Some aspects of positivism in middlemarch

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George Eliot’s unwillingness to write a Positivist novel has been clearly documented in her letters. Her responses to Frederic Harrison’s suggestion that “ the grand features of Comte’s world might be sketched in fiction in their normal relations…under the forms of our familiar life” (Letters, IV, 287), are particularly unambiguous: “[if fiction] lapses anywhere from the picture to the diagramit becomes the most offensive of all teaching”. (Letters, IV, 300-301). Art, for Eliot, must labor to “ get breathing, individual forms, and group them in the needful relations, so that the presentation will lay hold on the emotions as human experience”. (Letters, IV, 300-301). A Positivist novel such as that advocated by Harrison would have condemned Eliot to a schematic structure, requiring her to overlook the multiple elements and infinite shadings that she recognized as constitutive of a human personality. Eliot is aware, in a way that is less evident in Auguste Comte for example, of the limitless subtleties and gradations of human character: “ Our vanities differ as our noses do: all conceit is not the same conceit, but varies in correspondence with the minuti of mental make in which one of us differs from another.” (Middlemarch, 148). By contrast Comte believed that “ a new doctrine” was capable of “ embracing the whole range of human relations in the spirit of reality.” (General View, 5). Implicit in Comte’s remark is one of the fundamental conclusions of his Positive Philosophy: that human nature and, beyond that, the interactions between individuals may be reduced to the scientifically determinable and definable. Much of Middlemarch seems suspicious of this view. Could it ever have been possible, if we imagine fiction as reality for a moment, to predict that a young doctor whose intent was “ to do good small work for Middlemarch, and great work for the world” (147) would die early, his crowning achievement “ a treatise on gout”? (818).

Equally, would the application of universal laws have made it possible to determine that Fred Vincy would become a “ theoretic and practical farmer”? (816). Presumably Comte would argue that given sufficient information, and with that information distilled into laws, it would. In agreement with Comte would be a large proportion of nineteenth century thinking on the philosophy of science, particularly if one believes that Mill’s deterministic notion that “ human volitions and actions [are] necessary and inevitable” (System of Logic, 547) is axiomatic for those active in the field. Mill goes on to claim that: “ if we knew the person thoroughly, and knew all the inducements which are acting upon him, we could foretell his conduct with as much certainty as we can predict any physical event.” (System of Logic, 547). 1 Mill’s is an undeniably powerful argument and it may be that Eliot is philosophically persuaded, or even “ internally convinced” by it, but Middlemarch seems to deny its practical application (although I would acknowledge that Eliot’s unwillingness to allow her characters much agency in any grand schemes might suggest otherwise). Eliot’s insistence on the major consequences of small events, random meetings and the fine, yet telling details of personality argue against the possibility on the grounds of complexity alone of exact prevision and prediction: “ If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel’s heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence.” 2 (Middlemarch, 192). There is simply too much detail. Does this, then, make the whole Positivist project untenable? Is it fatal to it? Or will the project “ lead us on to a social condition the most conformable to human nature, in which our characteristic qualities will find their most perfect respective confirmation, their completest mutual harmony, and the

freest expansion for each and all”? (Essential Writings, 306). Comte believes that, in the fullness of time, the culmination of the Positivist project is inevitable; Eliot In Middlemarch, I would suggest, believes differently. If the view is accepted that George Eliot could never write a Positivist novel and, further, that she remained suspicious of Positivism’s certainty of an available scientific approach to human nature, the question becomes: to what extent is Middlemarch influenced by Positivism? As I have argued, I feel that there is strong resistance in Middlemarch to the project in its full panoply. There are, however, powerful Positivist themes in the novel and these are, perhaps, most readily approached by considering the characters who display something of the Positivist spirit. Plainly there is Lydgate but there is also Casaubon. There is an air of the Comtean about Casaubon’s project: it is conducted on quasi-scientific grounds (Casaubon is interested in Dorothea for her “ elements both solid and attractive” [General View, 42] a phrase which could easily have emerged from the pages of a textbook on chemistry) it is rooted in the search for universal laws (the “ Key to all Mythologies” [Middlemarch, 486]), its precepts involve the need to “ systematize” and “ generalize” (General View, 3), and Casaubon is fully consistent in the application of his established principles to his studies. Rapidly, however, Eliot reveals Casaubon to be “ floating” among “ flexible conjectures” (472). He lacks the single most vital attribute of the good Positivist: “ Unity in our moral nature is, then, impossible, except so far as affection preponderates over intellect and activity.” (General View, 16). Casaubon is without affection, he is all activity and intellect, there is no unity, he is one dimensional: If we have been accustomed to deplore the spectacle, among the artisan class, of a workman occupied during his whole life in nothing else

but making knife handles or pinheads, we may find something quite as lamentable in the intellectual class, in the exclusive employment of a human brain in resolving some equations or in classifying insects. The moral effect is unhappily, analogous in the two case. It occasions a miserable indifference about the general course of human affairs, as long as there are equations to resolve and pins to manufacture. (Essential Writings, 274). Casaubon is unable, or unwilling, to move beyond purely theological speculations, through the sphere of the scientific, into the realm of the social in which the unity that the Comtean version of Positivism requires reaches its apotheosis. Casaubon's vainglorious metaphysical conjectures recall Comte's condemnation of those who would seek knowledge without consideration of its potential benefit to humanity as constituted in " society": " Yet in this case, as in every other, there is intense egotism in exercising the mental powers irrespectively of all social objects." (General View, 18). Casaubon's is a " mind… very able in some one respect and monstrously incapable in all others" (Essential Writings, 274), and Eliot has Casaubon fail to recognize that " the only position for which the intellect is permanently adapted is to be the servant of the social sympathies." (General View, 15). For Comte, if this position is abandoned, we are inevitably drawn towards the " deplorable disorder" (General View, 15) of something like the French Revolution. This, on a less grand scale, is what overtakes Casaubon. In spite of his overwhelming desire to classify and order, Casaubon's life descends into a species of this " deplorable disorder" as the ability to control his wife and her affections slips away from him, and his life's work upon which he had " risked all his egoism" (Middlemarch, 471) begins first to atrophy 3 and then to disintegrate under the burden of its own futility and the critical scrutiny of

his peers. As James. F. Scott suggests, rather than the Positivist he at first might appear, Casaubon may be viewed as a metaphysician of the kind most completely reviled by Comte: " Like all metaphysicians, as Comte saw them, Casaubon is a scientist manque, a thinker whose rational capacities have been suffocated by meaningless abstractions and discredited religious assumptions. Without the skill or honesty to subject his premises to scientific test, he can do little more than collect great bundles of worthless notes." (Scott, 69). Casaubon, then, whilst at first appearing to embody certain elements of Positivism is rapidly revealed to be trapped within an obsolete metaphysics. Lydgate, however, begins as the perfect Positivist. 4 He possesses: the imagination that reveals subtle actions inaccessible by any sort of lens, but tracked in that outer darkness through long pathways of necessary sequence by the inward light which is the last refinement of Energy, capable of bathing even the ethereal atoms in its ideally illuminated space. He for his part had tossed away all cheap inventions where ignorance finds itself able and at ease: he was enamoured of that arduous invention which is the very eye of research, provisionally framing its object and correcting it to more and more exactness of relation; he wanted to pierce the obscurity of those minute processes which prepare human misery and joy, those invisible thoroughfares which are the first lurking-places of anguish, mania, and crime, that delicate poise and transition which determine the growth of happy or unhappy consciousness. (Middlemarch, 163). In his early appearances in Middlemarch Lydgate is very much Harrison's prototype of the ideal fictional Positivist: " a local physician…a man of the new world with complete scientific and entirely moral ascendancy over both capitalist and labourer". (Letters, IV, 287). As the above passage from Middlemarch shows,

Lydgate has the potential to become a leading hierophant of Comte's " new Priesthood" (General View, 384): his epistemology is essentially empirical, 5 he is committed to the absolute relativity of knowledge, is dependent for scientific truth on the " invariable relations of succession and resemblance" (Essential Writings, 72), and supposes that a sufficiently detailed scientific analysis of human behavior may lead to the resolution of social problems. Lydgate, in this incarnation, fits precisely Mill's description of the Positivist: " Whoever regards all events as parts of a constant order, each one being the invariable consequent of some antecedent condition, or combination of conditions, accepts fully the Positive mode of thought." (Comte, 15). Lydgate, in both his approach to medicine and its history, is in the vanguard of contemporary Positivist epistemology: " But [Lydgate] did not simply aim at a more genuine kind of practice than was common. He was ambitious of a wider effect: he was fired with the possibility that he might work out the proof of an anatomical conception and make a link in the chain of discovery." (Middlemarch, 144). Lydgate's " chain of discovery" is exactly that sequence of invariable " relations of succession and resemblance" (General View, 75) traced by Comte in his description of the history and development of the sciences. Lydgate's approach is redolent of the Positivist practice outlined by Mill: From this time any political thinker who fancies himself able to dispense with a connected view of the great facts of history, as a chain of causes and effects, must be regarded as below the level of the age; while the vulgar mode of using history, by looking in it for parallel cases, or as if in a single instance, or even many instances not compared and analyzed, could reveal a law, will be more than ever, and irrevocably, discredited. (Comte, 86). Eliot describes Lydgate's attitude within a similar framework of

interconnectedness and historical interdependence: “ The more [Lydgate] became interested in special questions of disease, such as the nature of fever or fevers, the more keenly he felt the need for that fundamental knowledge of structure which just at the beginning of the century had been illuminated by the brief and glorious career of Bichat, who died when he was only one-and-thirty, but, like another Alexander, left a realm large enough for many heirs.” (146). Not only is Lydgate devoted to a Positive scientific method, he is filled with “ affection” and is fully aware of the need to follow a course “ offering the most direct alliance between intellectual conquest and the social good”. (143). As Eliot makes abundantly clear Lydgate matches Comte’s criteria in this area: “ he was an emotional creature, with a flesh-and-blood sense of fellowship which withstood all the abstractions of special study. He cared not only for ‘ cases’ but also for John and Elizabeth, especially Elizabeth.” (143). Lydgate’s downfall, however, is the result of his failure to apply his Positivism to his life beyond his work: “ 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.” (162). Lydgate’s relationship with Rosamond is conducted with a superficiality and a reliance on vague supposition that would have been unthinkable to him in his work, and recapitulates that of which he has been guilty in the past: “ As to women, he had once already been drawn headlong by impetuous folly”. (149). His disastrous marriage could have been avoided with the application of Positivist principles, the novel implies. Equally

Lydgate’s financial difficulties and his fateful entanglement with Bulstrode and Raffles might have been averted had the “ spots of commonness” (148), 6 which disfigure his attitude to money and commerce, been eliminated by a consistent and interfused application of the Positivist spirit. Nowhere is this clearer than in the scenes in which Lydgate attends to the medical needs of Raffles in full accordance with Positivist methods, but thoroughly neglects to apply the same principals to his interaction with Bulstrode, thus precipitating the calamitous chain of events with which the novel reaches its crescendo. Lydgate’s downfall is, in certain respects, linked to his upper class background. As James Scott observes, Lydgate spends carelessly in predictable aristocratic fashion, he marries a “ status-conscious wife, and reacts to the lower orders of Middlemarch society with aloof baronial hauteur. Significantly, these are the personality traits that lead to his demise. His overbearing attitude shrinks his medical practice, his genteel wife encourages him to live beyond his means, and his mounting debts press him into fatal dependence upon Bulstrode.” (Scott, 71-2). A thorough reading of Positivism might have been sufficient to have convinced Lydgate of the need to renounce his aristocratic background, but “ In warming himself at French social theories he had brought away no smell of scorching.” (344). A disbelief in the capacity, or willingness, of the aristocracy to effect social change is a strong theme in Comte and is a notion with which Eliot appears to concur. As Comte remarked: “[The upper classes] are all more or less under the influence of baseless metaphysical theories and of aristocratic self-seeking. They are absorbed in blind political agitation and in disputes for the possession of the useless remnants of the old theological and military system. Their action only tends to prolong the revolutionary state

indefinitely, and can never result in true social renovation.” (General View, 318). The majority of the upper classes and gentry in Middlemarch are involved to one extent or another in the kinds of activity Comte describes: disputes over succession to clerical “ livings”, Mr. Brooke’s self-interested dabbling in the politics of the 1832 Reform Bill, 7 Mrs Cadwallader’s failure to be “ consciously affected by the great affairs of the world” (58), Sir James Chettam’s indifference to the living conditions of his tenants until his interest is piqued by the possibility of impressing Dorothea (20-21); Casaubon’s cobwebbed metaphysics and Lydgate’s “ spots of commonness” I have already mentioned. Little or no social change is instigated by the aristocracy of Middlemarch. As Eliot informs the reader: “ The country gentry of old time lived in a rarefied social air: dotted apart on their stations up the mountain they looked down with imperfect discrimination on the belts of thicker life below.” (322). Eliot never abandons her craft to the extent that there is a clumsy personification of a “ Positivist”; but certainly it may be argued that within Middlemarch there are all the elements required to create a fictional Comtean. An unholy union of the characters of Casaubon and Lydgate might, indeed, suffice: Casaubon’s application of his principles to all aspects of his life combined, perhaps, with Lydgate’s commitment to a Positivist approach in his work. It is intriguing, therefore, in the light of the notion that Eliot could not accept Postivism in its “ systematizing” totality, to conclude that neither Lydgate, Casaubon nor the Middlemarch aristocracy are Positivist enough. This would, it seems, expose a paradox or at least an ambivalence at the heart of Middlemarch; something further complicated by the notion that Eliot’s heroine, Dorothea, is herself a species of Positivist albeit an unconscious one. Clearly Dorothea possesses the fundamental Positivist

attributes: “ a nature altogether ardent, theoretic, and intellectually consequent…The thing which seemed to her best, she wanted to justify by the completest knowledge.” 8 (28). I would argue, therefore, that it is not Positivism itself that Eliot resists indeed Positivism is portrayed as a valuable, morally desirable philosophy upon which to base one’s life but any absolute imprisonment of individuals within artificial philosophical systems; systems rendered necessarily crude by their inability to encompass all of the complexities of human nature. Such a conclusion not only reinforces the notion of Eliot as opposed to systems but, also, recalls her insistence upon the picture over the diagram. As Walter Pater subsequently observed: “ Such is the matter of imaginative or artistic literature this transcript, not of mere fact, but of fact in its infinite variety, as modified by human preference in all its infinitely varied forms.” (106). Sentiments that could easily have come from Eliot herself, and are prefigured in her insistence on the necessary mediating function rooted in the imaginative propensities of the artist: “ How triumphant opinions originally spread how institutions arose… what circumstances affecting individual lots are attendant upon the decay of long established systems, all these grand elements of history require the illumination of special imaginative treatment.” (Pinney, 446). Further evidence of Eliot’s reluctance to embrace totalizing systems emerges in her resistance to the alliance “ between the priests of science and the captains of industry” (Scott, 70) a key element of the Comtean project. Comte argues that the new priesthood of scientists will require support from the bankers if it is not to wither away, bereft of an efficient administration. Such a relationship would lead “ habitually” to “ close relations between the priesthood and the bankers…so that the banking class [would] be the civic

organ for inaugurating the more important connections of science with industry." (System, IV, 71). As T. R. Wright concludes, however, Eliot does not allow a Positivist alliance of capital and science to flourish in Middlemarch: " The physician makes an alliance with the capitalist, but Bulstrode cannot escape from his theological bias and Middlemarch is totally unprepared for Lydgate's new ideas. Public opinion has the power to hound the hypocritical banker from his position but it lacks the insight to accept scientific advance. Middlemarch is not ready for Positivism." (268). For Eliot it is the convoluted nexus of human frailties that causes the alliance to fail Bulstrode's tangled past and Lydgate's inability to be the wholly consistent Positivist priest are just two contributory elements. As Middlemarch implies: until all is known that can be known, systems fail, and all cannot be known at this stage of human development. For Eliot the briefest of human interactions have ramifications of sufficient potential to disrupt any system: " But any one watching keenly the stealthy convergence of human lots, sees a slow preparation of effects from one life on another, which tells like a calculated irony on the indifference or the frozen stare with which we look at our unintroduced neighbour. Destiny stands by sarcastic with our dramatis personae folded in her hand." (Middlemarch, 93). For Eliot the complexity of human nature and behavior, or " the interdependence of all human interests" (Pinney, 409), tends to work in opposition to totalizing systems. Society, in Middlemarch, is an organic entity constructed from countless millions of human interactions and possesses a degree of complexity utterly resistant to imposed systems. Indeed it would be tempting to compare Eliot's thinking, on these grounds, with that of a recent Pragmatist like Richard Rorty: " Our language and our culture are as much a contingency, as much a

result of thousands of small mutations finding niches (and millions of others finding no niches), as are the orchids and the anthropoids." (Rorty, 16). Such a comparison, however, must remain, if not erroneous, then partial. Eliot's take, as opposed to Rorty's, supposes a linear teleology in which the movement is from the fragmentary to the whole, from the incomplete to the complete and from relative chaos to relative order: " Language must be left to grow in precision, completeness, and unity, as minds grow in clearness, comprehensiveness, and sympathy." (Byatt, 128). Eliot's resistance to systems does not, as some might claim, constitute an anticipation of the Poststructuralist reverberation of infinite meaning, echoing endlessly in the epistemological void. The world may not yet be ready for the Positivist utopia envisaged by Comte but such an ideal has meaning, is potentially " real", and remains in view as an identifiable aspiration. These notions of " reality" and " meaning" are inherent in Eliot's synopsis of Dorothea's life: " Certainly those determining acts of [Dorothea's] life were not ideally beautiful. They were the mixed result of young and noble impulse struggling amidst the conditions of an imperfect social state, in which great feelings will often take the aspect of error and great faith the aspect of illusion." (Middlemarch, 821). Contained, also, as implications within this passage are the concepts of " right", " wrong", " truth" and " perfectibility" concepts that the thrust of Poststructuralist thought tends to reject as destructive of multiplicity, as guilty of promoting " the reassuring foundation" and as instigating " the end of play." (Derrida, 122). Eliot, though, remains a " realist", she insists upon the struggle to find stable meaning and permanent " truth": " May I unceasingly aspire to unclothe all around me of its conventional, human, temporary dress, to look at it in its essence and in its relation to eternity".

(Letters, I, 70). Interestingly, the metaphysical notions of “ essence” and “ eternity” are exactly of the character most execrated by Comtean Positivism, and this alone would probably be sufficient to disqualify George Eliot from the priesthood of Positivism. As I have tried to show, however, there is a significant degree of sympathy towards Positivism in Middlemarch, particularly in connection with Positivism’s moral and social prescriptions. It is the deterministic and totalizing nature of Positivism to which Eliot is most antagonistic. Eliot’s suspicion of raw determinism of the kind that suggests exact prediction and prevision are possible seems founded in the notion that, even if all existing phenomena are the result of antecedent phenomena, no system yet devised, or to be devised in the future, is capable of embracing all the minutiae of human activity; the minutiae that are constituted in the “ unhistoric acts” of “ hidden” individuals: “ But the effect of [Dorothea’s] being on those around her was incalculably diffusive: for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not half so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs.” (Middlemarch, 822). If we see the world, as Eliot seems to, as an infinitely sensitive and complex organism, susceptible to the tiniest of influences, the Positivist project is simply not a sufficiently delicate instrument with which to expose all the universal laws that govern human behavior and interaction. As in fiction, so in the life of the artist: “ I at least have so much to do in unravelling certain human lots, and seeing how they were woven and interwoven, that all the light I can command must be concentrated on this particular web, and not dispersed over that tempting range of relevancies called the universe.” (Middlemarch, 139). Notes1 Mill’s remarks are used

here as emblematic of a particular trend in nineteenth century “ scientism” but, plainly, he has doubts about the infallibility of the position himself: But as society proceeds in its development, its phaenomena are determined, more and more, not by the simple tendencies of universal human nature, but by the accumulated influence of past generations over the present. The human beings themselves, on the laws of whose nature the facts of history depend, are not abstract or universal but historical human beings, already shaped, and made what they are, by human society. This being the case, no powers of deduction could enable any one, starting from the mere conception of the Being Man, placed in a world such as the earth may have been before the commencement of human agency, to predict and calculate the phaenomena of his development such as they have in fact proved. (Mill, 85). 2 My interpretation of Eliot’s “ roar on the other side of silence” is that the tumultuous cascade of complex information necessitated by the reception, and perception, of such detail would be of such a volume/volume that no individual could survive its onslaught, thus making any attempt to absorb and process knowledge on such a scale impossible. 3 Eliot’s imagery of lifelessness at Lowick reinforces the notion of Casaubon and his ideas as fading anachronisms: “ sombre yews”, “ small-windowed and melancholy looking”, “ no bloom”, “ autumnal decline” (71) and “ colours subdued by time” (72). Casaubon’s project is reduced to the “ lifeless embalmment of knowledge”. (194). Like the metaphysical and theological stages of Comte’s tripartite epistemological system, Casaubon is moribund. 4 Indeed Eliot makes Lydgate’s knowledge of the origins of the Comtean project explicit: “ he had thought of joining the Saint Simonians when he was in Paris”. (148). 5 Lydgate’s analysis of Casaubon’s heart condition is a strong example of his

empiricism: "' I believe you are suffering from what is called fatty degeneration of the heart…A good deal of experiencea more lengthened observationis wanting on the subject.'" (418). 6 Scott argues, convincingly I feel, that Lydgate's " spots of commonness" are " the vestiges of his aristocratic upbringing". (71). As Eliot informs the reader: " In the rest of practical life [Lydgate] walked by hereditary habit; half from that personal pride and unreflecting egoism which I have already called commonness, and half from that navet which belonged to preoccupation with favourite ideas." (345). 7 Brooke may have been of " uncertain opinion" (8) but legislation with the potential to re-distribute power and influence (and, therefore, money), Eliot suggests, would cause him to become " watchful, suspicious and greedy of clutch". (8). 8 Comte might have been detailing a framework for Eliot's portrayal of Dorothea's morality when he wrote: " By its various aptitudes positive morality will tend more and more to exhibit the happiness of the individual as depending on the complete expansion of benevolent acts and sympathetic emotions towards the whole of our race". (Essential Writings, 302). Works CitedBloom, Harold. Ed. Selected Writings of Walter Pater. New York: Columbia University Press, 1974. Byatt, A. S. and Nicholas Warren, eds. George Eliot: Selected Essays, Poems and Other Writings. London: Penguin, 1990. Comte, Auguste. General View of Positivism. London: Turner, 1865. Comte, Auguste. System of Positive Polity. 4 Vols. London: Longmans, 1875-77. Derrida, Jacques. " Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences." Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader. Ed. David Lodge. London: Longman, 1988. Eliot, George. Middlemarch. Ed. David Carroll. Oxford: OUP, 1998. Haight, Gordon, ed. The George Eliot Letters. 8 vols. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954-55. Lenzer, Gertrude,

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