

THE END(S) OF MYTH IN *MIDDLEMARCH*:
THE POETICS AND POLITICS
OF LITERARY EXPERIENCE

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Introduction

WHAT HAPPENS to myth and mythical allusion in the so-called “classic realist text” of the nineteenth century? How does it co-habit with the new empirical discourses of science and politics which were becoming more and more the stuff of fiction and literature? Do the allusions to classical and Christian mythology, which continue to permeate the texts of a “realist” writer like George Eliot, function as a common intertext, a consecrated body of shared knowledge encouraging a consensual reading practice and providing a “key” to understanding the nineteenth century text? Or on the contrary, is the discourse of myth to be read as a jarring intrusion into the more empirical, positivist discourses of the day which would willingly confine myth to a purely decorative function? The nineteenth century saw the triumph of the philosophical “positivism” of Auguste Comte, a philosophy which tended to sideline the aesthetic imagination and what was seen as the “obscurantism” of myth in favour of an emphasis on the rationality and objectivity of scientific naturalism. Gilbert Durand in *Introduction à la mythodologie* describes this sidelining as follows: “Saint-Simon, Auguste Comte ont une philosophie progressiste de l’histoire et l’« imaginaire » est bien de façon manifeste chez eux repoussé dans les limbes pré-historiques, dans des « états » – « théologique » puis « métaphysique » – obscurantistes et médiévaux. L’état positiviste, le dernier, l’actuel, sera l’état du bonheur humain permis par le progrès des sciences et des techniques”¹. Yet this overt rejection of the imaginary and the mythical, relegated to the primitive “theological” and “metaphysical” stages of human development in Comte’s scheme of things

in favour of a scientific "positivist" stage, sits uneasily with what Durand sees as the paradoxical "return of myth" in the nineteenth century. According to Durand, even the anti-mythological philosophy of positivism itself is couched in the terms of myth: "Auguste Comte [...] veut dépasser et détruire l'obscurantisme du mythe, mais par le moyen d'un autre mythe, d'une autre théologie qui n'est pas nouvelle, [...] une mythologie progressiste"². Indeed, even the most positivistic of scientific discourses of the period, the evolutionary theory of Charles Darwin, owed much to myth, implying "a new myth of the past: instead of the garden at the beginning, there was the sea and the swamp", as Gillian Beer's analysis of *Darwin's Plots* shows³:

Faced with so absent a beginning and so bleak and prodigious an extension of time it is not surprising that many of Darwin's first readers favoured the counter-form of evolutionary myth: that of growth, ascent, and development towards complexity. Viewed in that light evolutionary theory can become a new form of quest myth, promising continuing exploration and creating the future as a prize.⁴

The position of a novelist such as George Eliot, an avid reader of both Comte and Darwin, caught between the optimistic social vision of positivism with its demythologising push, and the counter-imperatives of the creative imagination which draws freely on myth and image, emerges clearly in *Middlemarch*, which was George Eliot's response to a request by Frederic Harrison, a leading figure in the Positivist movement, that she write a novel showing "what a Positive system of life would be"⁵. Although the positivist stage proclaimed the end of myth, myth is overtly thematised in the novel as one discourse among many through which characters attempt to make sense of the world (the others being the scientific (Lydgate), the theological and religious (Bulstrode), the political (Brooke), the commercial (Mr Vincy), the romantic (Rosamond), the historical (the narrator), the artistic (Ladislaw), and the technological (Caleb Garth)). The failure of Casaubon's attempt to write a 'Key to all Mythologies' in the novel may appear as a damning indictment of the usefulness of myth as a tool of knowledge. Yet myth traverses the text in ways which take it beyond the narrow confines of Casaubon's project. The range and diversity of mythical allusion in *Middlemarch* is marked by the latency of many of the references, which fosters what Gillian Beer calls "the mystery of relations" in George Eliot's writing⁶. Such an experience of the "mystery of relations" in the reading process takes readers beyond the positivistic pursuit of meaning and understanding of human development towards a more ethical approach better afforded by the processes of art and literature than by the empirical rigidity of scientific investigation.

Myth, science and the pursuit of knowledge

Myth in *Middlemarch* means different things to different characters. For theologian Casaubon, myth is enshrined as a body of knowledge present as "fragments" of a "mosaic"⁷ requiring only to be resolved back into an intelligible 'Key to all Mythologies' which would show that "all the mythical systems or erratic mythical fragments in the world were corruptions of a tradition originally revealed" (*M*, 14). An object of fervid but fruitless inquiry which, to the young and ardent Dorothea Brooke at first has an "attractively labyrinthine extent" (*M*, 14), myth soon has Casaubon lost among "anterooms and winding passages which seemed to lead nowhere. [...] With his taper stuck before him he forgot the absence of windows, and in bitter manuscript remarks on other men's notions about the solar deities, he had become indifferent to the sunlight" (*M*, 136-137). In contrast to Casaubon and his misguided quest for knowledge through myth, the novel's representative of positivist scientific thinking, the doctor Lydgate, dismisses myth as "rather vulgar and vinous" (*M*, 113), especially in the diluted forms in which it has filtered down through his "liberal education" into "the indecent passages in the school classics" (*M*, 98) and "portraits of Lucifer coming down on his bad errands as a large ugly man with bat's wings and spurts of phosphorescence" (*M*, 113). As such, myth compares unfavourably with the discourse of science, "that arduous invention which is the very eye of research, provisionally framing its object and correcting it to more and more exactness of relation" (*M*, 113). Lydgate's positivist pursuit of knowledge is, however, ironically couched in the same labyrinthine imagery as Casaubon's apparently quite different type of inquiry. The object of his pursuit is seen as something to be "tracked in that outer darkness through long pathways of necessary sequence by the inward light which is the last refinement of Energy", and his journey is to take him along "those invisible thoroughfares which are the first lurking-places of anguish, mania and crime" (*M*, 113). As the labyrinth mutates into its structural variant of the web or skein, Casaubon ends up struggling in the "morass of authorship" (*M*, 57), while Lydgate's own ambitions become no less hampered by his entanglement in the "gossamer web" of marriage to Rosamond (*M*, 298), a labyrinth which proves impossible to track: "Between him and her indeed there was that total missing of each other's mental track, which is too evidently possible even between persons who are continually thinking of each other" (*M*, 405).

Both the discourse of myth and the discourse of science fail in the efforts of Casaubon and Lydgate to map and contain the sum of human knowledge and development in *Middlemarch*. They do so largely on account of the refusal of each

to acknowledge the discourse of the other which nonetheless traverses and contaminates the thinking of both. Casaubon, with his theological, metaphysical, monotheistic beliefs, is in apparent diametrical opposition to positivist scientist Lydgate; his belief in the viability of his enterprise is underpinned by his faith in a metaphysical *point d'appui* or "firm footing" which would stabilise the shimmering vastness of myth into a vision of unity, and he displays no sense of the stages of empirical demonstration necessary to arrive there: "Having once mastered the true position and taken a firm footing there, the vast field of mythical constructions became intelligible, nay, luminous with the reflected light of correspondences" (*M*, 14). Yet he displays none of the "symbolic imagination" which Gilbert Durand sees as inherent to the mythological mindset. On the contrary, his obsessively rational mindset, evidenced in the impeccable syntactic complexity of his speech and writing and in the mode in which he conducts his inquiry, aligns him with a form of positivist thinking in the sense that positivism, as John Kucich points out, "was concerned not so much with the discovery of empirical truth – as is often assumed by contemporary caricatures – but with the articulation of a system of rational laws that link phenomena together beneath the level of appearances"⁸. That Casaubon's system for linking together "shattered mummies, and fragments of a tradition [...] wrought from crushed ruins" (*M*, 331) should amount to nothing more relevant than "a plan for threading the stars together" (*M*, 332) is his particular tragedy; his methods of inquiry are nonetheless tainted with positivism, while conversely, as we will see, Lydgate's positivist "strictly scientific view" of things (*M*, 105) is revealed to have its foundations in unquestioned assumptions inherited from myth.

Casaubon's mode of investigation displays many of the taxonomic, hierarchical and sequential features of scientific investigation. He arranges his documents taxonomically, for instance, "in pigeon holes, partly" (*M*, 11) and is quick to ascribe to the various myths their correct generic classification, significantly dismissing the myth of Cupid and Psyche as "probably the romantic invention of a literary period, [which] cannot, I think, be reckoned to be a genuine mythical product" (*M*, 137). If the ostensible definiteness of Casaubon's pseudo-scientific approach is undermined by the "imperfect coherence" (*M*, 136) of his discourse (he is incapable of saying what a "genuine mythical product" actually is, and the reason for his rejection of the fable of Cupid and Psyche may perhaps be ascribed to the sexual nature of the myth which Casaubon represses), his "frigid rhetoric" (*M*, 32) is nonetheless symptomatic of the burden of sterile rationalism weighing him down, as illustrated in the hyper-rational organisation of his proposal of matrimony to Dorothea in which the various stages of his exposition are pedantically

signposted by allusions to, for example, "those affections to which I have but now referred" and "the mental qualities above indicated" (*M*, 27). In the words of U.C. Knoepfelmacher, "Mr Casaubon belongs to the fog-end of the Enlightenment"⁹. With sardonic humour the narrator points up the strictly tabulating and sequential nature of Casaubon's mind, comparing it to "a volume where a *vide supra* could serve instead of repetitions, and not the ordinary long-served blotting-book which only tells of forgotten writing" (*M*, 16). This last comparison tellingly suggests that the desultory (but reliable, because "long-served") blotting-book and unsorted papers of a Mr Brooke are somehow worthier tools of knowledge than the "synoptical tabulation" (*M*, 372) and pigeon-holes of Casaubon's mind. Mr Brooke – an unlikely but reliable source of wisdom in the novel – points to the limits of rationalism and taxonomy: "Ah, pigeon-holes will not do. I have tried pigeon-holes, but everything gets mixed in pigeon-holes: I never know whether a paper is in A or Z" (*M*, 11). Casaubon experiences the deficiency of pigeon-holes when Dorothea herself fails to slot into the category he had ascribed to her from his reading of the "sonneteers of the sixteenth century" (*M*, 192) and "all the classical passages" (*M*, 57) on love and marriage: he can only conclude that "the poets had much exaggerated the force of masculine passion" (*M*, 42). A hybrid form of metaphysical thinking tainted with positivist methodology, Casaubon's project is lacking in the necessary objectivity to ensure success, not being "tested by the necessity of forming anything which had sharper collisions than an elaborate notion of Gog and Magog" (*M*, 332). In this he differs from Lydgate who has the declared intention of "combining and constructing with the clearest eye for probabilities and the fullest obedience to knowledge; and then, [...] standing aloof to invent tests by which to try its own work" (*M*, 113; emphasis mine).

Lydgate's more rigorous positivist methods should not, however, blind readers to the mythologising strain that contaminates his search for knowledge, which is essentially couched in the same terms of unity and a quest for origins as Casaubon's, being a search for the "primary webs or tissues" (*M*, 101) that make up the human frame:

What was the primitive tissue? In that way Lydgate put the question – not quite in the way required by the awaiting answer; but such missing of the right word befalls many seekers. And he counted on quiet intervals to be watchfully seized, for taking up the threads of investigation... (*M*, 102)

The flaw in Lydgate's positivist model is here materialised by the severing dash and the aside which throws the whole enterprise into question, but the conjunction "and" which yokes together the aside and the next sentence effectively darns over the incipient gap and allows for Lydgate's continued weaving of a mythical

web of explanation. The narrator repeatedly mentions Lydgate's project in association with the endeavours of his precursors who have achieved mythical or god-like status, those "great originators [who] have been lifted up among the constellations and already rule our fates". In spite of "small temptations and sordid cares", Lydgate believes he is on a "course towards final companionship with the immortals" (*M*, 100). His undertaking is informed by the myth of America: "about 1829 the dark territories of Pathology were a fine America for a spirited young adventurer" (*M*, 101). And where the dark territory of womanhood is concerned, Lydgate's "strictly scientific view of women" (*M*, 105) on which he has determined following his disastrous infatuation with the homicidal actress Laure in Paris, turns out to be nothing more than a set of assumptions about women crystallised in a masculine oral tradition and gleaned from it unquestioningly:

He went home and read far into the smallest hour, bringing a much more testing vision of details and relations into this pathological study than he had ever thought it necessary to apply to the complexities of love and marriage, these being subjects on which he felt himself amply informed by literature, and that traditional wisdom which is handed down in the genial conversation of men. (*M*, 113)

Empirical demonstration is deemed unnecessary to prove the eligibility of an already mythically enshrined Rosamond Vincy, "who had just the kind of intelligence one would desire in a woman [...] enshrined in a body which expressed this with a force of demonstration that excluded the need for other evidence" (*M*, 112; emphasis mine). In his study of womanhood – which in spite of his intentions becomes the primary object of Lydgate's investigations during his time in Middlemarch – and despite his arrogant dismissal of "vulgar and vinous" forms of imagination, myth comes in through the back door, determining the doctor's actions and skewing his positivist theories. Neither the representations of woman in myth and literature nor their objectification in science are adequate to account for what the narrator calls their "inconvenient indefiniteness":

if there were one level of feminine incompetence as strict as the ability to count three and no more, the social lot of women might be treated with scientific certitude. Meanwhile the indefiniteness remains, and the limits of variation are really much wider than any one would imagine from the sameness of women's coiffure and the favourite love-stories in prose and verse. (*M*, xiv)

Both "scientific certitude" and the prevailing *mythos* crystallised in the "favourite love-stories in prose and verse" congeal Woman in too definite forms, ascribing taxonomies and narrowing down the "limits of variation". It is an exploration of these "limits of variation" which a reading of *Middlemarch* offers, not only the variations of womanhood, but an experience of diversity and indefiniteness that

is central to the novel's moral and artistic definition. As Gillian Beer points out, there is not just one "primitive tissue", just as there is not just one "key to all mythologies":

This emphasis upon plurality, rather than upon singleness, is crucial to the developing argument of *Middlemarch* which, with all its overtly taxonomic ordering, has as its particular deep counter-enterprise the establishment of individual diversity beneath ascribed typologies.¹⁰

Indefiniteness

Gillian Beer has magisterially shown in *Darwin's Plots* how the process of reading *Middlemarch* "leads into divergence and variability"¹¹, especially through what she calls "laying alongside or collocation of apparently similar happenings"¹². She points out how George Eliot's use of myth in *Middlemarch*, unlike Casaubon's, favours abundance of reference even at the expense of uniformity of meaning, since all of the many allusions to mythological systems which are woven into the narrator's commentary or characters' dialogue – "classical myth, folk-tale and theatre, Troubadour romance and courtly love, the Arabian Nights, hagiography, mythography, the Brothers Grimms' collections, Christian legend and martyrology"¹³ – provide the reader with provisional significances without necessarily ever cohering into a uniform account. Beer illustrates this by analysing the diverse myths that cluster around Dorothea: at one point, Dorothea is associated by spatial contiguity with the "reclining Ariadne" (*M*, 131), which she is contemplating in the Vatican during her honeymoon, but the narrator also adds that this statue was, at the time of Dorothea's marriage, "then called the Cleopatra" (*M*, 131). This telescoping of two mythical female figures of different origins highlights the contingent nature of mythical representations which are perceived and interpreted differently at different times in history. But the "official" designation of the statue as Ariadne is later corroborated by Will Ladislaw's subsequent angry implication that Dorothea's husband is a Minotaur:

You talk as if you had never known any youth. It is monstrous – as if you had had a vision of Hades in your childhood, like the boy in the legend. You have been brought up in some of those horrible notions that choose the sweetest women to devour – like Minotaurs. (*M*, 153)

Already, though, the myth of Ariadne is branching out into another subtext of allusion here: the reference to the "vision of Hades" recalls a former association of Dorothea with Persephone, who was ravished by the god of the Underworld while gathering flowers, plunging the world into wintry darkness – on several

occasions Casaubon identifies himself with Hades ("I live too much with the dead. My mind is something like the ghost of an ancient, wandering about the world and trying mentally to construct it as it used to be" *M*, 9) and implicitly Dorothea with Persephone: "I have been little disposed to gather flowers that would wither in my hand, but now I shall pluck them with eagerness, to place them in your bosom", professes Casaubon (*M*, 32). The footnote in the Norton edition of the text corroborates this mythical ramification, suggesting that the "boy in the legend" can only refer to Eros who is persuaded by Aphrodite to shoot Hades with one of his arrows and smite him with love for Persephone. Gillian Beer however, sees the "boy in the legend" as a latent reference to "Anskar, a ninth century missionary to Scandinavia, whose boyhood vision was a promise of his own eventual martyrdom"¹⁴. This divergence of interpretation is in itself telling of the function of myth in *Middlemarch*, whose presence does not halt interpretation by providing definitive meaning but incites antagonistic readings which go to make up the whole¹⁵. Beer sees the latency of the "boy in the legend" myth in aesthetic terms, as an "extraordinary example of the profuse organic creativity of *Middlemarch* that George Eliot could afford *not* to bring it to the surface: that she could allow the mystery of relations to persist"¹⁶. This "mystery of relations" can also be seen in ethical terms. Richard Kearney explains the importance of recognising the ethical dimension of myth in order to forestall its being recuperated for dangerously reductive, essentialist readings:

myth is not authentic or inauthentic by virtue of some external essence *in itself*, but by virtue of its ongoing reinterpretation by each historical generation. [...] Every mythology implies a *conflict of interpretations*. And this conflict is, in the final analysis, an ethical one.¹⁷

An interstitial reading of myth in *Middlemarch*, a reading-between the different strands or versions of the same mythical allusion, thus has a properly ethical dimension in that it precludes the "ideological perversion" (Kearney) that arises when a myth is given only one reading to the exclusion of all others. In this respect the reverend Camden Farebrother is a more accurate mythographer than Casaubon since rather than excluding myths in a search for authenticity, he embraces the whole set of variants of a given myth and lays them side by side. His mythological reading of himself, but also implicitly of his fellow Middlemarcher Lydgate, as a (failed) Hercules figure draws on the version of the myth which stages an effeminate Hercules subjected to queen Omphale and a victim of his wife's schemes, rather than on his virile labours, thus prophesying Lydgate's fate in the novel: "The choice of Hercules is a pretty fable; but Prodicus makes it easy work for the hero, as if the first resolves were enough. Another story says that he came

to hold the distaff, and at last wore the Nessus shirt" (*M*, 129-130). Refusing to place one intertext above the other, Farebrother leaves the implications of the myth open for Lydgate to mistakenly infer that "there was a pitiable infirmity of will in Mr Farebrother" (*M*, 130). Myth here, while pointing to an inherent truth, also has the potential to mislead. On the one hand, science and mythology do, as Gillian Beer points out, have the consensual function of "creat[ing] within the work ways beyond the single into a shared, anonymous, and therefore more deeply creative knowledge"¹⁸ on account of their narratives which "bind perceptions together and [...] enrich with meaning the recurrences of human experience"¹⁹; but on the other hand, they are also involved in a deeply antagonistic jostle of significations which point to both truth and its opposite. Myth may be valuable not only as a problem-solving tool, but more importantly, and conversely, as an agonistic mode of discourse which resists consensual explanation and instead disseminates disagreement and dissent, dis-sensus as opposed to con-sensus²⁰. This element of *agon* central to myth and, as some recent inquiries would have it, to the "literary experience" itself as a politically involved act²¹, is nowhere more explicitly foregrounded than in George Eliot's use of the myth of Antigone, whose plot of political and familial wrangling, overlaid with a network of Christian allusion, informs her literary production in structurally significant ways.

Antigone and *agon*

The myth of Antigone surfaces again and again in George Eliot's novels²². In the tragedy of Sophocles, Antigone, one of the daughters of Oedipus and Jocasta, buries her brother Polynices' body in accordance with the wishes of the gods but in defiance of a legal ruling passed by her uncle Creon, thus effectively condemning herself to death. If Dorothea is an Ariadne, she is also, in the eyes of Nazarene painter Naumann, a "Christian Antigone" "antique form animated by Christian sentiment [...] sensuous force controlled by spiritual passion" (*M*, 132). Like Antigone, Dorothea is similarly torn between conflicting claims and imperatives: on the one hand, her conviction that dispossessed Will Ladislaw has a "prior claim" (*M*, 256) to the fortune which she will inherit as Casaubon's widow; and on the other, her husband's "bitter resistance to that idea of claim" (*M*, 341) and the hold that the "dead hand" of his will has over her, forbidding her to fulfil it. Yet Dorothea is also a St. Theresa, as the parabolic Prelude outlining that saint's life hints at, suggesting that this novel will be the story of one of "these later-born Therasas [who] were helped by no coherent social faith and order which could perform the function of knowledge for the ardently willing soul" (*M*, xiii). Clearly,

though, by the end of the novel, Dorothea, having spent her "full nature" in "channels which had no great name on the earth" (*M*, 578), is neither a St. Theresa nor an Antigone, or only negatively so, as the Finale points out: "A new Theresa will hardly have the opportunity of reforming a conventual life, any more than a new Antigone will spend her heroic piety in daring all for the sake of a brother's funeral: the medium in which their ardent deeds took shape is for ever gone." (*M*, 577) The mythical medium has been replaced by a "petty medium" (*M*, 129), a *middling*-ness or mediocrity which is George Eliot's chosen plastic for shaping the "home epic" of *Middlemarch* (*M*, 573).

The significance of the myth of Antigone for George Eliot resided not in the linguistic or literary brio of the original text by Sophocles since, as she points out in her 1856 review of a London production of the play, the force of the myth persists beyond, and in spite of, the mediocrity of the translation used:

The translation then adopted was among the feeblest by which a great poet has ever been misrepresented; yet so completely did the poet triumph over the disadvantages of his medium and of a dramatic motive foreign to modern sympathies, that the Pit was electrified [...] even the ingenious dullness of translators cannot exhaust [fine tragedies] of their passion and their poetry.²³

In this, she anticipates 20th century anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss who, in his *Anthropologie structurale*, identifies the easily translatable nature of myth as one of its fundamental characteristics distinguishing it from other forms of linguistic production. Myth, according to Lévi-Strauss, could be defined as "ce mode de discours où la valeur de la formule *traduttore, traditore* tend pratiquement à zéro [...] Au contraire, la valeur du mythe comme mythe persiste, en dépit de la pire traduction. [...] La substance du mythe ne se trouve ni dans le style, ni dans le mode de narration, ni dans la syntaxe, mais dans *l'histoire* qui y est racontée"²⁴. If the significance of (the) myth is not to be found in its language or style, neither is it to be sought in purely contingent historical detail or local anecdote such as the importance of burial rites for the ancient Greeks, which George Eliot sees as "the accidents and not the substance of the poet's conception" (*SE*, 364). Instead, it resides in a more structural permanence which ensures its continuity. For Claude Lévi-Strauss, this too is a characteristic of myth in general; myth possesses a "double structure", "à la fois *historique et anhistorique*"²⁵, being at once "séquence d'événements passés, mais aussi schème doué d'une efficacité permanente"²⁶. George Eliot would have agreed: "The turning point of the tragedy", she affirms, "is not [...] 'reverence for the dead and the importance of the sacred rites of burial', but the *conflict* between these and obedience to the State" (*SE*, 364). It is this state of conflict or *agon*, or more precisely what George Eliot repeatedly refers

to as "two principles, both having their validity" (*SE*, 364) or "this balance of principles, this antagonism between valid claims" (*SE*, 365), or again "this antagonism of valid principles" (*SE*, 365) which the novelist identifies as the permanent structure underpinning the myth of Antigone, beyond the contingencies of a polytheistic culture:

The exquisite art of Sophocles is shown in the touches by which he makes us feel that Creon, as well as Antigone, is contending for what he believes to be the right, while both are also conscious that, in following out one principle, they are laying themselves open to just blame for transgressing another. [...] But, is it the fact that this antagonism of valid principles is peculiar to polytheism? Is it not rather that the struggle between Antigone and Creon represents that struggle between elemental tendencies and established laws by which the outer life of man is gradually and painfully being brought into harmony with his inward needs? [...] Wherever the strength of a man's intellect, or moral sense, or affection brings him into opposition with the rules which society has sanctioned, *there* is renewed the conflict between Antigone and Creon. (*SE*, 365-366)

The foregrounded "antagonism of valid principles" points to indissoluble contradiction which the myth sets out to dramatise, contradiction between "elemental tendencies" and "established laws", between "moral sense" and "society", between nature and culture. In this, it chimes in with Lévi-Strauss's now famous definition of myth as providing a logical model to resolve a perceived contradiction: "l'objet du mythe est de fournir un modèle logique pour résoudre une contradiction (tâche irréalisable, quand la contradiction est réelle)"²⁷. What is interesting about George Eliot's understanding of myth here, though, is less the notion of "resolution" of a contradiction (Lévi-Strauss himself admits that this is a "tâche irréalisable") than that of a gradual, potentially endless *process* of adjustment and realignment in the working out of the myth, as attested to by the use of the continuous form of the verb describing the way in which "the outer life of man *is* gradually and painfully *being* brought into harmony with his inward needs". The myth of Antigone does not enact, perform or embody the resolution of a contradiction, but instead provokes in the receiver of the myth an awareness of the ongoing *construction* of a contradiction and its effects.

George Eliot's analysis of the myth is here couched in characteristically humanistic terms, stressing the gradual harmonisation of man's "outer" and "inner" lives. But given the emphasis on *process*, on the *experience* of contradiction which the myth constructs and offers to the receiver of the myth rather than on the resolution of the contradiction, the myth of Antigone which lies behind *Middlemarch* is clearly not to be read merely as a hermeneutic "key" unlocking the text, an invitation to discover and fix original meanings – Casaubon's doomed 'Key to all

Mythologies' stands as the notorious emblem of the failure of such uses of myth. Instead, it refers readers to the many antagonistic discourses and subjectivities that go to make up the myth – both Antigone's and Creon's – and confronts them with an understanding of the on-going and provisional *construction* of meanings, effects and subjectivities which jostle for dominance with a violence that is inherent to all linguistic production and exchange²⁸. The myth of Antigone is thus structurally significant for its invitation to reflect on past texts (or indeed any text) not as a set of meanings ultimately reducible to the solipsistic viewpoint of a single consciousness (that of a Casaubon or a Lydgate), but as a field of shifting significations which are "gradually and painfully being brought into harmony" during the reading process. A recognition of claims (of readings, of interpretations) whose validity, but also whose *invalidity*, is constructed *in relation to* other claims (or interpretations or readings) constitutes the particular wisdom of George Eliot's use of myth as emblematised by the Antigone.

The politics of reading

A similar "wisdom of balancing claims" (*M*, 322) is upheld by Will Ladislav to justify his political dealings with, and support for, Mr Brooke when he is accused by Lydgate of "crying up" the disease which he claims to want to cure. Will Ladislav's involvement with Mr Brooke in the name of "balancing claims" might smack of moral or political compromise – Will recognises Brooke's misplaced motivations in supporting Reform – yet he deems his compromise a form of "wisdom" in the light of the benefits of the Reform itself: "your cure must begin somewhere," retorts Ladislav, "and the best wisdom that will work is the wisdom of balancing claims. That's my text – which side is injured? I support the man who supports their claims; not the virtuous upholder of the wrong" (*M*, 322). Will negotiates the murky political waters of the Reform period of the 1830s by balancing the claims of both sides, by entering into the thinking of others rather than excluding or rejecting it. His heterogeneous nature, "rather miscellaneous and *bric à brac*, but likable" (*M*, 301), is constantly highlighted: his "mixed blood" (*M*, 320) and being a "sort of gypsy" with a "sense of belonging to no class" (*M*, 319) does not endear him to the Middlemarchers who regard him with suspicion as an "energumen" vaguely related to the French revolution (*M*, 320), a "Polish emissary" (*M*, 319) or an "Italian with white mice" (*M*, 344). He incarnates the irreducible 'other' whom Middlemarch is unable to "swallow and assimilate very comfortably" as it does Lydgate (*M*, 105).

Ladislav's political and social versatility is made possible by his fluid Protean nature, his embracing of otherness and his ability to occupy or project himself

into various subject positions: "Will [...] was made of very impressible stuff. The bow of a violin drawn near him cleverly, would at one stroke change the aspect of the world for him, and *his point of view shifted as easily as his mood*" (*M*, 268; emphasis mine). A great number of mythological and literary analogies gather around Will: he is at once a Pegasus who calls "every form of prescribed work 'harness'" (*M*, 55); an Apollonian figure constantly shaking the light out of his curls (*M*, 250) and fearing he may become "ray-shorn" in Dorothea's eyes (*M*, 254); a Dionysus making dithyrambs to Dorothea (*M*, 151); an implicit Theseus rescuing Ariadne from Casaubon's Minotaur; a "sort of Daphnis in coat and waistcoat" (*M*, 344); "mercurial Ladislav" (*M*, 497); as well as "a kind of Shelley" (*M*, 248), and "a sort of Burke" (*M*, 346). Will's attitude to his cousin's 'Key to all Mythologies' is characteristically to see the topic more in terms of a shifting field of points of view than as a rigidified body of knowledge ready for tabulation: "The subject Mr Casaubon has chosen is as changing as chemistry: new discoveries are constantly making new points of view. Who wants a system on the basis of the Four Elements or a book to refute Paracelsus?" (*M*, 154) Will does not share Casaubon's sense of the importance of seeking for the mythical origins of symbolic rivers, being "so far [...] from having any desire for an accurate knowledge of the earth's surface, that he said he should prefer not to know the sources of the Nile, and that there should be some unknown regions preserved as hunting-grounds for the imagination" (*M*, 54). He rejects the unifying notions of the painter Naumann ("I do not think the universe is straining towards the obscure significance of your pictures", *M*, 132) whose symbolical paintings he twits in a parody of Casaubon's interpretative method:

"I have been making a sketch of Marlowe's Tamburlaine Driving the Conquered Kings in his Chariot. I am not so ecclesiastical as Naumann, and I sometimes twit him with his excess of meaning. But this time 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. In my opinion, that is a good mythical interpretation." Will here looked at Mr Casaubon, who received this offhand treatment of symbolism very uneasily, and bowed with a neutral air. (*M*, 148)

It could be said that to the "hermeneutics" of myth of Casaubon and Naumann, Will opposes a "poetics" of myth (he reads Dorothea as a "poem": "You *are* a poem" *M*, 156). Here I borrow the helpful distinction between hermeneutics and poetics made by Jonathan Culler. Whereas hermeneutics deals in meanings and interpretations, poetics focuses on the conditions and processes that make such meanings possible:

Hermeneutics [...] starts with texts and asks what they mean, seeking to discover new and better interpretations. Hermeneutic models come from the fields of law and religion, where people seek to interpret an authoritative legal or sacred text in order to decide how to act. [On the other hand] a poetics [...] would focus on the conventions that make possible literary structure and meaning: [...] poetics does not require that we know the meaning of a work; its task is to account for whatever effects we can attest to [...].²⁹

Whether his medium be "painting and Plastik" (*M*, 132) or words – although he professes to language being a "finer medium" (*M*, 132) – Will's emphasis is on the processes involved in seizing the event to be recorded. According to him "language gives a fuller image, which is all the better for being vague" (*M*, 133); the contiguous displacements and play of language alone can capture the "the movement and tone" of women and the breathing of their voices: "how would you paint her voice, pray? But her voice is much diviner than anything you have seen of her" (*M*, 133). But even painting and art, in which, according to John Rignall, myths have "their natural home"³⁰, can give insight on condition that they be approached with "an idea of the process" which a little personal "daubing" can procure:

"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. [...] I suppose if I could pick my enjoyment to pieces I should find it made up of many different threads. There is something in daubing a little one's self, and having an idea of the process." (*M*, 143)

Will's use of the metaphor of multiple threads images the tug and pull of vying readings which, all pulling in opposing directions, go to make up the web of understanding. Will's political and poetical positioning is driven by a readiness to admit and incorporate the other's point of view: "he was a creature who entered into everyone's feelings, and could take the pressure of their thoughts instead of urging his own with iron resistance" (*M*, 344). As such, he comes to embody a certain kind of reading practice, one which admits the multiplicity and heteronomy of meaning, be it of texts, paintings or people. Such a reading practice is one that George Eliot advocates and seeks to enact through the multiplex form of her novels in which myth functions less as an interpretative intertext than as a problematic subtext, both offering and resisting meanings and solutions. As Will also recognises, however, most people do not "read" with a view to admitting the heteronomous other, but rather with a view to recognising and confirming their own views, values and prejudices:

"those who read the 'Pioneer' don't read the 'Trumper'," said Will [...]. "Do you suppose the public reads with a view to its own conversion? We should have a witches' brewing with a vengeance then – 'Mingle, mingle, mingle, You that mingle may' – and nobody would know which side he was going to take." (*M*, 321)

It is precisely on account of such a denial of the other discourse (of the discourse of the other) that Casaubon's and Lydgate's scientific and mythical inquiries fail. In George Eliot's novel, the discourses of both science and myth are filtered and combined to offer readers an encounter with a multiplicity of vying and contradictory angles on the uneven web of reality. This is perhaps ultimately what defines the ethics of "literary experience":

Ce que la littérature nous offre, c'est le luxe de la multiplication des points de vue, l'expérience impossible de l'altérité, de la dissolution provisoire de notre subjectivité dans le flux d'un langage qui se fait monde. Car la littérature, instrument de connaissance du monde de la réalité, n'a pas besoin de refléter celui-ci directement, ce qui est par principe impossible, mais en le déformant, en le reconstruisant, en se déployant dans ses interstices, en suivant ses lignes de fuite, bref en y faisant surgir des problèmes : là où la connaissance scientifique se veut assertorique, la connaissance littéraire est problématique.³¹

Conclusion

One of the ends of the mythical allusions which surface in *Middlemarch* like so many traces of "forgotten writing" on the "blotting-book" of the novel (*M*, 16) is to engage readers in an antagonistic experience of reading: on the one hand, a consensual recognition of an enduring mythical intertext – thus offering what Gillian Beer calls "the continuity of collective insight against the anomie of the solitary perceiver"³²; on the other hand, an awareness of the provisionality of discourses and meanings which come up against, and may be invalidated by, other discourses. Such discourses are only provisional since for George Eliot, "the key [...] to mythology was to recognise that myths were products not of divine inspiration but of the human imagination"³³. If, through Casaubon, George Eliot announces the end of myth, it is only to revive the original meaning of *mythos* as "plot, narrative, or, more generally, sequential arrangement of words"³⁴, human fabrications without theological or divine grounding, in which meaning is constructed provisionally through an encounter with otherness, providing a way out of the solipsistic discourses of a Casaubon or a Lydgate. Such a function is central to the literary experience itself: "la littérature [...] est un des lieux essentiels de construction de la réalité [...] en ce qu'elle me donne une expérience de

l'altérité, du point de vue de l'autre homme, mais aussi de l'autre de l'homme, et me permet ainsi d'échapper au solipsisme"³⁵. George Eliot's novels repeatedly dramatise such an "escape from solipsism" in their emphasis on the distortions of subjectivity ("I know no speck so troublesome as self", *M*, 289) and the necessity for art to work towards "the extension of our sympathies"³⁶. "If art does not enlarge men's sympathies, it does nothing morally," she wrote in a letter to Charles Bray in 1859³⁷. The enlargement of sympathies describes George Eliot's ethical or moral vision of the literary enterprise, not on account of any reductively moral or ethical content or "bons sentiments"³⁸ in her narratives, but insofar as it offers readers an experience of cooperation and struggle which is inherent to the process of politics and of language exchange itself, to what Jean-Jacques Lecercle calls "l'être-ensemble langagier ... l'être-ensemble tout court"³⁹.

NOTES

- 1 Gilbert Durand, *Introduction à la mythologie*, Paris, Albin Michel, 1996, p. 24.
- 2 *Ibidem*, p. 24.
- 3 Gillian Beer, *Darwin's Plots. Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth Century Fiction*. Second Edition, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 118.
- 4 *Ibidem*, p. 120.
- 5 Letter from Frederic Harrison, in A.S. Byatt and Nicholas Warren, eds., *George Eliot. Selected Essays, Poems and Other Writings*, London, Penguin Classics, 1990, p. 243.
- 6 Gillian Beer, "Myth and the Single Consciousness: *Middlemarch* and *The Lifted Veil*" in Ian Adam, ed., *This Particular Web*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1975, p. 106.
- 7 George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, New York, W.W. Norton, 1977 (1871), p. 331. References to this edition of the novel will henceforth be included in the text as *M*.
- 8 John Kucich, "Intellectual debate in the Victorian novel: religion, science and the professional" in Deirdre David, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Victorian Novel*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 219.
- 9 U.C. Knoepfmacher, "Fusing fact and myth: the new reality of *Middlemarch*" in Ian Adam, ed., *op. cit.*, p. 54.
- 10 Gillian Beer, *op. cit.*, p. 143.
- 11 *Ibidem*, p. 143.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 155.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 163.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 163.
- 15 U.C. Knoepfmacher provides a more detailed analysis of these myths and their adaptation by George Eliot which "prevents the reader from succumbing to any [...] straightforward allegorization" and "complicate[s] our responses to the literal fabric of the narrative." U.C. Knoepfmacher, *art. cit.*, p. 61-62.
- 16 Gillian Beer, *art. cit.*, p. 175.

- 17 Richard Kearney, *Transitions. Narratives in Modern Irish Culture*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1988, p. 276.
- 18 Gillian Beer, *op. cit.*, p. 161.
- 19 Gillian Beer, *art. cit.*, p. 96.
- 20 See Gillian Beer, *Darwin's Plots, op. cit.*, p. 112 on R.A. Proctor's understanding of this in *Myths and Marvels of Astronomy* (1884).
- 21 See Jean-Jacques Lecercle and Ronald Shusterman, *L'Emprise des signes. Débat sur l'expérience littéraire*, Paris, Seuil, 2002, on the political implications of the role of literature, to "dissolve consensus in order to introduce dissensus", p. 245.
- 22 In *The Mill on the Floss*, the shadow of Antigone's dilemma hovers over Maggie Tulliver's wavering between the paternal (and later fraternal) interdiction to frequent Philip Wakem, and the tug of friendship she naturally feels for the humpback.
- 23 George Eliot, "The *Antigone* and its Moral" in A.S. Byatt and Nicholas Warren eds., *op. cit.*, p. 363. Henceforth *SE* in brackets in the text.
- 24 Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Anthropologie structurale*, Paris, Plon, 1974 (1958), p. 240.
- 25 *Ibidem*, p. 240.
- 26 *Ibid.*, p. 239.
- 27 *Ibid.*, p. 264.
- 28 In *L'Emprise des signes*, Jean-Jacques Lecercle posits this agonistic version of linguistic interchange, "une conception de l'interlocution fondée sur la lutte des participants, qui cherchent à imposer à autrui leur image d'eux-mêmes, à lui imposer une place, voire à lui faire abandonner le champ de bataille linguistique" (*op. cit.*, p. 45). On the violence inherent to such exchanges, see Jean-Jacques Lecercle, *The Violence of Language*, London, Routledge, 1990: "There is violence involved in the linguistic struggle for places, i.e. in the linguistic process of subjectivation. One becomes a subject by acquiring a linguistic place and imposing it on others" (p. 257).
- 29 Jonathan Culler, *Literary Theory. A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 61-62.
- 30 John Rignall, ed., *The Oxford Reader's Companion to George Eliot*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 278.
- 31 Jean-Jacques Lecercle and Ronald Shusterman, *op. cit.*, p. 185.
- 32 Gillian Beer, *op. cit.*, p. 161.
- 33 John Rignall, *op. cit.* p. 278.
- 34 Northrop Frye, *Le Grand code. La Bible et la littérature*, Paris, Seuil, 1984, p. 74 ; translation mine.
- 35 Jean-Jacques Lecercle and Ronald Shusterman, *op. cit.*, p. 191.
- 36 "The Natural History of German Life" (1856) in *SE*, p. 110. The oft-cited pier-glass metaphor in *Middlemarch* stands as the type of George Eliot's critique of the distorting narratives of egoism (*M*, 182).
- 37 Letter to Charles Bray, 5 July 1859 in *M*, 590.
- 38 Jean-Jacques Lecercle and Ronald Shusterman, *op. cit.*, p. 16.
- 39 *Ibidem*, p. 236.