

“Entangled in metaphors”: visions and notions in *Middlemarch*

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For most of the characters in *Middlemarch*, what you see is emphatically *not* what you get. Whatever they enjoy or do not enjoy looking at, the messages transmitted by their senses to their minds bear but little relation to what they actually experience. They live in a world of intellectual “visions”, disconnected from reality, as opposed to the “notions” entertained by their more pragmatic counterparts. Their mental constructs, what they see with their minds’ eyes, seem to prevent them from getting a better grasp on reality: they are “entangled in metaphors” (10). Images play a major part in the novel, mainly as the “objective correlative” constantly used by the narrator in order to help the reader understand her creatures’ feelings and reflections, but also by the characters themselves, who compare human beings, affects and ideas with entities from the animal, vegetal or mineral realms. Even though pictures are actually rather uncommon in *Middlemarch*, the visual element is also very much present as the inhabitants of the town generally judge each other according to their appearances.

Painting

Right from the opening pages of her novel, George Eliot makes abundant use of cultural equivalents so as to give her implied reader a wealth of references allowing him or her to better apprehend situations and characters. In the Prelude, we learn that the (still unknown) heroine will be “a Saint Theresa, foundress of nothing”, that is, a young woman of strong feelings who aspired to an “epic life”

but could never find fulfilment. As if her developed parallel with the sixteenth-century catholic mystic was not limpid enough, the narrator adds: "Here and there a cygnet is reared uneasily among the ducklings in the brown pond, and never finds the living stream in fellowship with its own oary-footed kind". Though trivial, this image clearly summarizes Dorothea's plight and makes it more striking.

When the novel proper begins, the narrator suggests new ways of placing the heroine in a religious light: "she could wear sleeves not less bare of style than those in which the Blessed Virgin appeared to Italian painters; and her profile as well as her stature and baring seemed to gain the more dignity from her plain garments, which by the side of provincial fashion gave her the impressiveness of a fine quotation from the Bible – or from one of our elder poets, – in a paragraph of to-day's newspaper" (1). Thanks to those comparisons, Dorothea appears as doubly Christian, on a "stylistic" level. While still discussing her physical appearance, George Eliot manages to convey something of her moral nature, notably through a reference to high art.

Dorothea does obviously not look like a "fashion plate", as she does not care for all the "trimmings" which she should be wearing if she cared for the judgment of her contemporaries. More superficial women like Rosamond and Mrs Bulstrode can have a conversation while studying each other's clothes in detail, for instance (31). Nevertheless, the narrator also reminds us of the transitory nature of ways of dressing, since *Middlemarch* takes place between 1829 and 1832, that is four decades before the novel was written, more than time enough for fashions to have altered dramatically. In his own historical novel, *Vanity Fair*, published in 1847-48 but dealing with events occurring round the year 1815, Thackeray deliberately decided to give his characters anachronistically "modern" clothes and to show them – since he also was his own illustrator – dressed in mid-Victorian style; he even went as far as to include a footnote with a vignette depicting them as they should be represented, adding "I have not the heart to disfigure my heroes and heroines by costumes so hideous; and have, on the contrary engaged a model of rank dressed according to the present fashion" (Thackeray, Chapter 6, note). No such thing with George Eliot, who alludes to various outmoded garments worn by her characters. Dorothea is also seen in a "straw-bonnet (which our contemporaries might look at with conjectural curiosity as at an obsolete form of basket)" (3): what used to seem normal wear is later perceived as an incongruous

item borrowed from another field of human activity – which is more or less the principle of a metaphor. While apparently devoid of any desire to adorn herself, she does conform to the general style of her time, yet conferring her own special grace and dignity to such old-fashioned things (for 1871 readers) as a poke bonnet: “the large round poke which was then in the fate of women, seemed no more odd as a head-dress than the gold trencher we call a halo” (43). Here again, a link is established between Dorothea and Christian iconography: since the shape of her hat recalls a circular plate, she looks like a saint in a medieval painting.

By choosing “Dorothea” rather than the more English form “Dorothy”, George Eliot probably had in mind the two Christian martyrs of that name, Dorothea of Caesarea, or Dorothea of Alexandria, the latter being sometimes conflated with the former. Other catholic martyrs are mentioned in *Middlemarch*, through a casual reference to the representations given by painters. As a young girl, Dorothea is not just compared to a virgin saint, but more precisely to the image of a saint: “there seemed to be as complete an air of repose about her as she had been a picture of Santa Barbara looking out from her tower into the clear air” (10). When her sister’s child is born, she has to take part in what art historians would call a *sacra conversazione* (holy conversation), a type of painting where the Virgin Mary shows the baby Jesus to various saints; here, it is more precisely a “mystic marriage”, since she has “to sit like a model for Saint Catherine looking rapturously at Celia’s baby” (54), an allusion to the mystical union celebrated between Jesus Christ and Saint Catherine of Alexandria and/or Saint Catherina of Sienna. Lydgate’s medical research leads him to study “eyes presented in a dish (like Santa Lucia’s)” (36). Saint Lucy was blinded by her tormentors (or by herself), and it was one of the conventions of Western art to show her holding her eyes on a platter, which may be why she is not given her English name in the novel, as the most famous depictions of the martyr were painted by Italian or Spanish artists like Guercino or Zurbaran.

Ironically enough, while she is repeatedly associated with the imagery of religious art as deserving to be part of it, Dorothea claims not to understand such pictures. When in Rome, she needs help in order to grasp “the significance of Madonnas seated under inexplicable canopied thrones with the simple country as a background, and of saints with architectural models in their hands, or knives accidentally wedged in their skulls” (22), an inventory which

corresponds to many productions of Italian painting between the fourteenth and the seventeenth century, Bellini's and Mantegna's Holy Virgins, various patron saints holding the model of a church bearing their names, or Saint Peter of Verona, also called Saint Peter Martyr.

Despite its heroine's visual illiteracy, the novel is replete with references to the classical and modern (that is, early nineteenth-century) visual arts, which contribute to the characterization of Middlemarchers. Paintings as objects, as items of interior decoration, are present in the town, even if only among its richer inhabitants. Their lack of true appreciation for art is denounced in the scene of the auction of "the furniture, books, and pictures... belonging to Edwin Larcher, Esq." (60). The sale is conducted by Mr Trumbull, whose notions of art history is not limited to "Berghems" (the landscapes painted by seventeenth-century Dutch artist Nicolaes Berchem), since he claims having at his home "pictures by Murillo, Rubens, Teniers, Titian, Vandyck, and others" (32), a gathering of illustrious names which would make his belongings the equivalent of the best collections then existing in England. Trumbull claims an old familiarity with Western art: "I have seen a great many pictures by the Old Masters, and they are not all up to this mark – some of them are darker than you might like, and not family subjects" (60).

By this comment, the auctioneer betrays his materialistic conception of painting, which is to be valued from a purely consumerist or moralistic point of view. As Dickens would mockingly say in *Our Mutual Friend*, art should not "bring a blush into the cheek of the young person" (Dickens, Part I, Chapter 11): Larcher, the seller, has already acquired "such large framefuls of expensive flesh-painting... that Mrs Larcher was nervous until reassured by finding the subjects to be Scriptural". In *Middlemarch*, the nude is only acceptable if the occasion for its depiction is some Biblical anecdote. Considering Trumbull's lack of scruple, a prospective buyer like Mrs Bulstrode needs the help of Will Ladislaw, a "connoisseur" (the auctioneer's mispronunciation of *connoisseur*, a word derived from the French) because of "his remarkable knowledge of pictures" and because he has "been abroad". After various engravings and prints have been knocked down to various buyers, comes the supposed gem of the collection, "a Supper at Emmaus, attributed in the catalogue to Guido", the name of the

Italian painter being also mangled by Trumbull who repeatedly mentions “the celebrated *Guydo*, the greatest painter in the world, the chief of the Old Masters, as they are called” (60).

More cultivated characters also rely on the received hierarchy of artists. When Casaubon suggests that Dorothea should visit the Farnesina, it is in order to “have seen the chief works of Raphael... He is the painter who has been held to combine the most complete grace of form with sublimity of expression. Such at least I have gathered to be the opinion of cognoscenti” (20). Casaubon seems very careful not to express a personal conviction, as if he could only feel “a blank absence of interest or sympathy”. Dorothea’s attitude to art is totally different, and for her, accepted wisdom is not enough. At her uncle’s, she is surrounded with “classical nudities and smirking Renaissance-Correggiosities” which she finds “painfully inexplicable” even though they “are so much praised” (9). While Correggio was then one of the most highly considered painters, on a par with Guido and Raphael, Dorothea is unable to understand the works of art produced by his pupils and imitators, as she later confesses to Will Ladislav: “I never could see any beauty in the pictures which my uncle told me all judges thought very fine” (21).

Her incapacity to enjoy art is partly explained on moral grounds: “the simpering pictures in the drawing-room seemed to me like a wicked attempt to find delight in what is false, while we don’t mind how hard the truth is for the neighbours outside our walls” (39). When she is not just indignant at their disdain for a reality made of poverty and suffering, paintings simply baffle her because she finds no relation between ordinary life and art. “I feel myself in the presence of some higher life than my own... something violent and strange to me” (21). The problem does not simply occur in relation with great works of history painting, that is religious or mythological art, but also with landscapes, which should be a more accessible genre. When she meets Ladislav, she is exposed to his drawings, and even his “large coloured sketch of stony ground and trees, with a pool” (9) seems to have “a relation to nature too mysterious for Dorothea” (62). To convey her incomprehension, she uses a metaphor: “They are a language I do not understand. I suppose there is some relation between pictures and nature which I am too ignorant to feel – just as you see what a Greek sentence stands for which means nothing to me” (9).

On a par with language, art is a semiotic system, its signs being forms and colours instead of words. But as opposed to the comparison with Greek used by Dorothea, it is not only a language that used to be spoken in the classical Antiquity, it is not simply made of “strange ancestral images” (20). Even those antique statues whom Dorothea is “not looking at” in the Vatican museum bear more relation to her present than she thinks, especially when she is seen by Will and his artist friend in front of “the reclining Ariadne, then called the Cleopatra” (19). Under its former name, the sculpture has indeed little in common with George Eliot’s heroine, and the “marble voluptuousness of her beauty” seems furthest removed from nun-like Dorothea. And yet, if the narrator takes care to specify the name of the mythological character which it really represents, it may well be to remind us that Ariadne was quickly abandoned by the demigod she had fallen in love with, only to be rescued later by the full god Bacchus, thus foreshadowing the pledge of Mrs Casaubon (as opposed to whom Rosamond only appears as “a charming stage Ariadne left behind with all her boxes full of costumes and no hope of a coach” [31], a far less tragic predicament). What the character cannot decipher, the cultured reader may be able to interpret.

And even though Dorothea only knew “art chiefly of the hand-screen sort” (20) before her trip to Rome, she is soon confronted with the fact that art can be a much more ambitious language, and that it is still very much spoken. Being perceived as a “most perfect young Madonna” (19), sitting on a chair “from which she can look down with those clear eyes at the poor mortals who pray to her” like any Renaissance Holy Virgin (76), the heroine is to be part of a brand new work of art, painted by one of those “German long-haired artists at Rome” (19) called the Nazarenes because of their physical resemblance with Jesus Christ. Adolf Naumann will depict her “as Santa Clara” (22), and will also have Mr Casaubon sit for him as Saint Thomas Aquinas for a work entitled *The Dispute* (30) which refers to one of Raphael’s Vatican frescoes, *The Dispute of the Holy Sacrament*, imitated by Nazarene artist Johann Friedrich Overbeck in his *Triumph of Christianity in the Arts* painted in 1840. Instead of being represented together as husband and wife, Dorothea and Casaubon are separated on canvas as they are already separated in life despite their official union, and they are transformed into a nun and a monk belonging to different religious orders (the Dominicans for Aquinas, the Franciscans for Clara), which makes their incompatibility all the more perceptible.

Just like he considers himself a better writer than painter, Ladislav asserts that art as a semiotic system is inferior to language. “Your painting and Plastik are poor stuff after all. They perturb and dull conceptions instead of raising them. Language is a finer medium... Language gives a fuller image, which is all the better for being vague. After all, the true seeing is within; and painting stares at you with an insistent imperfection” (19). Far from offering a clearer vision of things, the visual arts, which were still restricted to an imitative function at the time, can only bring confusion into the human mind, according to Will. Both art and language try to express human reactions to the world, which supposes first the perception of exterior reality, then its transformation into concepts, and finally its translation into words or pictures: from vision to notion and then on to expression. True seeing may be the goal pursued by most of the characters in *Middlemarch*, but their eyes and their minds do not necessarily allow them to see things as clearly as they would like to.

Seeing

What painters do in their works of art is similar to what people do when they speak: they use significant symbols in order to describe what they see, feel or think. Observing oneself or what lies around may be taken as a first step, involving one’s physical or mental eyes, since the metaphor of vision is currently used to qualify the operation through which the brain chooses an object of study.

George Eliot almost immediately signals the fact that Dorothea is not the best of all possible witnesses: “I am rather short-sighted”, she confesses to Sir James (3), which confirms her nature as a slightly laughable, impractical character, whose perception of exterior reality is encroached on by the importance of her inner visions. “Dorothea had less of outward vision than usual this morning, being filled with images of things as they had been and were going to be” (77): what she sees with her mind’s eyes takes much more room in her brain than what her body’s eyes can or could observe, were they not so myopic. Nevertheless, she is not such an exceptional case, since the narrator more generally asserts that mental activity often prevents us from giving full attention to our senses: “Few things hold the perceptions more thoroughly captive than anxiety about what we have got to say” (51), which explains why Mr Brooke is the last person to see “the effigy of himself” raised in front of him during his electioneering speech.

Even for those whose eyes are more reliable, looking is not always a fully satisfactory activity, since it also entails the capacity to interpret what is seen. During Featherstone's funeral, several characters gather at the Casaubons' to witness the scene. As a member of the gentry, Dorothea stands as if on top of a mountain and can look "down with imperfect discrimination on the belts of thicker life below" (34). While Celia soon gives up looking, her sister is "watching everything with the interest of a monk on his holiday tour". Mr Brooke makes himself useful by identifying those people whom Mrs Cadwallader has never met, but who inspire her various comparisons: "Dear me, they are like a set of jugs! Do look at Humphrey: one might fancy him an ugly archangel towering above them" or "a sort of frog-face". But looking at the funeral through the window is only part of the scene, and there is also much to be seen inside the room, mainly Dorothea's reactions when "she "saw her husband enter" and her "sudden paleness" which "every one noticed" when Ladislav was mentioned. "Mrs Cadwallader's eyes diverted from the churchyard, saw a good deal of dumb show which was not so intelligible to her as she could have desired". Seeing is not enough, as one still has to make sense of those visual impressions.

Casaubon finds "it necessary to use the utmost caution about [his] eyesight" (2) and short-sightedness may be Dorothea's deficiency, but other peculiarities of vision sometimes affect some characters in *Middlemarch*. It is Celia's main complaint with her sister: "You always see what nobody else sees; it is impossible to satisfy you; yet you never see what is quite plain" (4); "she does not see things" (6). As if to compensate for her lack of clear-sightedness, Dorothea manages to see what is invisible to the other characters, "to see the stars by daylight" (6). The merit she perceived wrongly in Casaubon makes her the victim of "some heroic hallucination" (76). Just like the heroine in Richard Wagner's opera *The Flying Dutchman* is fascinated by the portrait of an imaginary man who turns out to be real, Dorothea falls in love with Casaubon partly because "the set of his iron-grey hair and his deep eye-sockets made him resemble the portrait of Locke" (2). The physical resemblance with a great thinker confirms Dorothea in her opinion that her union with Casaubon will be "like marrying Pascal" (3). When Celia adds that, beside his eyes, he also has "two white moles with hairs on them", the future Mrs Casaubon answers that such a detail appears only "when people of a certain sort looked at" John Locke himself (2); in other words, like beauty, ugliness is in the eye of the beholder. A person can be said to be beautiful when