *Middlemarch*. The past, in the form of Raffles, returning to haunt Bulstrode, for instance, is an example; likewise, the story of Lydgate and his passion for the deadly Laure. The image of the young Dorothea, all but prostrate before Casaubon, is not quite Gothic, but it comes close. Mahawatte argued, especially if we see Casaubon as some creature exercising abusive power. The chapter 'Waiting for Death' (Book III) and much of Book V, 'The Dead Hand', contain language very familiar to readers of the Gothic. Mahawatte concluded that Eliot can be seen playing around with the tropes of sensation narratives in a variety of ways, sometimes ironically, sometimes as clever plot devices to link stories, and sometimes to add poignancy to Dorothea's life and tragedy.

Kate Osborne's (King's College, London) "'The End of Mr Brooke's Pen': Scenes of Writing in *Middlemarch*" analysed the novel's failed writers. There is Casaubon, of course, whose 'Key to All Mythologies' is an exercise in futility, and there is Mr Brooke. Asked by Dorothea to put Ladislav off from visiting, Mr Brooke writes freely and ends up doing the opposite, because, the narrator tells us, '... the end of Mr. Brooke's pen was a thinking organ, evolving sentences, especially of a benevolent kind, before the rest of his mind could well overtake them' (ch 31). The comedy, here, Osborne argued, has a serious purpose: it helps us see some of the problems of authorship, of putting thoughts into writing, of maintaining control. Eliot sympathizes with all failed writers, Osborne suggested, because she too struggled to keep control over her authorship. She wrote the second half of *Middlemarch* as the first was being serialized and found the pressures enormously difficult. During the Question and Answer session, Osborne agreed that perhaps Mr Brooke's letter to Ladislav can be seen as both comic and organic. Despite her struggles writing *Middlemarch*, Eliot remained aware of how to control her stories and events, which flow naturally and effortlessly. Mr Brooke's flow copiously, but he is often surprised into chaos.

Beryl Gray's (Co-editor, *George Eliot Review*) 'Riding Horses in *Middlemarch*', considered the novel's horse metaphors. In chapter 37, for instance, Ladislav shakes his 'head backward somewhat after the manner of a spirited horse'. Mr Brooke continues this intended association, saying Ladislav 'will take wing' once 'harnessed' to him. Gray argued that characters divide into riders and non-riders, drivers of horses and those who are driven. Horses are simply commodities for characters, but Eliot, an astute observer of all kinds of horses, uses them to shape destiny, as it were. Thus, Dorothea gives up what she arguably loves best, riding, and chooses Casaubon; Fred's money losses finally set him off *walking* the road of redemption; his illness results from visits to unsanitary stables, and that illness furthers the story of Rosamond and Lydgate; Lydgate then follows in Fred's footsteps, trying to sell his fine horse to Mr Bambridge at the Green Dragon, in order to raise badly needed cash of his own. These incidents encapsulate Eliot's symbolic use of horses at moments of moral and structural importance.

Louise Lee (Roehampton) paper, '*Middlemarch's* Jokes', formed part of her broad investigation into humour and jokes in nineteenth-century writing. Lee talked about how Eliot's comedy in *Middlemarch* is different from what went before. Arguing that much early nineteenth-century humour is couched in quasi-religious language designed to help characters laugh about themselves, Lee argued that Eliot's humour in, say, *Adam Bede*, follows that pattern. Seth Bede's mainly self-deprecating humour is a good example. In *Middlemarch*, humour has moved on, according to Lee. Its language is secular. Rev Cadwallader's amusing

comments about Casaubon are free of religious encumbrances, and so are Rev Farebrother's about himself and others. Both churchmen stand in the shoes of others and show their inherent sympathy and generosity of spirit without religious references or allusions. Likewise Fred Vincy: aware of his sister's complete lack of humour, he teases her about it but does so charitably. Perhaps, Lee concluded, if Casaubon had been capable of humour, he might have finished his 'Key to All Mythologies'.

The final presentation of the day was 'Twenty Years On: The 1994 BBC TV *Middlemarch*', by Margaret Harris (Sydney). Hers was an exercise in Adaptation Studies. Harris explored how, twenty years on, we now evaluate the BBC's adaptation, which, she said, was a deliberate attempt by the corporation to update the cultural heritage for a new audience, part of the BBC's mandate. It was an expensive production, each episode costing around £1 million pounds, and although it was visually authentic – in terms of dress, hairstyles, and so on – contemporary reviewers considered it 'not as good as the novel'. That, Harris argued, is a tired critique, since it overlooks the fact that an adaptation is, more often than not, interesting in its own right. The DVD of the series has allowed Harris to see it many times, and that in turn, she added, has given her a sense of inhabiting the town of Middlemarch. Repeated scenes of the town's various locations have made them familiar and significant. With excerpts from that DVD, Harris discussed some of the differences between novel and series. She looked at the re-ordering of events; the complete omission of others; the adoption and adaptation of Eliot's dialogue; the eliding of the novel's political events, Middlemarch's industry and land management; and she highlighted the additions of scenes not found in the novel, such as Dorothea looking at poor villagers while out riding, or walking out in the morn, instead of sitting pensively in a window. Harris also considered the effects of music and camera angles and close-ups, how these shape moods and attitudes, or create effective shorthands for the novel's central concerns. Finally, Harris drew attention to Judy Dench's voiceover in the final episode. In 1994, Dench was already a well-known member of British Theatre, Harris said, and using her was a clever move, since she added artistic weight to the story, while also reminding us that *Middlemarch* is just that, a story.

The Conference ended with a very welcome wine reception at which many words of thanks and gratitude were expressed to the organizers for what was a very successful, interesting, stimulating and memorable occasion. The bar for the next Conference, on *Daniel Deronda*, was set very high indeed.