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JOSEPH WIESENFARTH

Middlemarch: The Language of Art

WHEN A NOVEL begins with a "Prelude" and ends with a "Finale" one can legitimately expect something musical in between. The in-between part of *Middlemarch* is much concerned with Dorothea Brooke, whose soul is in her voice and whose voice is like that of "a soul that had once lived in an Aeolean harp" (ch. 9). She is significantly different from Rosamond Vincy, whose piano playing perfectly echoes her teacher's but has no soul of its own (ch. 16). Rosamond is the siren of Middlemarch society, as Mr. Farebrother indicates (ch. 16), and her playing and singing entrap Lydgate, who neither stops his ears nor has himself tied to a mast. Dorothea, unlike Rosamond, can hardly play and never sings; she is, however, moved deeply by grand music greatly played (ch. 7), and in moments of feeling the "musical intonation" of her voice makes "her speech [sound] like a fine bit of recitative" (ch. 5). Although Ladislaw sings duets with Rosamond, he marries Dorothea. Since he is the most sensitive aesthetic intelligence in *Middlemarch*, his choice of soul over siren is a telling one.

Middlemarch is replete with imagery that has to do not only with music but also with poetry and painting. Dorothea meets Ladislaw while he is sketching a landscape (ch. 9); he sees her a second time in the Vatican Museum (ch. 19); together with Casaubon they visit an atelier where her husband has his portrait painted (ch. 22); Ladislaw delivers it to England and once again gains entry to Lowick (ch. 34), where a miniature of his grandmother that Dorothea has in her boudoir reminds her of him; and as the boudoir becomes a projection of Dorothea's heart, the miniature of Aunt Julia is transformed before our eyes into Ladislaw himself (ch. 28); separated from Dorothea first by her husband and then by the codicil of her husband's will, Ladislaw twice meets her again: once when he is sketching at Lowick (ch. 37) and once when he is collecting his sketches at Tipton (ch. 62). Art in image, metaphor, and symbol runs through *Middlemarch* from beginning to end as a leitmotiv and a unifying emotional force. All this is obvious enough and needs neither further emphasis nor detailed explication. What requires attention is the theory of art that composes the novel more harmoniously than individual notes like these might suggest is possible. For *Middlemarch* contains its own aesthetic theory, thus providing a context in which we can interpret the novel as a whole and understand its many references to the arts.

When, in the first chapter of *Middlemarch*, Dorothea and her sister examine their mother's jewelry, Dorothea's feeling for beauty prevents her from giving everything to Celia. When "the sun passing beyond a cloud" sends "a bright gleam over the table," irradiating a set of emeralds, Dorothea remarks, " 'How very beautiful these gems are,' speaking under a new current of feeling, as sudden as the gleam." Having begun the task of dividing the jewelry with "Puritanic toleration," she is embarrassed by her desire to keep what she thinks she ought to give away. Fortunately, she remembers that emeralds are associated with heaven in the Revelation of Saint John.[1] Unfortunately, she also remembers, despite this scriptural loophole, that "miserable men find such things, and work at them and sell them." Celia, who rather fancies the ring and bracelet, is pleased that her sister recalls these prevenient poor men. But she is finally disappointed. Dorothea keeps the emeralds. The scene is an apt dramatization of the division created in Dorothea by her Puritanic conscience and her instinctive life—between a theory that denies the legitimacy of pleasurable feelings about worldly objects and the undeniably pleasurable feelings themselves. The reversion to Saint John momentarily harmonizes the difference insofar as feeling for spiritual beauty is legitimate. But it is not a permanent solution: the miserable men still intrude. Nevertheless,

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Dorothea decides to keep the emeralds and to live, as her sister ruefully perceives, illogically. At this point in *Middlemarch* Dorothea has no aesthetic theory capable either of resolving the dilemma that relates the beautiful things she wants to the miserable men she pities or of elucidating the riddle of her desire for what her conscience suggests is valueless. It is well to remember that Dorothea Brooke is only nineteen years old and that she will not solve all her problems until she is twenty-two! But even now, amid the tatters of her doctrine, the unbreakable thread in the tapestry of her life is visible. Moral commitment tempers a response to aesthetic objects with an awareness of social responsibility.

Dorothea herself is a beautiful woman with a beautiful voice who instinctively enjoys beautiful emeralds.[2] She is also a woman who, because she yearns to be practical, habitually dwells but little on aesthetic objects. When Celia induces Dorothea to divide their mother's jewelry, she takes Dorothea away from working on plans for the rebuilding of cottages on tenant farms. Architecture is important to Dorothea because she expects it to have practical results in better buildings on the Freshitt and Tipton estates. Things that are important to her are those that a person does well enough to affect the quality of another person's life. In this way Dorothea is like Caleb Garth, who praises her plans and implements them, in part, on Brooke's and Chettam's estates. Dorothea has an organic sense, limited but real, of relations in life. She can, for example, respond immediately to art that is minutely realistic. She is struck by the miniature of Aunt Julia at Lowick because of the unusual combination of features it shows: close-set deep-gray eyes, a delicate irregular nose, and curls that fall backward; these enable her to pronounce it "peculiar rather than pretty" (ch. 9). When she meets Ladislaw, she carefully notes his resemblance in eyes, nose, hair to the miniature of his grandmother (ch. 9). Art reflects life in a way that easily satisfies Dorothea's impatience for integration. But Dorothea, it is sobering to remember, keeps a Saint Bernard dog because she is so nearsighted that she requires a pet she is not likely to tread on or trip over. While her organicism and social conscience are fine elements in her character, they are little satisfied because she does not know how to deal with things she cannot see clearly. Her dog, Monk, is a highly visible piece of evidence, literally and metaphorically, of Dorothea's myopia. For instance, she marries Casaubon—whose physical and spiritual warts she obviously does not see as clearly as Celia does—and therefore must spend a year and a half in purgatory to improve her eyesight (the epigraph to ch. 19, from Dante, makes it clear that Dorothea's marriage *is* her purgatory).

When Dorothea visits Lowick before her wedding (ch. 9), one sees how poorly developed her aesthetic perceptions are and how uneducated the range of her sensibility is. When she meets Ladislaw, he is at work on a landscape, "a large coloured sketch of stony ground and trees, with a pond." Mr. Brooke asks Dorothea's opinion of it; she declines to give it. "You know, uncle, I never see the beauty of those pictures which you say are so much praised. 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." One of the reasons that Dorothea likes the dismal Lowick is that it contains no casts or pictures of the kind Mr. Brooke collected on his fabled Italian tour: no "severe classical nudities and smirking Renaissance-Correggiosities" to stare "into the midst of her Puritanic conceptions." She does not like these things because "she had never been taught how she could bring them into any sort of relevance with her life" (ch. 9). Understandably, Dorothea is very much lost in Ladislaw's landscape. "You took to drawing plans," says Mr. Brooke; "you don't understand *morbidezza* and that kind of thing." What he is saying is what Dorothea has already said: she understands little of the language of art. Ladislaw will presently teach her a bit of the grammar of this language, and, by the time he comes to the task, Dorothea will have a keen sense of her need to be taught. When, after her wedding to Casaubon, Dorothea and Ladislaw meet in Rome, Dorothea is confronted with the ruins and art of a civilization where cottage plans, needful as they are, will not suffice and where organic unity is an anachronism (ch. 21). Her Swiss Puritanism (Dorothea

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was educated at Lausanne) allows her to see in Rome only "the deep degeneracy of a superstition divorced from reverence" (ch. 20).

It is very difficult, if not impossible, to talk about Puritanism and aesthetics because they are hostile to each other insofar as Puritans consider art to be more or less a misrepresentation of truth. George Eliot's most splendid Puritan, the Reverend Rufus Lyon of *Felix Holt*, whom she created out of the pages of Daniel Neal's standard *History of the Puritans*, is admired for his moral excellence but twitted for his aesthetic ignorance. Lyon, who distrusts Shakespeare, is antipathetic to art of the greatest order. Reflecting on his partial reading of *The Tempest*, he remarks, "the fantasies therein were so little to be reconciled with a steady contemplation of that divine economy which is hidden from sense and revealed to faith, that I forebore the reading, as likely to perturb my ministrations" (*Felix Holt*, ch. 27). Eliot expresses her judgment of Lyon's response by placing it in a chapter that begins with two Shakespearean quotations, one from *Coriolanus* and a second from the sonnets, and in the novel—a relatively short one at that—in which she uses more epigraphs from Shakespeare than she does in any other. Her depiction of Rufus Lyon shows that moral fervor and aesthetic ignorance are frequently Puritanic coordinates. Lyon is a Dissenter—a "hole and corner" Puritan, in Matthew Arnold's phrase—whose acquaintance with sweetness and light is slight; he is a man whose rigorous notions prevent him from solving the major problem of his life, the reconciliation of his marriage to his vocation, but whose problem is solved for him by the death of his wife. Dorothea is not allowed the luxury of living in a corner. The experience of Rome changes her life, and London becomes her home. Although her husband's happy death also solves a problem in her life, she is faced with other difficulties that a simple Hebraism cannot help her with. Without losing the moral fervor of her life, she is required to give it the guidance that Hellenism can provide. And the Apollonian Ladislaw eventually shakes some light in her direction. Before going on to Ladislaw, however, let us retreat from the text for a moment, look about us, survey the ground, and try to determine whether the territory already traversed is governed by any legitimate aesthetic authority.

The greatest son of Evangelical Puritanism who turned art critic was John Ruskin.[3] His voice is heard throughout *Middlemarch* when aesthetics is the issue. *Modern Painters*, Ruskin's first great work, begins by telling us that art is a language—"nothing but a noble and expressive language, invaluable as the vehicle of thought"—that artist and critic alike must learn (*Works* 3:87). George Eliot elaborated Ruskin's notion that art is a language in her 1854 review of his Edinburgh lectures on architecture and painting: "The aim of Art, in depicting any natural object, is to produce in the mind analogous emotions to those produced by the object itself; but as with all our skill and care we cannot imitate it exactly, this aim is not attained by *transcribing*, but by *translating* it into the language of Art" (*Notebook* 140; see fig. 1).[4] The impulse behind *Modern Painters*—the same impulse that stood behind the third Edinburgh lecture, "Turner and His Works"—was Ruskin's desire to teach his contemporaries to appreciate the landscape paintings of J. M. W. Turner, who, critics maintained, represented nature falsely. Only by distinguishing *copying* from the *truth of imitation*—in Eliot's vocabulary, by distinguishing *transcribing* from *translating*—can Ruskin show that Turner is a realist who captures the soul of nature (its vital force) rather than its less essential, surface attributes. Capturing the soul of nature is for Ruskin a moral act of a moral sensibility, just as appreciating that achievement is preconditioned by the moral sensibility of the viewer. Knowledge of the language of painting enables one to create and perceive the truth of a nonliteral but realistic representation of nature. Language leads artist and critic to the true, the beautiful, and the good, which are essential to both a moral art and a moral life.

What George Eliot presents in the heroine of *Middlemarch*, then, is a Puritan with the right moral impulse who is cut off from the deeper truths of nature and history and culture because she does not know the language of art. Moreover, this ignorance exacerbates her sense of alienation. Rome overwhelms Dorothea and makes the comfort of her homeland seem far away; Casaubon's inability to help her learn—he

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cannot even understand why she needs to learn —the language of art serves to divide her from him; and her Swiss Protestant response to an Italian Catholic culture sickens her spirit: Saint Peter's at Christmastide becomes "a disease of the retina" (ch. 20). Furthermore, the splendid ruins and art of Rome are memorials of a once vibrant spiritual life that stand to mock a modern world notably bereft of religious belief. As the ruins of a defunct spiritual ideal, Rome is an image of Dorothea's soul, which has longed to find a spiritual ideal in marriage and has found only desolation. Fortunately, at this juncture in her life, Will Ladislaw appears and helps Dorothea through her difficulties.

When Will and Dorothea meet in Rome (ch. 21), this second encounter is directly concerned with the language of art. Will, who reminds one of the irradiated emeralds in chapter 1—"Ladislaw's smile was . . . a gush of inward light illuminating the transparent skin"—recalls to Dorothea the circumstances of their first meeting at Lowick, when, as he says, "you annihilated my poor sketch with your criticism." He continues, "I daresay you don't remember it as I do—that the relation of my sketch to nature was quite hidden from you."

> "That was really my ignorance," said Dorothea, admiring Will's good humour. "I must have said so only because I never could see any beauty in the pictures which my uncle told me all judges thought very fine. And I have gone about with just the same ignorance in Rome. . . . It must be my own dulness." (ch. 21)

Ladislaw replies in a way that once again recalls an earlier remark: "Art is an old language with a great many artificial affected styles, and sometimes the chief pleasure one gets out of knowing them is the mere sense of knowing" (ch. 9).

Ladislaw's answer indicates that the pleasure one takes in translating a picture, once one knows the language, may be intellectual only and not affective in the least. There is at no point in *Middlemarch* any praise for a highly stylized art. Eliot herself admired Ruskin for teaching the one great doctrine of realism in art—realism that, for Ruskin and Eliot, means nature conceived organically, not as the clockwork of the Enlightenment or the chain of being of the Renaissance—and realism pervades aesthetic discussion throughout *Middlemarch*, from Ladislaw's landscape to Naumann's symbolic histories of the world.

Thanks to Ladislaw, Dorothea has already mastered some of the language of art by the time they visit Adolf Naumann's atelier:

> Dorothea felt that she was getting quite new notions as to 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 [see figs. 2 and 3], or knives accidentally wedged into their skulls. Some things which had seemed monstrous to her were gathering intelligibility and even a natural meaning. . . . (ch. 22)[5]

This same scene presents an attack on what might justly be called the corruption of the language of art. Naumann speaks an ornate rhetoric with brush and palette by making relatively simple things bear a weight of meaning that they cannot sustain. Ladislaw is quick to call this corruption of language to Dorothea's attention by suggesting that he is going Naumann one better.

> Naumann has been painting the Saints drawing the Car of the Church, and I have been making a sketch of Marlowe's Tamburlaine Driving the Conquered Kings in his Chariot. . . . I mean to outdo him in breadth of intention. I take Tamburlaine in his chariot for the tremendous course of the world's physical history lashing on the harnessed dynasties. (ch. 22)

"Do you intend Tamburlaine to represent earthquakes and volcanoes?" asks Dorothea:

> "Oh, yes," said Will laughing, "and migrations of races and clearings of forests—and America and the steam-engine. Everything you can imagine."
>
> "What a difficult kind of shorthand!" said Dorothea, smiling towards her husband. (ch. 22)

Ladislaw here ridicules what Ruskin, in *Modern Painters*, called "high-art":

> The so-called historical or "high-art" painter is a person infinitely inferior to the painter of flowers or still life. . . . He degrades the subjects he intended to honour, and his work is more utterly thrown away, and his rank as an artist in reality lower, than if he had devoted himself to the imitation of the simplest objects of natural history. The works of Overbeck are a most notable instance of this form of error. (*Works* 5:50)

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Needless to say, Adolf Naumann, wearing "a dove-coloured blouse and a maroon velvet cap," wears what Overbeck wore in his studio and is a counterfeit of the Nazarene, as Sibilla Pfeiffer pointed out some fifty-seven years ago (285; for a discussion of Johann Friedrich Overbeck and another prototype of Naumann, Joseph von Fürich, see Witemeyer 78–87).

A good deal of fairly sophisticated fun takes place in the atelier at the expense of Naumann and Casaubon. (Casaubon, of course, does not like the careless mythological interpretations of artists.) In *Middlemarch*, one should note, Ladislaw, who quits Naumann and supersedes Casaubon, proves himself their most telling critic. The history of mythological scholarship testifies to Will's correctness in criticizing Casaubon's futile work on the projected "Key to all Mythologies." Unable to read German, Casaubon is unaware of the work of Karl Otfried Müller, which in 1825 changed the course of studies in mythology. Casaubon, Ladislaw says, succeeds Jacob Bryant in a bankrupt tradition—Bryant, who, Edward B. Hungerford remarks, got everything wrong in ninety years of trying to get a thing or two right and finally died after being hit on the head by a falling book, when Scholarship, seemingly, could no longer "endure the outrage."[6]

If one sympathizes with Ruskin's criteria for "Greatness of Style" in volume 3 of *Modern Painters*, as George Eliot did in her April 1856 notice in the *Westminster Review* (*Notebook* 272–74), then one sees that Ladislaw's parody of Naumann's painting is as accurate as his attack on Casaubon. The good-humored Naumann is as vain an artist as any who could excite Ruskinian outrage.

> My existence [says Naumann] presupposes the existence of the whole universe—does it *not?* and my function is to paint—and as a painter I have a conception which is altogether *genialisch* . . . ; therefore, the universe is straining towards that picture through that particular hook or claw which it puts forth in the shape of me. . . . (ch. 19)

The picture, incorporating Dorothea, represents a Hegelian concept of history working itself out through Naumann himself. To Ruskin, "high-art" of the Overbeck kind is nonsense and the product of unrestrained vanity: "the modern German and Raphaelesque schools lose all honour and nobleness in barber-like admiration of handsome faces, and have, in fact, no real faith except in straight noses and curled hair" (*Works* 5:57). This "high-art" makes no impression on Dorothea—"I think I would rather feel that painting is beautiful than have to read it as an enigma," she says (ch. 22)—even though she has learned some of the language that makes it intelligible. Like Ruskin, she demands the best:

> I should be quite willing to enjoy art here [she tells Ladislaw] but there is so much . . . that seems to me a consecration of ugliness rather than beauty. The painting and sculpture may be wonderful, but the feeling is often low and brutal, and sometimes even ridiculous. Here and there I see what takes me at once as noble. . . . but that makes it the greater pity that there is so little of the best kind among all that mass of things over which men have toiled so. (ch. 22)

Dorothea characteristically pities the labor of men that has yielded so little in the face of so much. Ruskin similarly laments the inferior landscapes of the many artists who tried to capture the majesty of the Simplon Pass. But Dorothea is unlike Ruskin in the compassion she has for labor that seems wasted. Her response to such painting is of a piece with her response to Casaubon's years of wasted work. Dorothea's is a moral sensibility informed by compassion for those who labor in the production of gems, in the production of cameos, in the production of paintings; for those like Lydgate who labor unrewarded in science and like Casaubon who labor erroneously in scholarly pursuits. It is a compassion that is susceptible to outrage when connoisseurs make a false culture out of third-rate art while neglecting the hardness of the lives around them. Eliot strikes out against such connoisseurship when she mockingly paints a pastoral version of down-and-out tenant-farm life.[7] And Dorothea strikes out against it when she indicts Mr. Brooke for cherishing painterly Correggiosities while fostering social atrocities:[8]

> Think of Kit Downes, uncle, who lives with his wife and seven children in a house with one sitting-room and one bed-room hardly larger than this table!—and those poor Dagleys, in their tumble-down farm-house, where they live in the back kitchen and leave the other rooms to the rats! That is one reason why I did not like the pictures here, dear uncle—which

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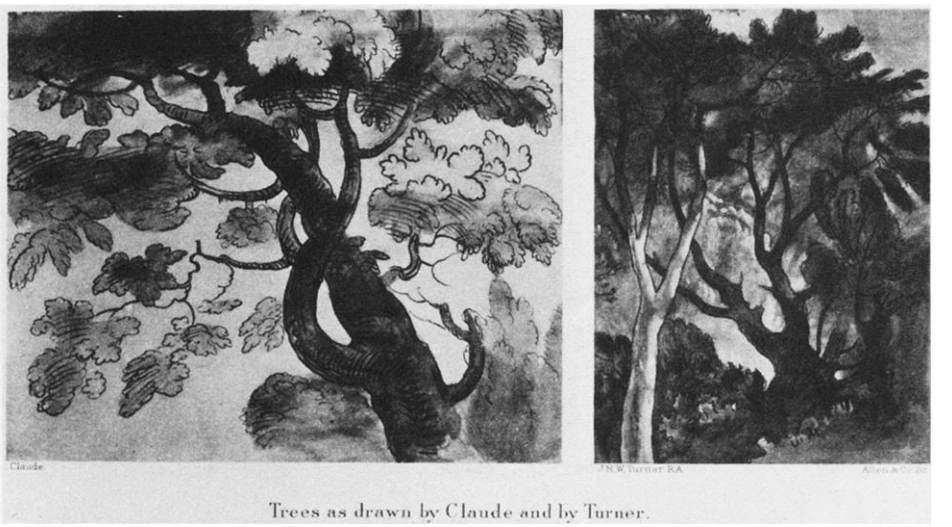

Fig. 1. Trees as Drawn by Claude and by Turner. From John Ruskin, *Lectures on Architecture and Painting.*

Fig. 2. Half-Length Enthroned Madonna between Saint Margaret and Saint Dorothea. Engraving after a picture by Mabuse. From Anna Jameson, *Sacred and Legendary Art.*

Fig. 3. Saint Barbara Enthroned. Engraving after a picture by Matteo di Siena. From Anna Jameson, *Sacred and Legendary Art.*

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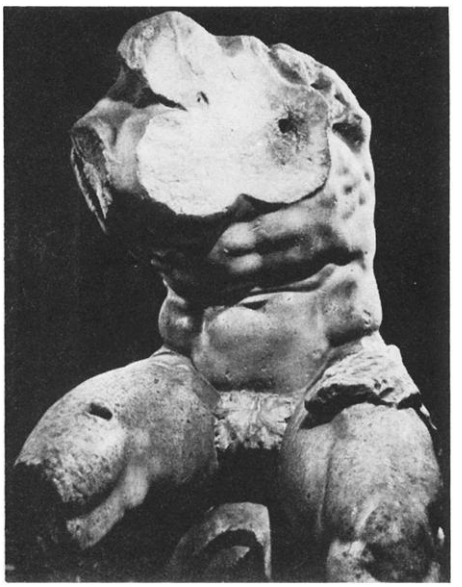

Fig. 4. Torso of Hercules. Vatican Museum, Rome. Courtesy of Kodansha, Ltd., Tokyo. Reproduced by permission.

Fig. 5. *Ariadne*. Vatican Museum, Rome. Courtesy of Kodansha, Ltd., Tokyo. Reproduced by permission.

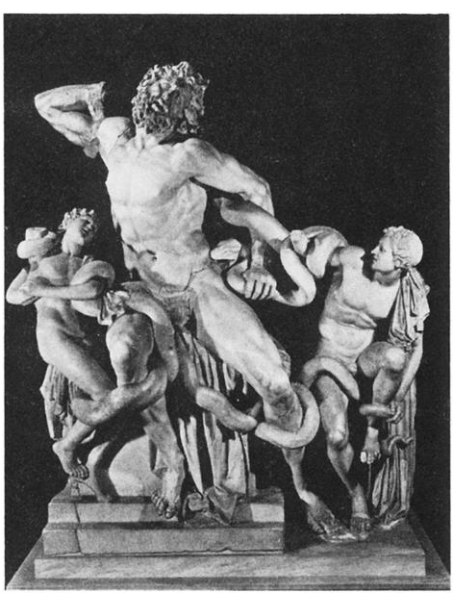

Fig. 6. *Laocoön*. Vatican Museum, Rome. Courtesy of Kodansha, Ltd., Tokyo. Reproduced by permission.

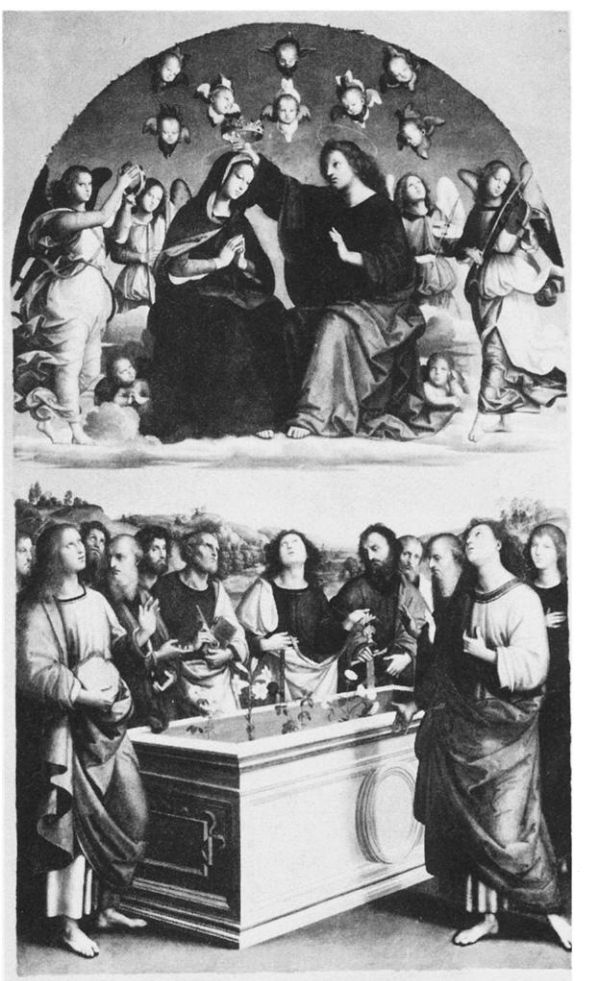

Fig. 7. *Coronation of the Virgin* by Raphael. Vatican Museum, Rome. Reproduced by permission.

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you think me stupid about. I used to come home from the village with all that dirt and coarse ugliness like a pain within me, and 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. (ch. 39)

Will Ladislaw tells Dorothea that, as far as art goes, "there is always a great deal of poor work: the rarer things want that soil to grow in"; and that, as far as compassion goes, she must avoid a "fanaticism of sympathy," for "the best piety is to enjoy—when you can" (ch. 22). Dorothea seems ultimately to agree with this philosophy—for joy is the shaping spirit of the imagination and Casaubon is "joyless"—but she finds it difficult to enjoy when others suffer: this feeling, translated into specific terms, underlies her inability to appreciate her uncle's pictures while he fails to appreciate his tenants' woes. Ruskin's sentiments were exactly those of Dorothea. In the first two volumes of *Modern Painters* (1843, 1845), as John D. Rosenberg remarks, Ruskin "looked at mountain peaks and saw God"; in the last three (1856, 1860), Ruskin "looked at their bases and saw shattered rocks and impoverished villages." "Ruskin's interest moved from mountains to men, from art to society" (15). *The Stones of Venice* (1851, 1853) was to praise what Ruskin saw as the organic society of medieval Europe at the expense of what he saw as the egotistical, disintegrated society of the Renaissance. In Mr. Brooke's drawing room he would have been more savage than Dorothea.

In *Middlemarch* Dorothea undergoes an education in the language of art, but she assimilates that language to a more encompassing experience of life; Dorothea, therefore, demands a realistic art that equals its subject in power and that relates to the culture in which it is appreciated, instead of standing apart from that culture, mocking the hard actualities of human existence. When Ladislaw, in the manner of Goethe,[9] describes a poet as one whose knowledge passes into feeling and whose feeling passes into knowledge, he describes Dorothea (ch. 22). Knowledge of life must sharpen feeling for art; knowledge of art, feeling for life (see Lewes, *Goethe* 1:37). Insofar as Dorothea is concerned, then, her aesthetic theory matures with her moral experience. That is the way the novel is dramatized. The winds of life that blow across the strings of her soul produce an ever richer musical poem, which Ladislaw, interpreting Goethe, can explicate but which Adolf Naumann, interpreting Hegel, cannot. Ladislaw's debate with Naumann amplifies this premise (ch. 19).

In creating the character of Ladislaw, Eliot touched her portrait with characteristics of the young Goethe—who was by no means the sagacious Goethe of *Dichtung und Wahrheit*—that she drew from Lewes' benchmark biography. She gives Ladislaw "magnificent hair" like Goethe's (Lewes 1:103) that shakes out light and makes him seem an Apollo (1:93, 241). Both are given a "manysidedness," a *Vielseitigkeit*, that takes them into painting, poetry, and politics (1:46). Kestner describes Goethe as someone who "has occupied himself chiefly with the *belles lettres* and the fine arts, or rather with all sorts of knowledge, except that which wins bread" (1:146). The same is true of Ladislaw: "O, he does not mean it seriously with painting," says Naumann. "His walk must be *belles-lettres*" (ch. 22). Both know Italian painting but fail as painters (Lewes 1:81). Each connects religion with beauty (1:314) and feeling with knowledge (1:337). Both are very fond of children (1:165, 314). And, finally, both Goethe and Ladislaw follow the aesthetic teaching of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing as set forth in the *Laokoon* (1:81).[10]

Ladislaw therefore attacks Naumann with Lessing, as well as with Ruskin, when the German artist insists on painting Dorothea into one of his historical canvases.

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, true seeing is within; and painting stares at you with insistent imperfection. I feel that especially about representations of women. As if a woman were a mere coloured superficies! . . . This woman whom you have just seen, for example: how would you paint her voice, pray? But her voice is much diviner than anything you have seen of her. (ch. 19)

Ruskin, of course, maintained in the first volume of *Modern Painters* that color was "a most unimportant characteristic of objects" (*Works* 3:159), that painters who caught merely the surface of their subjects portrayed the least im-

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portant truths about them. But when Lessing, in the *Laokoon*, distinguishes the temporal arts of music and poetry from the spatial arts of painting and sculpture, his philosophical argument is more damaging than Ruskin's to the enterprise of world-historical painting that Naumann is engaged in. Ladislaw maintains that Dorothea's soul is in her voice, and on two occasions compares her voice to that of an Aeolian harp, the Romantic image for poetry and the poet. "Will's emphasis upon Dorothea's voice directly parallels Lessing's emphasis upon Laokoön's voice, which can be represented by Vergil but not by the sculptor," says Hugh Witemeyer (42). Furthermore, he describes Dorothea's developing, like a poem, into something beautiful by the harmonious interplay of knowledge and feeling (ch. 22). Not only is it a basic mistake for Naumann to try to depict the temporal events of history in the spatial art of painting, but it is also a mistake for him to try to capture the music and poetry of Dorothea on canvas. Eclectically combining the theories of Ruskin and Lessing, Ladislaw defines the weakness of Naumann as an artist and the strength of Dorothea as a woman.

This may seem a rather remarkable achievement for Ladislaw, who early in the novel thinks himself a genius and awaits the call of the universe to higher things by drinking, fasting, and taking opium. Eliot as narrator is bemused by Ladislaw and defines *genius* as "a power to make or do, not anything in general, but something in particular" (ch. 10). What Will comes to do in particular is to care for Dorothea and to work for the Reform Bill of 1832. He gives over painting, which he does without genius, and enters politics: "Will became an ardent public man, working well in those times when reforms were begun . . ." (Finale). Will finds his genius in a public life meant to benefit the Dagleys and Downeses as well as the Brookes. He makes himself part of a culture less unknowing and unfeeling than that expressed by the drawing-room paintings of Tipton Grange. In short, Ladislaw develops from a third-rate artist into a first-rate public man. Most of the characters in *Middlemarch*, however, with their class prejudices and political enmities, fail to notice this development. Ladislaw is alternately seen as a Polish spy, as an "Italian with white mice," and as the "grandson of a thieving Jew pawnbroker." Many critics of *Middlemarch* have done little better in describing his character.[11]

Now, this failure of interpretation reveals a blindness to Ladislaw's development as I sketched it a moment ago. It also shows a blindness to Eliot's signals to the reader about Ladislaw's character. Ladislaw's religion is "to love what is good and beautiful when I see it" (ch. 39). Will here echoes not only Goethe and Lessing but also Ruskin, who says in the third volume of *Modern Painters* that "true criticism of art . . . can be just only when it is founded on quick sympathy with the innumerable instincts and changeful efforts of human nature, chastened and guided by unchanging love of all things that God has created to be beautiful, and pronounced to be good" (*Works* 5:43). Ladislaw's instinct for the beautiful and good is most obviously dramatized in his love for Dorothea. But it is also clearly in evidence when Eliot presents him to the reader in the Belvedere Gallery of the Vatican Museum (ch. 19).

Eliot opens chapter 19 by reminding the reader that the 1870s know more about the language of art than the 1820s did. Using information gleaned from Anna Brownell Jameson's *Legends of the Madonna*, she immediately corrects Hazlitt's misidentification of the Virgin's tomb as a monumental vase of flowers. The last work that Jameson discusses is Raphael's *Coronation of the Virgin* (c. 1503). "Here we have the tomb below, filled with flowers," she writes, "and around it the twelve apostles; John and his brother James in front, looking up; behind John, St. Peter; more in the background, St. Thomas holds the girdle"(457). The flowers are proof that the Virgin's body, assumed into heaven, is not in the tomb—a proof that, according to legend, was first given to the doubting apostle Thomas:

> he desired that the tomb should be opened before him; and when it was opened it was found to be full of lilies and roses. Then Thomas looking up to heaven, beheld the Virgin bodily, in a glory of light, slowly mounting towards heaven; and she, for the assurance of his faith, flung down to him her girdle, the same which is to this day preserved in the cathedral of Prato.[12] (434)

The opening of chapter 19, then, suggests Eliot's own rich knowledge of iconography. Passing

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through that portal of suggestion, we come upon a scene rich in iconographical writing, where Eliot employs a language of art drawing on classical mythology as the subtext of a series of realistic events that are dramatized in the chapter.[13]

Ladislaw is found standing before the statue commonly known as the *Belvedere Torso*, which represents Hercules resting from his labors (see fig. 4). This statue gave Adolf Stahr the title of his book *Torso: Kunst, Künstler und Kunstwerk der Alten* (1854–55), which George Eliot reviewed three times (see "The Art of the Ancients," "Art and Belles Lettres," and "The Art and Artists of Greece") and from which she excerpted passages that fill the pages of her *Notebook* (244–48, 275–79, 280–83; for excerpts see 11–12 and 16–18). According to Stahr, Michelangelo recovered the torso from a shoemaker's shop and, in blindness and age, visited the statue again and again to run his hands over its contours: "Zeitlebens ward dieser große Künstler nicht müde, dies Wunder der Kunst zu studieren" 'This great artist never in his life grew weary of studying this masterpiece' (2:26). In the company of Michelangelo, Ladislaw, who has been making his own study of the *Torso*, seems more impressive than not.

He turns away from the *Torso* and sees Dorothea standing before the *Sleeping Adriadne*, a statue that Stahr discusses at length (2:311–14). She is standing with her cheek pillowed in her hand in the posture of Henry of Navarre in canto 7 of the *Purgatorio*, which is quoted, with slight alteration, in the epigraph to chapter 19: "L'altra vedete ch'ha fatto alla guancia / Della sua palma, sospirando, letto" 'Look at the other sighing and making a bed for her cheek with her hand.' This is also the posture that Dorothea assumes when she links the injustice done to Will Ladislaw with that done to his grandmother and takes the miniature of Aunt Julia from the wall to rest her cheek on it as she holds it in her hand (ch. 55). This gesture defines Ladislaw as a victim of injustice, as one who has suffered no less from Casaubon than she. Appropriately, Dorothea stands before the *Sleeping Ariadne*, cheek in hand, suffering because Casaubon has recently been unjust to her.

That injustice is symbolized by the tableau assembled in the Belvedere Gallery. The figure of Dorothea, standing dreamily before the *Ariadne*, resembles this ancient heroine, who sleeps with her cheek and temple resting on the back of her hand (see fig. 5). Casaubon, who has just abandoned her there, reminds us of the faithless Theseus. Ladislaw is like Bacchus, who finds the abandoned Ariadne on Naxos. Here one is reminded of the words Stahr quotes from the *Greek Anthology*:

Wanderer, rühre nicht an die schlafende Tochter des Minos,
Daß sie nicht schnell sich erhebt, und den Geliebten verfolgt.

Wanderer, do not disturb the sleeping daughter of Minos,
Lest she awake and find her lover gone.

Ladislaw does rescue Dorothea from wretchedness after the codicil to her late husband's will testifies to Casaubon's failure as a lover. Naumann's invocation of Schiller's *Der Neffe als Onkel* late in chapter 19 reinforces this pattern by suggesting what actually happens: Will, who is called Casaubon's "nephew," replaces his so-called "uncle" as Dorothea's husband (see Wiesenfarth, "Commentary").

This pattern of Will as Bacchus, Dorothea as Ariadne, and Casaubon as Theseus has a complex development in the novel (see Wiesenfarth, *Mythmaking* 190–99), but its immediate implications are clear. Ladislaw affords Dorothea the emotional and sexual dimension of life that was so blatantly absent in her marriage to Casaubon. The myth enables Eliot to affirm what she avoids endorsing elsewhere—the need for Dionysus in the affairs of men. What is posited dramatically in chapter 19, then, by use of ancient sculpture, a posture out of the *Purgatorio*, and a tableau recalling a classical myth anticipates the ending of *Middlemarch* in Dorothea's union with Will, in the affirmation of justice and compassion and love as necessary to a full life, and in the positive identification of a modern hero and heroine with ancient counterparts. An arrangement that we could describe as *Plastik* has defined plot, theme, and character. By means of it Eliot suggests the significant virtues and faults of her characters before she allows them to develop dramatically. The course of their lives shows Ladislaw gaining in the com-

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passion that characterizes Dorothea and Dorothea affirming the passion that characterizes Ladislaw. Dorothea, who was moved by a "current of feeling" to take the emeralds, in chapter 1, is moved by a "flood of passion" to take Will Ladislaw, in chapter 83. In the earlier scene "a bright gleam" of sunlight galvanizes the action; in the later one, "a vivid flash of lightning." Dorothea no longer needs an excuse like the Revelation of Saint John to take Will, as she once did to take the emeralds. Her once divided sensibility is now unified. She has learned to love what is beautiful and good when she sees it. The woman who began the novel drawing plans for the improvement of cottages ends it marrying the man she loved but thought she could not have. The man who began the novel sketching a landscape ends it in Parliament working for a greater good than his own. In the myth, Bacchus transports Ariadne to the heavens, where she is made a goddess and her crown is a constellation. In the realistic milieu of *Middlemarch*, love and compassion have a more nearly recognizable conclusion. Will and Dorothea marry and do that small good which is available to them to do in a complex epoch, so that, as the Finale indicates, life will be better for you and me. This heroism of two lives aptly unfolds in a dramatic structure that is first suggested by a tableau that by itself could not adequately render the action of *Middlemarch*.

If Eliot here was faithful to the aesthetic of the *Laokoon* by coincidence—Lessing praised Homer's method of isolating a characteristic and then developing it dramatically—she was faithful to Ruskin's aesthetic by design. "Mr. Ruskin," she says in her April 1856 review of the third volume of *Modern Painters*, has "a great deal to say which is of interest and importance to others besides painters." She continues:

> The fundamental principles of all just thought and beautiful action or creation are the same, and in making clear to ourselves what is best and noblest in art, we are making clear to ourselves what is best and noblest in morals; in learning how to estimate the artistic products of a particular age according to the mental attitude and external life of that age we are widening our sympathy and deepening the basis of our tolerance and charity. (*Notebook* 273)

If one translates that statement into the vocabulary used earlier in this paper, one sees that a knowledge of the language of art serves George Eliot as well as it served Dorothea Brooke. For "widening our sympathy and deepening the basis of our tolerance and charity" became the purposes of her novels. The program for achieving that end is also clear in *Modern Painters*. "Nature," says Ruskin, "has for the most part mingled her inferior and nobler elements as she mingles sunshine with shade, giving due use and influence to both; and the painter who chooses to remove the shadow, perishes in the burning desert he has created." Ruskin here insists that "the ugliest objects contain some element of beauty . . . which cannot be separated from their ugliness, but either must be enjoyed together with it or not at all."[14] Translated into the moral context of fiction, this means that in *Middlemarch* Dorothea could not reach the moral beauty she does attain without the considerable ugliness of Casaubon. Ladislaw's development bears the same relation to Casaubon and Bulstrode; Lydgate's to Bulstrode and Rosamond; Fred Vincy's and Mary Garth's to Peter Featherstone. *Middlemarch* is a novel replete with various kinds of moral ugliness, because Eliot believes that ugliness belongs to life as much as shade belongs to sunshine. Ruskin teaches a "truth of infinite value," says Eliot, "and *so* teaches it that men will listen. The truth of infinite value that he teaches is realism—the doctrine that all truth and beauty are attained by a humble and faithful study of nature . . ." (*Notebook* 273). That study leads Dorothea to call Mr. Brooke's attention to Dagley and Downes, who are part of his world. That study also leads Eliot to create a novel in which Casaubon and Bulstrode and Rosamond linger as powerfully in the memory as do Dorothea and Ladislaw and Caleb Garth and to draw the character of Tertius Lydgate with such an admixture of strengths and weaknesses, greatness and commonness, that no one more closely approximates a tragic hero than he—no one is more nearly the Hercules described by Mr. Farebrother at the end of chapter 18: the one who held the distaff and wore the Nessus shirt. It is no accident that chapter 19 reinforces this last allusion to a careworn Hercules by presenting only a torso of the exhausted hero. It reminds us, in its mutilated beauty, of the exhausted Lydgate, who thought himself too strong to be overcome by the petty

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medium of Middlemarch, which, in destroying his medical career, left him only half a man.

Middlemarch has been called the greatest English novel of the nineteenth century: indeed, "in some respects," says Arnold Kettle, it is "the most impressive novel in our language, and one which it is not ridiculous to compare with the novels of Tolstoy . . ." (1:160). What makes *Middlemarch* so impressive is what, in Ruskin's view, makes art great: "It compasses and calls forth the entire human spirit, whereas any other kind of art, being more or less narrow, compasses and calls forth only part of the human spirit."[15] *Middlemarch*, moreover, engages our moral sense, our love of beauty, our sense of truth, and our historical memory—Ruskin's composites of the entire human spirit—without sacrificing realism. It is a novel in the mode of painting that Ruskin described as

> Naturalist Idealism, which accepts the weaknesses, faults, and wrongnesses in all things that it sees, but so places them that they form a noble whole, in which the imperfection of each several part is not only harmless, but absolutely essential, and yet in which whatever is good in each several part shall be completely displayed.
>
> (quoted in Eliot, *Notebook* 272, headnote)

Just as Dorothea had to learn the language of art to reach emotional maturity, George Eliot had to learn it to reach artistic maturity. And just as Ladislaw taught Dorothea, Ruskin taught George Eliot. One would have to travel a far road to find another voice that so clearly articulates the aesthetics of *Middlemarch*.

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Notes

[1] Eliot's authoritative source on gems, C. W. King's *Antique Gems*, includes a discussion entitled "Gems of the Apocalypse" (428–33).

[2] In antiquity the emerald was believed to cure myopia. Pliny says that Nero "used to view the combats of gladiators in the arena through an Emerald, 'Smaragdo spectabat' " (King 34). It is therefore fitting that Dorothea, who is nearsighted, should favor emeralds.

[3] *The George Eliot Letters* establish that Eliot knew Ruskin personally and that he visited her at least once at the Priory (9:95), that she read *Modern Painters* (2:228), *The Political Economy of Art* (2:422), and *St. Mark's Rest* (7:295). She reviewed *Lectures on Architecture and Painting* in the *Leader* (*Notebook* 238–43) and *Modern Painters* 3 in *Westminster Review* (*Notebook* 272–74). She took extensive notes from *Stones of Venice* (*Notebook* 39–42). Eliot said that she "venerate[d]" Ruskin "as one of the great Teachers of the day" (*Letters* 2:422); she found his best work "strongly akin to the sublimest part of Wordsworth" (*Letters* 2:423). In 1856 she told Barbara Leigh Smith, "I think he is the finest writer living" (*Letters* 2:255). George Eliot's debt to John Ruskin has been acknowledged and studied by Darrell Mansell, Jr. (203–16), N. N. Feltes, and Hugh Witemeyer (24, 27, 142–56, 171–73).

[4] In *Lectures on Architecture and Painting*, Ruskin praises Orcagna and his contemporaries: "Their art was conventional and imperfect, but they considered it only as a *language* wherein to convey the knowledge of certain facts . . ." (*Works* 12:148; italics added). Ruskin suggests five different translations of nature into landscape painting: "the periods of Giotto, Leonardo, Titian, pastoralism, and Turner" (*Works* 12:128). Pastoralism, says Ruskin, is "a gulf of foolishness, into the bottom of which you may throw Claude and Salvator, neither of them deserving to give a name to anything" (*Works* 12:123). Ruskin illustrates the superiority of Turner's translation of nature in "Trees as Drawn by Claude and by Turner" (*Works* 12:opp. 127; see fig. 1).

[5] Madonnas beneath canopied thrones and saints with architectural models in their hands appear in Anna Brownell Jameson's *Sacred and Legendary Art*, a book that George Eliot knew very well and quoted at length in her *Notebook* (58–64, 65–68). I have been unable to find in Jameson's book or anywhere else a saint with a knife wedged into his skull!

[6] The importance of Müller to Eliot is discussed in Harvey, in Deneau, and in Wiesenfarth, *Mythmaking* 34–35, 206. Hungerford writes, "Jacob Bryant was an astonishing person. . . . He devoted a very long life to scholarship, during the nine decades of which he came to not a single correct conclusion. His erudition was equalled only by his capacity to misuse it. He proved that Chatterton did not forge the Rowley poems, that there had never been a Troy, and he set up a system of mythology which dazzles the imagination. At last, as if Learning could no longer endure the outrage, a book fell on him while he was at work in his study, and he died from the injury" (20). The analogy between Bryant and Casaubon is developed further by Pratt and Neufeldt (xlvii).

[7] In her review of volume 2 of Adolf Stahr's *Torso: Kunst, Künstler, und Kunstwerk der Alten*, Eliot records her distaste for connoisseurship—a distaste cultivated by Ruskin's doctrine of realism—by quoting the philosopher Arcesilas' bitter words on those who

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neglect life for art: "Most men . . . think it an indispensable requisite to inquire closely into the composition and value of works of art, which are quite foreign to them, such as pictures and statues, and to contemplate them carefully both with their eyes and mind, while they neglect their own life, which offers them a fruitful subject of meditation" (*Notebook* 276). These words apply exactly to Mr. Brooke's connoisseurship in *Middlemarch*. Ruskin, like Eliot, excoriates an effete pastoralism; for his devastating condemnations of the work of Claude and Salvator, see n. 4. He ranks this pastoralism in poetry with "porcelain shepherds and shepherdesses on a chimney piece as compared with great works of sculpture. . . . The class of poetry which I mean . . . is that in which a farmer's girl is spoken of as a 'nymph,' and a farmer's boy as a 'swain,' and in which throughout a ridiculous and unnatural refinement is supposed to exist in rural life, merely because the poet himself has neither the courage to endure its hardships, nor the wit to conceive its realities" (*Works* 12:118). In *Middlemarch*, Eliot's outrage mirrors Ruskin's: "It is true that an observer, under that softening influence of the fine arts which makes other people's hardships picturesque, might have been delighted with this homestead called Freeman's End: the old house had dormer windows in the dark-red roof, two of the chimneys were choked with ivy, the large porch was blocked up with bundles of sticks, and half the windows were closed with grey worm-eaten shutters about which the jasmine-boughs grew in wild luxuriance; the mouldering garden wall with hollyhocks peeping over it was a perfect study of highly-mingled subdued colour, and there was an aged goat (kept doubtless on interesting superstitious grounds) lying against the open back-kitchen door. The mossy thatch of the cow-shed, the broken grey barn-doors, the pauper labourers in ragged breeches who had nearly finished unloading a waggon of corn into the barn ready for early thrashing; the scanty dairy of cows being tethered for milking and leaving one half of the shed in brown emptiness; the very pigs and white ducks seeming to wander about the uneven neglected yard as if in low spirits from feeding on a too meagre quality of rinsings—all these objects under the quiet light of a sky marbled with high clouds would have made a sort of picture which we have all paused over as a 'charming bit,' touching other sensibilities than those which are stirred by the depression of the agricultural interest, with the sad lack of farming capital, as seen constantly in the newspapers of that time" (ch. 39).

[8] Witemeyer points out that Laurence Sterne, who speaks of "the corregiescity of Correggio" in *Tristam Shandy*, anticipates Eliot's use of the term (225, n. 59). The seeming opaqueness of Correggio's works may have been suggested to Eliot by Friedrich von Schlegel's "Letters on Christian Art," which G. H. Lewes reviewed for the *Athenaeum*. In opposition to Schlegel's "fantastic" idea that "Correggio's distinctive peculiarity" is "musical," Lewes remarks "that it would be difficult . . . to prove Correggio's incorrectness of drawing to have any more recondite cause than his own imperfect mastery of form—or that any study of his *meaning* could make such incorrectness a merit" (296).

[9] Haight does not suggest any model for Ladislaw in "George Eliot's Originals," but Duerksen does in "Shelley in *Middlemarch*." Ladislaw's views on reform, art, and liberty, Duerksen argues, resemble Shelley's; and Ladislaw and Shelley are also alike in stretching out on floors, caring for children, and refusing tainted money. These characteristics nicely complement those of Goethe and help to complete the subtext of Ladislaw's characterization. The Goethe model seems the more consistent, however, when Ladislaw's moral development and moral philosophy are considered. As Haight shows in "George Eliot's 'Eminent Failure,'" Ladislaw makes his way to maturity by trial and error. In "The Morality of Wilhelm Meister" Eliot praised those few individuals who "are taught by their own falls and their own struggles, by their experience of sympathy . . . and help and goodness in the 'publicans and sinners' of these modern days, that the line between the virtuous and vicious, so far from being a necessary safeguard to morality, is itself an immoral fiction" (*Essays* 147). Goethe's belief that a man who hates men's vices hates mankind (Lewes, *Goethe* 1:77) is worked out in Ladislaw's growth to maturity. Indeed, Lewes found that Goethe's "excitable nature" did not fall "within the circle of law," that his vague aims did not become clear, and that what was "fluent" in the "recesses of his mind" did not crystallize into "a definite purpose" until he was thirty years old (1:371).

In "George Eliot's 'Eminent Failure,'" Haight suggests that Ladislaw's partial articulation of a moral philosophy—"The best piety is to enjoy—when you can"—momentarily has him looking like "a forerunner of Pater's New Hedonism" (26), but he quickly rescues Ladislaw from that line of development. George Eliot, of course, deeply disliked what Pater stood for. Speaking of *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, she said: "Mr. Pater's book . . . seems to me quite poisonous in its false principles of criticism and false conceptions of life" (*Letters* 5:455). Whereas Pater's philosophy uses art to isolate men from life by rare intense moments of experience, Goethe uses art to make men more completely human. George Eliot consequently quotes *Wilhelm Meister* with approbation (*Notebook* 8; 144, n. 11): "He was wont to say, 'Men are so inclined to content themselves with what is commonest; the spirit and the senses so easily grow dead to the impressions of the beautiful and perfect,—that every one should study, by all methods, to nourish in his mind the faculty of feeling these things. For no man can bear to be entirely deprived of such enjoyments: it is only because they are not used to taste what is excellent that the generality of people take delight in silly and insipid things, provided they be new. For this reason,' he would add, 'one ought, every day at least, to hear a little song, read a good poem, see a fine picture, and, if it were possible, to speak a few reasonable words.'"

It is a mistake to think of this conviction as hedonism; it is a call, in Matthew Arnold's words, to "cul-

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ture": "Religion says: *The kingdom of God is within you*; and culture, in like manner, places human perfection in an *internal* condition, in the growth and predominance of humanity proper, as distinguished from our animality. It places it in the ever-increasing efficacy and in the general harmonious expansion of those gifts of feeling, which make the peculiar dignity, wealth, and happiness of human nature" (476). For George Eliot, Goethe's moral philosophy leads, not to a "hard, gemlike flame," but to "sweetness and light."

[10] In "Belles Lettres" (1856), George Eliot summarizes the argument of *The Laokoon* as follows: "Every reader of Lessing's 'Laokoon' remembers his masterly distinction between the methods of presentation in poetry and the plastic arts—the acumen and the aptness of illustration with which he shows how the difference in the materials wherewith the poet and the painter or sculptor respectively work, and the difference in their mode of appeal to the mind, properly involve a difference in their treatment of a given subject. Virgil adds to the effect of his description by making this Laokoon shriek with agony; the words, *clamores horrendos ad sidera tollit* [He lifts his horrible cries to the heavens (*Aeneid* 2.22)], do not suggest a distorted mouth, but simply intensify in our imagination the conception of suffering [see fig. 6]. But the sculptor did not attempt to render this detail, because he could have given us nothing else than the distorted mouth, which would merely have been rigid ugliness, exciting in us no tragic emotion. And the same fine instinct which has here guided the sculptor to a different method of treatment from that of the epic poet, is needed in the dramatist. 'It is one thing,' says Lessing, 'to be told that some one shrieked, and another to hear the shriek itself.' The narrative is a suggestion, and addresses the imagination only; but the dramatic representation attacks the sense. On the other hand, the poet would be under an equal mistake if he adopted all the symbolism and detail of the painter and sculptor, since he has at his command the media of speech and action, and it is the absence of these which their symbolism is intended to supply" (*Notebook* 284).

[11] See Haight's "George Eliot's 'Eminent Failure,' Will Ladislaw" for a summary and analysis of this negative criticism.

[12] E. E. Duncan-Jones was the first to identify William Hazlitt as the critic George Eliot refers to in ch. 19. He also identifies the picture in question as Raphael's *Coronation of the Virgin* (see fig. 7).

[13] Entering through this same portal, U. C. Knoepflmacher sees something different in ch. 19 and explores it with another set of priorities in mind.

[14] Ruskin, quoted by Eliot, "Art and Belles Lettres," *Westminster Review* 346. In a passage similar to Ruskin's, Eliot writes that "the sphere of art extends wherever there is beauty either in form, or thought, or feeling. A ray of sunlight falling on the dreariest sandbank will often serve the painter for a fine picture; the tragedian may take for his subject the most hideous passions if they serve as the background for some divine deed of tenderness or heroism, and so the novelist may place before us every aspect of human life where there is some trait of love, or endurance, or helplessness to call forth our best sympathies" (*Essays* 146).

[15] Quoted by Eliot in "Art and Belles Lettres," *Westminster Review* 345.

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