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Temporality and Statuesque Women in George Eliot

Sculpture in George Eliot's fiction is most closely associated with female characters who often inhabit, or perhaps temporarily visit, a statue-like state, and the stillness and muteness of the sculptural form are resources that are never far from Eliot's pen. Her references to sculpture, whether to the ekphrastic possibilities of specific examples or more generally to a sculptural metaphor, denote an art form that for Eliot necessarily contains within it an inherent reference to the past, to a moment of memory instantiated in the sculpture, or an association that accretes significance over the passage of time. The pasts that sculptures refer to may be personal, but are often instances of a Classical aesthetic which binds its subject into an intimate, visceral relationship with that past, and which is often experienced as a form of entrapment, similar to that which Ovid's characters in the *Metamorphoses* experience as they become imprisoned within alien forms. Sculpture is profoundly, to borrow Walter Benjamin's term, a 'dialectical image' for Eliot which brings together the past and present.¹

Eliot's earliest fictional references to statuary appear in 'Mr Gilfil's Love Story' (1857), and seem initially purely private and decorative. Caterina Sarti, the orphaned Italian ward of the aristocratic Cheverel family, encounters 'Greek statues and busts of Roman emperors' thrown into 'strange light and shadow' by the 'bright moonlight' that streams through the windows as she 'made her way along the cloistered passages, now lighted here and there by a small oil-lamp, to the grand-staircase, which led directly to a gallery running along the whole eastern side of the building'. The statues and busts keep company with:

low cabinets filled with curiosities, natural and antiquarian; tropical birds and huge horns of beasts; Hindoo gods and strange shells; swords and daggers, and bits of chain-armour; Roman lamps and tiny models of Greek temples; and, above all these, queer old family portraits—of little boys and girls, once the hope of the Cheverels, with close-shaven heads imprisoned in stiff ruffs—of faded, pink-faced ladies, with rudimentary features and highly-developed head-dresses.²

The statues are among the 'heterogeneous objects that lined the long walls' of the Gallery of Cheverel Manor, and Caterina becomes one with them. They helped to form the aura of

¹ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1999), 462–63; quoted in Luisa Calè & Stefano Evangelista (2018) Introduction: literature and sculpture at the *fin de siècle*, *Word & Image*, 34:1, 1–6, DOI: [10.1080/02666286.2017.1330092](https://doi.org/10.1080/02666286.2017.1330092); accessed 30 November 2019.

² George Eliot, 'Mr Gilfil's Love Story', in *Scenes of Clerical Life* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), ch. 2, p. 144.

strange intimidation that is so often Caterina's experience of her adopted home, and which to an extent prefigures Dorothea's response to Rome's 'stupendous fragmentariness' in *Middlemarch*.³ The Manor was based on Arbury Hall in Warwickshire, a house that Eliot knew well, as her father Robert was land agent there. The Manor is undergoing significant renovations at the time of the story and is being remodelled from an Elizabethan mansion into a prime example of Gothic decoration. In this context, the Manor's muddle of Classical artefacts is one with the architectural confusion of the renovation, and mutely registers the ways in which tastes change and Empires fall, with the spoils going to the victors. The Gallery is Caterina's private retreat in the evening, and the place where occasionally she meets her clandestine lover, Anthony Wybrow. The statues displaced from Greece and Rome prefigure her situation as an uprooted acquisition.

In *Felix Holt* (1866), we are introduced to Transome Court by going through 'the double door of the entrance-hall, letting in the warm light on the scagliola pillars, the marble statues, and the broad stone staircase, with its matting worn into large holes'.⁴ The scene provides the back-drop to our first sight of Mrs Transome who, like her home, combines an innate and somewhat chilling grandeur with the signs of poverty and wear:

She was a tall, proud-looking woman, with abundant gray hair, dark eyes and eyebrows, and a somewhat eagle-like yet not unfeminine face. Her tight-fitting black dress was much worn; the fine lace of her cuffs and collar, and of the small veil that fell backward over her high comb, was visibly mended; but rare jewels flashed on her hands, which lay on her folded black-clad arms like finely-cut onyx cameos. (p.)

Mrs Transome is not wearing cameos, but is becoming them, is petrifying within her own home, amongst real marble statues and fake marble pillars that echo the representational tensions of the character's own uneasy occupation of her estranged husband's home. Romola, even more disturbingly, is seen first amidst 'books and antiquities [which] were arranged in scrupulous order', but whose order is a form of grotesque mutilation: 'Here and there, on separate stands in front of the shelves, were placed a beautiful feminine torso; a headless statue, with an uplifted muscular arm wielding a bladeless sword; rounded, dimpled, infantine limbs severed from the trunk, inviting the lips to kiss the cold marble; some well-preserved Roman busts'.⁵ The sensuous invitation to kiss cold marble speaks volumes about the process of Romola's becoming an adult woman, and the impossibility of her recognising the demands and desires of her own body within her home's museological cabinet of amputated forms.

³ George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994), ch. 20, p. 192.

⁴ George Eliot, *Felix Holt* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, XXXX), ch. 1, p. .

⁵ George Eliot, *Romola* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980; 1863), ch. 5, p. 93.

All three women appear to us initially against the interior design of early-nineteenth-century Britain and fifteenth-century Florence which alike carry punitive implications for these women, implicitly and ironically trapped into immobility within their homes by the exercise of acquisitive masculine mobility: many domestic statues would have been brought back from a Grand Tour, or, like Romola's father's statues, been the spoils of often unscrupulous trading and plundering. In these instances, Eliot contests the aesthetic of sculptural female beauty, seeing in it rather a synecdoche of male control through connoisseurship which would reach its peak in *Daniel Deronda*'s Grandcourt. But she also invites readers to reconsider viewing practices that might casually restrict a Classical sculpture to its moment of origin, rather than allowing its meaning free rein within the present, and indeed during the centuries of its transmission to the viewers' present moment. Sculpture, and its instantiation of a relationship to history that is always in process, are integral to Eliot's fiction, and to her realist agenda.

In 'The Natural History of German Life', Eliot's review of Wilhelm Riehl's book on German peasants, she refers to some of her experiences in Germany and specifically to German sculpture whilst beginning to articulate her realist agenda. Eliot's articulation of the possibilities of realist art, and the responsibilities of the artist, in her 1856 essay, 'The Natural History of German Life', are well-known:

Art is the nearest thing to life; it is a mode of amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellow-men beyond the bounds of our personal lot. All the more sacred is the task of the artist when he undertakes to paint the life of the People. Falsification here is far more pernicious than in the more artificial aspects of life.⁶

Her essay recognises that art can readily be perverted into misleading 'sentimentality' (p. 261), but that it can also be a witness to truths that inform the work of 'the social and political reformer' (p. 266).

A little later we read a paragraph which suggests that sculpture is critical to Eliot's vision of realism from the very beginning:

In Germany, perhaps more than in any other country, it is among the peasantry that we must look for the historical type of the national physique. In the towns this type has become so modified to express the personality of the individual that even 'family likeness' is often but faintly marked. But the peasants may still be distinguished into groups, by their physical peculiarities. In one part of the country we

⁶ 'The Natural History of German Life', *Westminster Review*, 66 (1856), 51-79; reprinted in *George Eliot: Selected Critical Writings*, ed. by Rosemary Ashton (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 1992), 260-95 (pp. 263-64).

find a longer-legged, in another a broader-shouldered race, which has inherited these peculiarities for centuries. For example, in certain districts of Hesse are seen long faces, with high foreheads, long, straight noses, and small eyes, with arched eyebrows and large eyelids. On comparing these physiognomies with the sculptures in the church of St. Elizabeth, at Marburg, executed in the thirteenth century, it will be found that the same old Hessian type of face has subsisted unchanged, with this distinction only, that the sculptures represent princes and nobles, whose features then bore the stamp of their race, while that stamp is now to be found only among the peasants. A painter who wants to draw mediæval characters with historic truth must seek his models among the peasantry. (p. 267)

The church sculptures perform a documentary function, but their witness to a historical truth is simultaneously an affirmation of a living reality and of temporal continuity: the sculptures register the passing of time despite their own immobility. The features of princes have been passed down to peasants, as the sculpture effectively breaks the bounds of its own moment of creation.

The viewer of sculpture enables this process: memory is always implicit within sculpture, as it contains historical narratives of memorialisation, of temporality within itself. Statues are complicit within, almost synonymous with, the processes of monumental memorialization. Their bounds, despite their seeming intact and impermeable, are inherently not limited by physicality; clearly the simple fact of their physical durability explicitly conquers time, but in the moment of viewing sculpture an impulse to narrative, rather than the instantaneous satisfaction of a momentary impression, is primarily invoked.

In this respect, Eliot pits herself explicitly against Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's influential essay, *Laokoon oder Über die Grenzen der Malerei und Poesie* (*Laokoon: an Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry* (1767)) which Eliot began reading in bed on G. H. Lewes's and her visit to Berlin in November 1854,⁷ during which she saw sculptures that she would use as reference points throughout her life. Lessing describes the experience of perceiving sculpture as practically instantaneous: we 'attain to a distinct conception of an object in space', arguing that when we see that object we see its parts singly, in combination, and then as a whole, with such rapidity that these separate operations 'appear but one'.⁸ 'The eye takes in at a glance' what the poet can only enumerate 'slowly and by degrees' (p. 111-12). Eliot uses statuary as both the medium and the enabling discourse of continuity in her

⁷ 'Diary, 1854-1861', in *The Journals of George Eliot*, ed. by Margaret Harris and Judith Johnston (CUP, 1998), pp. 3-90 (p. 34).

⁸ Eliot would have read Lessing in German. The English quotations here are taken from *Laocoon: an Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*, translated from the German of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing by E. C. Beasley (London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1853), p. 112.

review of Riehl, but in her fiction, the sculptural trope takes on further significance, and we see characters embroiled in a centuries-long emotional continuum instantiated in the form of the statuesque. Within Eliot's fiction, statuary inhabits temporal (as well as spatial) dimensions that necessarily invoke narrative and concomitantly instigate collective or personal memory, thus extending the resonance of the sculptural metaphor and the image of any specific sculpture that she might invoke through time.

We can see this in a number of women who fall into statue-like states as well as those who appear alongside Classical forms. As she awaits her verdict for infanticide, *Adam Bede*'s Hetty Sorrel 'stood like a statue of dull despair', rendered so by the gaze of everyone in the court: 'All eyes [but Adam's] were strained to look at her'. He 'felt a shuddering horror that would not let him look at Hetty'.⁹ At this moment, Hetty appears as a modern Medusa who is rendered stone-like in her despair. The admiring looks that she greedily sought throughout the novel now fall on her as a form of condemnation, and her spectators are safe, as Medusa's eventually were, from being ensnared by her beauty. This instance speaks to an image that Eliot proleptically set up earlier in the novel, when Hetty wanders through England, desperately seeking Arthur:

The face was sadly different from that which had smiled at itself in the old speckled glass, or smiled at others when they glanced at it admiringly. Hard and even fierce look had come in the eyes, though their lashes were as long as ever, and they had all their dark brightness. And the cheek was never dimpled with smiles now. It was the same rounded, pouting, childish prettiness, but with all love and belief in love departed from it – the sadder for its beauty, like that wondrous Medusa face, with the passionate, passionless lips. (ch 37, p. 430)

On her visit to Berlin in 1854-55, Eliot had seen a 'glorious' Medusa 'high up on brackets [which] used to attract my eyes away from the [Sleeping] Faun' in the same room.¹⁰ This is a copy of the Medusa housed in Cologne,¹¹ which particularly fascinated Goethe, whose biography G. H. Lewes was working on at the time. In *Italienische Reise*, Goethe writes that the Medusa is 'a wonderful work which, expressing the discord between life and death, between pain and pleasure, exerts an inexplicable fascination over us as no other ambiguous

⁹ George Eliot, *Adam Bede* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980; 1859), ch. 43, p.481.

¹⁰ George Eliot, 'Recollections of Berlin, 1854-1855', in *The Journals of George Eliot*, ed. by Margaret Harris and Judith Johnston (CUP, 1998), pp. 241-59 (p. 253).

¹¹ [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mask_of_the_Gorgon_Medusa,_dating_from_c._130_AD_and_found_in_the_Forum_Romanum_in_Rome,_RomischGermanisches_Museum,_Cologne_\(8115605754\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mask_of_the_Gorgon_Medusa,_dating_from_c._130_AD_and_found_in_the_Forum_Romanum_in_Rome,_RomischGermanisches_Museum,_Cologne_(8115605754).jpg); accessed 8 August 2019.

figure does'.¹² It is specifically a beautiful image, rather than the terrifying version of the Medusa that could usually be seen on Athena's aegis, and it is on this work, isolated in its suffering, that Eliot draws to depict Hetty in a portrait that combines a Classical archetype with a later sculptural depiction of it. Eliot's reference to 'that Medusa' clearly has a specific reference point in mind, and she relies on her reader to know what it is. Having identified the Medusa, Valentine Cunningham writes that the reader, 'could – she can – go and inspect the reality which is claimed by the would-be realistic account of Hetty Sorrel. The ekphrastic text really does, like this, purport to convincingly double, repeat, mirror, a real'.¹³ But the 'real' has not always been as accessible to Eliot's readers, either in the flesh, or in books, as it is to us, so her reference has also to be able to operate in a less-empirically grounded way too, to appeal effectively to the reader without access to the source image, who is unable fully to effect the 'ekphrastic encounter' (Cunningham, p. 58). In effect, what Eliot is doing here is referring not only to a physical object, but to the narrative that that object depicts too, and inviting readers to consider its relation to Hetty.

Hetty becomes Medusa-like when she is most despairing, and her despair is caused by Arthur's irresponsibility and his desertion of her. Their Arcadian idyll – 'He may be a shepherd in Arcadia for aught he knows, he may be the first youth kissing the first maiden, he may be Eros himself, sipping the lips of Psyche – it is all one' (ch. 13, p. 182) – has been swapped for another Classical reference, in which Hetty, like Ovid's Medusa, suffers because of male lust, and is the one to carry the heaviest punishment for her and Arthur's relationship. Intriguingly though, in the final pages of the novel, Arthur's own appearance has been changed to one of suffering as was Medusa's face. Though Adam, 'should ha' known him anywhere [...] his colour's changed, and he looks sadly' (*Adam Bede*, Epilogue, p. 582). He will recover, but at least here he goes some way to sharing Hetty's punishment. Ovid's story of the Medusa, ravished by Poseidon, punished by Athena, killed by Perseus, swims like a briefly-glimpsed palimpsest just beneath the surface of Eliot's novel, informing the dangerous attractions of Hetty's beauty, and Arthur's casually cruel desertion. But Eliot subtly uses her echoes of Ovid to highlight Arthur's status as a perpetrator, to question sculptors' punitive incarceration of a beautiful woman in a statuesque form, and to move away from her Ovidian source in a final tableau that mourns Hetty's death, and in so doing disturbs the moral equilibrium of the novel.

Inherent in Eliot's uses of the sculptural image is a disruption of the easy assimilability of the statuesque image's beauty. Eliot rather asserts the life crushed within that form and the narrative that inheres within, but extends beyond, the moment of sculpture. She may do this

¹² Quoted in Jerome J. McGann, 'The Beauty of the Medusa: A Study in Romantic Literary Iconology', *Studies In Romanticism*, 11 (1972), 3-25 (p. 4).

¹³ Valentine Cunningham, 'Why Ekphrasis?', *Classical Philology*, 102 (2007), 57-71 (p. 63).

by enabling readerly reflection on a moment taken out of her own narrative's progression. We can see these effects at work in *Silas Marner* (1861), in the moment when Godfrey Cass reveals to his wife that Silas's adopted daughter is in fact Godfrey's own child:

'Nancy,' said Godfrey, slowly, 'when I married you, I hid something from you—something I ought to have told you. That woman Marner found dead in the snow—Eppie's mother—that wretched woman—was my wife: Eppie is my child.'

He paused, dreading the effect of his confession. But Nancy sat quite still, only that her eyes dropped and ceased to meet his. She was pale and quiet as a meditative statue, clasping her hands on her lap.¹⁴

Typically, Godfrey thinks only of himself as he watches the effect of his news on Nancy. She remains silent, and he goes on:

'I oughtn't to have left the child unowned: I oughtn't to have kept it from you. But I couldn't bear to give you up, Nancy. I was led away into marrying her—I suffered for it.'

Still Nancy was silent, looking down; and he almost expected that she would presently get up and say she would go to her father's. How could she have any mercy for faults that must seem so black to her, with her simple, severe notions?

But at last she lifted up her eyes to his again and spoke. There was no indignation in her voice—only deep regret.

'Godfrey, if you had but told me this six years ago, we could have done some of our duty by the child. Do you think I'd have refused to take her in, if I'd known she was yours?'

At that moment Godfrey felt all the bitterness of an error that was not simply futile, but had defeated its own end. He had not measured this wife with whom he had lived so long. (p. 158)

Nancy's moment of statue-like reflection disrupts time, and effects a moment in which 'the story pauses a little', and lands in a new and revelatory place. In this un-narrated moment, we do not follow Nancy's thoughts, but watch with Godfrey a sculptural state which he reads as one of straightforward anger or despair, as redolent of the simple severity of the statue's outlines as well as his view of Nancy's 'notions', and of the often inflexible, allegorical nature of sculpture. Eliot's narration of Godfrey's stuttering, selfish response speaks to the way in which he has always under-estimated Nancy, and been content to assume a simplicity and indeed a superficiality about her that her statue-like appearance here seems to fulfil. But out of this moment of willed silence and deep reflection on Nancy's part comes a reaction of

¹⁴ George Eliot, *Silas Marner* (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 1996), ch. 18, p. 158.

humbling generosity, deeply-felt betrayal, and justifiable anger. Eliot uses the statue metaphor as the vehicle to represent Nancy's un-narratable moment of reflection, a moment from which we as readers are excluded along with Godfrey. All we can do is look on helplessly, in ignorance of what's happening within her mind, assuming perhaps that, like the statue, she has been stunned into marmoreal numbness. Her eventual response to Godfrey is made all the more compelling in the extent to which it exceeds the simplicity invoked by the meditative statue's passive and contained implications.

In this episode, Nancy and Godfrey experience time differently. He goes on in sequential, narrative time, whilst she dips into a different temporal experience, and the novella bifurcates as the characters move on different tracks. Godfrey remains audibly and vocally present whilst Nancy, 'pale and quiet as a meditative statue', slips down into the past history that subsists beneath the present moment. Eliot's allusion to an allegorical sculpture plunges Nancy vertically into the past and her memories, whilst Godfrey and the narrative carry on their horizontal progression through chronological time.

In *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), Eliot's use of a reference to the Parthenon sculptures embeds Stephen Guest's lust for Maggie within a tradition of sculptural desire that diminishes whilst it seeks to enjoy its subject, and which, in a variation on *Silas Marner's* juxtaposition of historical and sculptural time, enables the reader's simultaneous apprehension of Stephen and Maggie's present, and the moment of the Parthenon frieze's creation. Two forms of time, past and present, figured here as human and sculptural, inhabit the same moment, linked by sensuality:

Stephen was mute; he was incapable of putting a sentence together, and Maggie bent her arm a little upward toward the large half-opened rose that had attracted her. Who has not felt the beauty of a woman's arm? The unspeakable suggestions of tenderness that lie in the dimpled elbow, and all the varied gently lessening curves, down to the delicate wrist, with its tiniest, almost imperceptible nicks in the firm softness. A woman's arm touched the soul of a great sculptor two thousand years ago, so that he wrought an image of it for the Parthenon which moves us still as it clasps lovingly the timeworn marble of a headless trunk. Maggie's was such an arm as that, and it had the warm tints of life.¹⁵

This is eroticism as connoisseurship. Stephen's response to Maggie's arm, which might have seemed like gaucherie, is instead written – however ironically – through the clubbable collusion of that 'Who has not felt...?', and leads to this:

A mad impulse seized on Stephen; he darted toward the arm, and showered kisses on it, clasping the wrist.

¹⁵ George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), vol. 3, book 6, ch. 10, p. 561.

But the next moment Maggie snatched it from him, and glared at him like a wounded war-goddess, quivering with rage and humiliation.

‘How dare you?’ She spoke in a deeply shaken, half-smothered voice. ‘What right have I given you to insult me?’

She darted from him into the adjoining room, and threw herself on the sofa, panting and trembling. (pp. 561-62)

Maggie’s affront, generated in part of course by her own unacknowledged desire for Stephen, articulates a form of the same anger that Nancy feels at having been mistaken for something other and less than she really is, something that the popularity of the sculptural metaphor, with its apparently validating roots in history, continues to condone. Eliot’s is a resistant use of the metaphor here, which both writes against women’s being subsumed within its dimensions, but also animates the metaphor itself, and allows it to exceed its fixed form: in this instance, women – and not Pygmalion – can animate sculpture.

George Eliot is no Pygmalion, though an early review of *Adam Bede* spoke of her as one: the *Morning Chronicle* reviewer believed that the author had ‘a Pygmalion fancy for his own statues’,¹⁶ and that that tendency had driven ‘him’ to depict Arthur and Hetty as characters who were too amiable for the moral of the tale. As we have seen, Eliot derides the tendency to believe that a statue coming to life will be a simple animation of the physical form that might seem to a viewer to encompass all that women are. This tendency is seen most clearly in *Daniel Deronda*, when Gwendolen Harleth foolishly takes on the form of Hermione’s statue in *The Winter’s Tale*, in a tableau which defeats her own purposes when she is startled out of her marble-like loveliness by the sudden appearance of a painted panel of a dead face and a figure fleeing from it, which she had previously ordered to be locked up. Gwendolen is defeated by the forces she seeks to control.¹⁷

Eliot’s most extended use of the sculptural motif and the climax of Eliot’s career-long engagement with sculpture as an art form, appears in *Middlemarch*. Joseph Wiesenfarth has described chapter 19 of the novel as ‘the single most allusive chapter of fiction George Eliot ever wrote’: ‘In a scant 1700 words there are allusions to Dante, Hazlitt, Plutarch, Apollonius, Ovid, Sophocles, Winckelmann, Stahr, Coleridge, Overbeck, Lessing, and Schiller, which involve the classical figures of Hercules, Theseus, Ariadne, Dionysus, Antigone, Aeolus, Cupid, and Psyche’.¹⁸ Ariadne appears in the novel as a misattributed sculpture of Cleopatra, and is at the heart of the allusions noted by Wiesenfarth, and indeed of the novel itself.

¹⁶ ‘Literature. Adam Bede’, *The Morning Chronicle*, 28 February, 1859.

¹⁷ See my *Actresses on the Victorian Stage: Feminine Performance and the Galatea Myth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 80-82.

¹⁸ Joseph Wiesenfarth, ‘The Greeks, the Germans, and George Eliot’, *Browning Institute Studies*, 10 (1982), 91-104 (p. 93).

Middlemarch's Rome chapters are replete with sculpture and with Eliot's use of that form to write the narrative of Dorothea's honeymoon and her situation as a young, married woman, innocent about her own feelings and desires, and her future. Rome is described by Eliot as 'the city of visible history, where the past of a whole hemisphere seems moving in funeral procession, with strange ancestral images and trophies gathered from afar' (ch.20, p. 192). Within a complex play of historical, mythic, and fictional possibilities, the potential for sculpture's narrative possibilities are multiple.

Eliot had visited the Vatican Museum herself in 1860, when she responded more enthusiastically than Dorothea did to the antiquities that she saw there, though we can hear an echo of Dorothea's dazzled bewilderment – along with, it has to be said, Casaubon's antiquarian bent – in Eliot's 'one complaint':

against the home provided for this richest collection of antiquities: it is, that there is no historical arrangement of them and no catalogue. The system of classification is based on the history of their collection by the different Popes, so that for every other purpose but that of securing to each Pope his share of glory it is a system of helter-skelter.¹⁹

She lists her favourite statues in the Vatican, Lateran, and Capitoline Museums,²⁰ before recording in her journal that:

Perhaps the greatest treat we had at the Vatican was the sight of a few statues, including the Apollo, by torchlight – all the more impressive because it was our first sight of the Vatican. Even the mere hurrying along the vast halls, with the fitful torchlight falling on the innumerable statues, and busts, and bas-reliefs, and sarcophagi, would have left a sense of awe at these crowded silent forms which have the solemnity of suddenly arrested life. (*Journals*, p. 344)

The passage moves from a sense of the lambency with which the torchlight plays in reinvigorating the Belvedere Apollo, to an awareness of the stark contrast between Eliot's own swift progress and rapid assimilation of perceptions, and the 'suddenly arrested life' of the statues. There's no sense here of Keats's perception of the figures on the Grecian Urn as 'For ever warm and still to be enjoy'd,/ For ever panting, and for ever young'. Instead, she sees the statues as silent and solemn, absolutely trapped in, and conquered by, time.

¹⁹ 'Recollections of Italy 1860', in *The Journals of George Eliot*, pp. 327-68 (p. 344).

²⁰ 'Those statues are: 'the Venus of the Capitol, and the kissing children in the same room; the Sophocles, at the Lateran Museum; the Nile; the black laughing Centaur at the Capitol; the laughing Faun; in the Vatican the Sauroktonos, or boy with the lizard; and the sitting statue called Menander. The Faun of Praxiteles, and the old Faun with the Infant Bacchus I had already seen at Munich; else I should have mentioned them among my first favourites.' (pp. 343-44)

This experience initially consists in the distinction between the stillness of the trapped statues, and Eliot's awareness of her own activity as a perceiving consciousness passing through them, connecting them with each other, re-vivifying them, and thus herself creating a matrix of physical response and reaction, which simultaneously recognises the potent political, historical, and literary substance of the sculptures that she sees. Implicit in this narration of multiple temporalities are the roots of Eliot's depiction of Nancy's experience of temporal disjunction, an apprehension that will inform her sense of the representational possibilities of sculpture, and also arguably of her fiction itself. It is a distinction that is manifested throughout Eliot's use of sculpture as both a metaphor and an ekphrastic reference in *Middlemarch*, where it achieves its most thorough, thoughtful, and theoretically underpinned articulation in the Ariadne episode. This in turn informs the whole novel and marks a new stage in Eliot's development of realism.

A number of critics have read *Middlemarch*'s Rome chapters, and specifically Naumann and Will Ladislav's argument about form and representation, in terms of Lessing's comparison of the poetic and plastic arts.²¹ Elizabeth Hollander considers how Will uses Lessing to challenge Naumann to reproduce Dorothea's voice, knowing, as does Lessing, that the visual arts fall short in this respect (Hollander, p. 173).²² For Valentine Cunningham, the tacit presence of Lessing in Will and Naumann's argument shows Eliot 'turn[ing] art historian', in order 'further to enhance this realistic novel's claim of historical authenticity, the authenticity of real presence' (Cunningham, p. 63). The only other reference to Lessing in Eliot's work comes in an early 'Belles Lettres' essay for the *Westminster Review* in 1856, where Sydney Dobell's new volume of poems, *England in Time of War*, in which Eliot sees 'something analogous to that mistake of confounding the methods proper to distinct arts, against which Lessing directs his trenchant arguments',²³ prompted an extended quotation from the *Laokoon*. Eliot began her review with a paragraph summing up the distinction between poetry and the plastic arts which 'Every reader of Lessing's "Laokoon" remembers':

the acumen and the aptness of illustration with which he shows how the difference in the materials wherewith the poet and 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 his Laocoon shriek with agony; the words, *clamores horrendous ad sidera tollit*, do not suggest a distorted mouth, but simply intensify in our imagination the conception of

²¹ See in particular Cunningham; Joseph Wiesenfarth, 'Middlemarch: The Language of Art', *PMLA*, 07 (1982), 363-77; Elizabeth Hollander, 'Ariadne and the Rippled Nose: Portrait Likenesses in *Middlemarch*', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 34 (2006), 167-87; and Abigail S. Rischin, 'Beside the Reclining Statue: Ekphrasis, Narrative, and Desire in *Middlemarch*', *PMLA*, 111 (1996), 1121-32.

²² See also Wiesenfarth, p. 371.

²³ [Mary Ann Evans], 'Belles Lettres', *Westminster Review*, (1856), 566- 82 (p. 567).

suffering. 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. (p. 566)

This engagement with Lessing's dicta about form and representation finally reaches a head in the Vatican scene in *Middlemarch*. This is the first time we – and Will Ladislaw – see Dorothea as a married woman, and she is carefully positioned before the statue that Eliot describes as the 'reclining Ariadne, then called the Cleopatra' (ch.19, p. 188).²⁴ In this episode Eliot takes on Lessing's argument, and specifically uses her powers as a novelist to challenge both his analysis of the temporal process by which readers and viewers are able to apprehend visual and literary art forms, and implicitly his rigid generic demarcations. The impact of the visual arts is practically instantaneous, and the poet's challenge is to 'awaken in us conceptions so lively, that, from the rapidity with which they arise, the same impression should be made upon our senses, which the sight of the material objects, that these conceptions represent, would produce' (p. 112). The prose writer, by comparison, 'is contented with simply rendering his descriptions clear and distinct' (p. 112). Language is particularly lacking, Lessing argues, when it tries to represent beauty, which 'arises from the harmonious effect of numerous parts, all of which the sight is capable of comprehending at the same time (p. 138). Poetry, since it 'can only exhibit in succession [beauty's] component parts' (p. 138), fails in the attempt. Lessing cites Lucian as an example of a poet who,

was too acute to attempt to convey any idea of the beauty of Panthea, otherwise than by a reference to the most lovely female statues of the old artists. Yet what is this but an acknowledgement that language by itself is here without power; that poetry falters and eloquence grows speechless, unless art, in some measure, serve them as an interpreter. (pp. 146-47)

²⁴ <https://www.flickr.com/photos/mbell1975/12731449543>

It might initially appear that by positioning Dorothea before a beautiful sculpture, Eliot concurs with Lessing. Will Ladislaw and Naumann, walk us rapidly into the scene, following Eliot's path along the Vatican corridors, and move us swiftly along until we see Dorothea:

Quickness was ready at the call, and the two figures passed lightly along by the Meleager, towards the hall where the reclining Ariadne, then called the Cleopatra, lies in the marble voluptuousness of her beauty, the drapery folding around her with a petal-like ease and tenderness. They were just in time to see another figure standing against a pedestal near the reclining marble: a breathing blooming girl, whose form, not shamed by the Ariadne, was clad in Quakerish gray drapery; her long cloak, fastened at the neck, was thrown backward from her arms, and one beautiful ungloved hand pillowed her cheek, pushing somewhat backward the white beaver bonnet which made a sort of halo to her face around the simply braided dark-brown hair. She was not looking at the sculpture, probably not thinking of it: her large eyes were fixed dreamily on a streak of sunlight which fell across the floor. But she became conscious of the two strangers who suddenly paused as if to contemplate the Cleopatra, and, without looking at them, immediately turned away to join a maid-servant and courier who were loitering along the hall at a little distance off. (pp. 188-89)

This confusion of names is critical, as is the way that the scene is introduced. Initially, as Naumann suggests, the scene seems simply to offer a contrast between Cleopatra and what the text clearly implies is Dorothea's still virgin state:

'What do you think of that for a fine bit of antithesis?' said the German, searching in his friend's face for responding admiration, but going on volubly without waiting for any other answer. "There lies antique beauty, not corpse-like even in death, but arrested in the complete contentment of its sensuous perfection: and here stands beauty in its breathing life, with the consciousness of Christian centuries in its bosom. But she should be dressed as a nun; I think she looks almost what you call a Quaker; I would dress her as a nun in my picture. (p. 189)

Eliot's prose does indeed describe clearly and distinctly the sequence of temporal stages that Lessing outlines, but the (mis)naming of the statue provokes not just a momentary appraisal, but a series of comparisons and images that Hollander describes as the clash of 'the fixity of visual impressions and the slipperiness of verbal formations' (p. 174), and James A. W. Heffernan as the 'representational friction, which occurs wherever the dynamic pressure of verbal narrative meets the fixed forms of visual representation and acknowledges them as

such'.²⁵ Out of this, Eliot produces a fictional response that surpasses Lessing's oppositional aesthetic by blending representational possibilities, narrative process, and the moment of apprehension, within her fiction. (What is also implicit here is the way in which Eliot, unlike Lessing, allows that an experience of perception might also impact on the viewer or reader. As Summer Star writes, 'the sensuous perception of the formal configurations of one's surroundings' signal an 'openness to being reconfigured by a new given form'.²⁶ In the Vatican, Will realises not only the dawning of his love for Dorothea, but the extent of his divergence from Naumann, and his need to live by different criteria.)

The confusion of the statue's names generates two tiers of interpretation of the episode: one bound by the moment of viewing, the other surpassing that moment. In the first instance, the sculptor Naumann responds primarily to the 'fine bit of antithesis', the visual moment in the present that the contrasting figures suggest, to the Cleopatra's marble voluptuousness as opposed to Dorothea's Quakerish grey drapery. In the immediate instance, as Cleopatra, the statue is simply all that Dorothea is not, all that she is deprived of in her marriage, all the sensuous experience that that marriage lacks and will ever lack. Naumann's response suggests that this is not solely Casaubon's fault, for in his own relish of the sexuality of the statue, he readily attributes a sexlessness to the living female form that bodes ill for its being recognised as part of a woman's identity. Naumann's response might also remind us of Stephen Guest's reaction to Maggie, which seems in retrospect more like an appropriation than an appreciation. In this instance too, Eliot might be critiquing the heterosexual response to beauty that Lessing expresses. His viewer, and implied reader, are clearly male, the object, female: 'What is the use of all this learning and observation to us readers whose desire is to believe that we see a beautiful woman, and to feel at that belief some of those soft emotions of the blood which accompany the actual sight of beauty?' (p. 143). This is an overtly sexualised response, which Eliot challenges in demanding a more nuanced response from her readers.

The statue's true name, Ariadne, offers an alternative, a narrative, and in this case one which presages Dorothea's future beyond the confines of the Vatican and her marriage by delving into the past of Classical mythology. As Ariadne, the statue sleeps, and Dorothea currently shares this state of unconsciousness. The statue represents a moment in the story of the Classical heroine Ariadne, the princess who helped Theseus escape from the minotaur in King Minos's palace on Crete, and who subsequently left the island with Theseus. However, on reaching the island of Naxos, Ariadne fell asleep, and was abandoned by the ungrateful Theseus who returned without her to his home in Athens. Dorothea will of course

²⁵ James A. W. Heffernan, *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1993), p. 19; quoted in Hollander, p. 173.

²⁶ Summer Star, 'Feeling Real in *Middlemarch*', *ELH*, 80 (2013), 839-69 (p. 865).

subsequently be left alone in her spiritually and sexually slumbering state by her husband's death. Ariadne is subsequently married to Bacchus, the god of wine and merry-making who eventually turns her into a constellation, and Dorothea will marry the equally youthful and radiant Will Ladislav, of whom in a later Rome chapter, Eliot writes:

Will Ladislav's smile was delightful, unless you were angry with him beforehand: it was a gush of inward light illuminating the transparent skin as well as the eyes, and playing about every curve and line as if some Ariel were touching them with a new charm, and banishing forever the traces of moodiness [...]

When he turned his head quickly his hair seemed to shake out light, and some persons thought they saw decided genius in this coruscation. Mr. Casaubon, on the contrary, stood rayless (ch. 21, pp. 205-06, 209)

The second reading of the statue, as Ariadne, emphasises the woman's capacity for life beyond the rarefied moment captured by the statue, demonstrating that women's lives are not confined to, or trapped within, the limits of their physical forms; but it also shows how Eliot takes the most concrete of artistic forms and animates it, giving it life beyond its own material parameters, and refusing the reading of sculpture's meaning as acting only restrictively to represent the lives and experiences of the women it depicts.

In this episode's tacit challenge to Lessing's hierarchy of artistic forms, Eliot shows how realist fiction can work differently, how it can adopt and suspend additional types of narrative and artistic form within itself, make itself anew through its amalgamation with those forms, in this instance in activating the multi-dimensional temporality of sculpture with which she had been experimenting throughout her career. Eliot is indeed no Pygmalion: she does not wish to animate a marble woman, but rather to animate sculpture itself within her fiction, to bring its Classical past into an engaged dialogue with the present and future within her realist writing. In doing so via sculptures of women, Eliot also both perpetuates more variegated representations of women and challenges the reader/viewer to adopt new moral, political, and aesthetic practices. Allusions in *Middlemarch*, and indeed in *Daniel Deronda*, place characters and texts within different forms of historical duration. They are Eliot's means of enabling characters to live multi-temporal lives, of having different experiential dimensions enter into the text, of breaking the bounds of her own realism, and initiating experiments with time that prefigure those of Henri Bergson and modernism. The dimension of time is central to allusion, and particularly to sculpture which, in Eliot's hands, always works with this extra dimension.

George Eliot is no Pygmalion, though an early review of *Adam Bede* spoke of her as one: the *Morning Chronicle* reviewer believed that the author had ‘a Pygmalion fancy for his own statues’,²⁷ and that that tendency had driven ‘him’ to depict Arthur and Hetty as characters who were too amiable for the moral of the tale. As we have seen, Eliot is rather critical of the tendency to believe that a statue coming to life will be a simple animation of the physical form that might seem to a viewer to encompass all that women are. This tendency is seen most clearly in *Daniel Deronda*, when Gwendolen Harleth foolishly takes on the form of Hermione’s statue in *The Winter’s Tale*, in a tableau which defeats her own purposes when she is started out of her marble-like loveliness by the sudden appearance of a painted panel of a dead face and a figure fleeing from it, when she had previously ordered to be locked up. Gwendolen is defeated by the forces she seeks to control.²⁸

²⁷ ‘Literature. Adam Bede’, *The Morning Chronicle*, 28 February, 1859.

²⁸ See my *Actresses on the Victorian Stage: Feminine Performance and the Galatea Myth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 80-82.