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# CLASHING HORIZONS

## GEORGE ELIOT ON SCHOLASTICISM



### ON DANCING ANGELS

SEVERAL YEARS AGO I heard a layperson preach, at an evangelical parish, on Trinity Sunday. I've got nothing against laypeople preaching, whether male or female. There's a good chance they'll be as qualified as the clergy and their homilies are liable to be no worse. The theme of his homily was hard to grasp, though, and seemed counter-intuitive, as he did little more than question the relevance of this feast day. Trinity Sunday, he said, is fairly recent, since it began in the medieval period. I suspect he was trying to make the perfectly valid point that, unlike other feast days, Trinity Sunday focuses on a theological idea about God's nature rather than the saints and events of history, but it didn't come out that way. Instead we were reminded of how much more we know now than they knew then, and he seemed more a stand-up comic than a preacher when mocking scholasticism's debate over how many angels can dance on the head of a pin.

It's true we know more now than they knew then, about some things; for example, how germs cause disease and what happens within atoms. About other things we're still in the dark. Scholasticism, as a process of dialectical reasoning, and a systematic way of assembling and analysing data, may be unfashionable but it's methodologically sound and its technique, if not its content, continues to be used in philosophy and the sciences. Central to scholasticism is natural law, a theory which proposes that humans, by their own reason, can gain knowledge of the ethically good without reference to revelation. Scholasticism and natural law stand on their own merits and it's obvious we're still asking some of the same questions Aquinas asked 800 years ago; and, indeed, Aristotle asked 2300 years ago. When we ridicule scholasticism for debating how many angels can dance on the head of a pin, we should remember the debate is about infinity and different

kinds of being. Although medieval, its hypothesis is timeless. Since angels aren't spatial, an infinite number of them could occupy a point, if they exist.

Scholasticism and natural law belong to classical metaphysics. Central to classical metaphysics is the Platonic model of mind, which originates in the ancient Greek myths of rationality and irrationality. In this model, the mind is conceptualised as imprisoned in the

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body, and it has a tripartite structure of reason, noble feeling, and base appetite that, by analogy, is associated with different parts of the body. Reason is associated with the mind as the highest point of the body. Noble feeling is associated with the heart and can be inspired as a higher form of irrationality. Base appetite is associated with the lower abdomen and is therefore a lower form of irrationality.

Within this Platonic model, the rationality of the mind and noble feeling of the heart are both associated with the divine: with God if you're Christian; with the Good if you're ancient Greek. However, because the heart is closer to the lower abdomen than the mind, by the same analogy, the higher form of irrationality is always threatened by the lower form of irrationality, hence the need for reason to control feeling from being overtaken by base appetite. Western readers have been conditioned to think of the mind in these classical categories: rational and irrational, conscious and unconscious, mind and body. Whether they're mythological or scientific categories is still a matter of theory and debate.

Since the Enlightenment, classical metaphysics has been subjected to a wide-ranging critique, which has been influential for over 200 years. When locating the critique in philosophy, it's useful to consider the movement from Kant to Hegel to Nietzsche to Derrida; when locating the critique in theology, it's useful to consider the movement from deism to theism to atheism to agnosticism; when locating the critique in literature, it's useful to consider the movement from neoclassi-

cism to romanticism to modernism to postmodernism. Of course, these movements are all fluid, but when they are compared it becomes obvious that philosophy and theology and literature often share similar intellectual and aesthetic concerns.

During the evolution of this critique, neoclassicism appealed to reason over feeling, romanticism appealed to feeling over reason, and movements within modernism and postmodernism, such as phenomenology and existentialism and hermeneutics, invented terms such as *dasein* and *astruktur* and *horizonverschmelzung* to distance themselves from the supposed mind-body dualism of classical metaphysics. Curiously, though, the earlier forms of psychology went against this modern grain by systematising the Platonic model of mind into the ego-id of Freudianism, and conscious-unconscious of Jungianism. The theories and assumptions of the critique have been popularised and, of course, with popularisation comes misunderstanding and misrepresentation. Perhaps that's one reason why the lay preacher, who was a scientist, not a philosopher or theologian or literary author, felt sufficiently empowered to mock scholasticism's debate over how many angels can dance on the head of a pin.

This article discusses one of English literature's most interpreted novels, George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871–72), to draw attention to the way Eliot participated in the critique of classical metaphysics, and in particular to her take on the decline of scholasticism and rise of early modernism. While the critique went on to become mainstream, and dominated the twentieth century, it was still relatively new in the period Eliot wrote, and certainly new in the 1830s, the period in which the novel is set. Noticing the critique helps the reader understand the relationship between the history of ideas and the literature of ideas.

## ON DEAD LEAVES

THE OVERARCHING FRAME of *Middlemarch* is Dorothea Brooke's journey into maturity, with all its hallmarks of *bildungsroman*: her painful transition from adolescent to young woman, the religious fervour and social idealism that motivate her non-conformity, the way in which she adapts to a society that is itself adapting, and finally, her assessment of the position she eventually chooses, or is consigned to, at a lower rung of that society. Within this

frame the novel represents English provincial life just before the Victorian period.

This period of wide-ranging upheaval—political, ideological, social, economic, scientific and religious—provides the background for Eliot's critique. It was a period of clashing horizons, and in *Middlemarch* Eliot brilliantly fictionalises the horizons that clashed. The central clash, at the heart of Dorothea's *bildungsroman*, is between scholasticism and the early modernism that grew out of romanticism. These horizons are related, just as their representatives, Edward Casaubon and Will Ladislaw, are related. Casaubon's maternal aunt was Ladislaw's maternal grandmother, who made an “unfortunate” marriage, and the novel suggests Casaubon benefited from an estate that, in different circumstances, Ladislaw would have some moral if not legal claim to.

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The novel also fictionalises other horizons, which interact in intricate overlapping ways. There's the tension within science, evident in the hostility between locally-established apothecaries, or leeches, who still practise folk medicine, and a newly-arrived surgeon, Tertius Lydgate, who practises what then passed for modern medicine; there's an alliance of expediency between science and religion, evident in the relationship between Dr Lydgate, who represents scientism, and the banker, Nicholas Bulstrode, who represents evangelicalism; there's the whole spectrum of late-Georgian churchmanship, evident in the high church clergy associated with Casaubon, the evangelical clergy Bulstrode seeks to promote, and the Reverends Farebrother and

Cadwallader, who both represent the broad church; there's the whole spectrum of the period's party politics, and the campaigning for votes around the time of the Reform Acts and Catholic Emancipation; and there's the standoff at the geographical centre of the novel, a significant place in many novels, between Mr Brooke as an ineffectual landlord and one of his aggrieved tenant farmers. Each of these horizons is subjected to Eliot's magisterial gaze; they provide a snapshot of upheavals in the early nineteenth century; critics have written a great deal about them.

What is Eliot's take on these clashing horizons? Does she stand apart from them or promote one over the other? I suspect she's as objective as she can be from her subjective position, which took for granted the importance of contemporary insights that challenged received wisdom. In one sense, she's similar to the evangelical layperson, with his attempt at stand-up

comedy from the pulpit, although her take is much more intellectual, systematic and ironic. In another sense, her background is different, since while she was raised in an evangelical household she made the typical journey out of the church via radical politics, liberal theologies, demythologising hermeneutics, early attempts at the historical Jesus, the interrogation of reason as a verifying calculus, and the ideas that contributed to the development of evolutionary theory.

In general, then, Eliot left the church via all the events that led to the crisis of belief associated with the nineteenth century, and these events determined her caste of mind. We can locate her intellectual milieu in her non-fiction: published translations of Strauss's *Life of Jesus* and Feuerbach's *Essence of Christianity*, an unfinished translation of Spinoza's *Ethics*, and the assistant editorship of the *Westminster Review*, a quarterly journal for philosophical radicals published between 1824 and 1914. This milieu, which was fuelled by and in turn fuelled the crisis of belief, was sceptical about scholasticism and natural law.

Eliot begins *Middlemarch* with a brief reflection on the life of Theresa of Avila, whose "passionate ideal nature demanded an epic life", and who "found her epos in the reform of a religious order". Since then many Therasas have been born who are unable to demand epic lives because they live in an age that has "no coherent social faith and order" to support "the ardent willing soul". Instead, some lead "blundering lives" as "foundress of nothing", partly because of contemporary crises of "faith and order" and partly because of the "inconvenient indefiniteness" of women's nature.

Here's an authorial statement of the dilemmas confronting her nineteenth-century heroine, as a victim of circumstances and of herself in equal measure. Twenty-first-century feminists may not care for Eliot's suggestion that women are inconveniently indefinite by nature, and of course the statement is confounded by her own authorial definiteness. Many female authors have written canonical novels about heroines quite unlike themselves.

At the beginning of the novel, the reader learns that, in addition to being inconveniently indefinite, Dorothea—an intelligent orphan being raised by an uncle of acquiescent temper, miscellaneous opinions, and uncertain vote—is limited by the narrow education and social expectations that circumscribe women. Apart from these limitations, Dorothea has a theoretical caste of mind that belies a passionate nature, and she's deeply religious:

she was enamoured of intensity and greatness, and rash in embracing whatever seemed to her to have those aspects; likely to seek martyrdom, to make

retractions, and then to incur martyrdom after all in a quarter where she had not sought it.

In spite of Dorothea's intelligence and eagerness to know the truth, she has childlike ideas about marriage, would have accepted a theologian like Richard Hooker or a poet like John Milton as a husband, and felt a really delightful marriage would be one in which "your husband was a sort of father, and could teach you even Hebrew, if you wished it". Her younger sister Celia emerges from the same background but is more practical and pragmatic, especially in accepting Sir James Chettam's proposal of marriage once her high-minded older sister turns that baronet down. Dorothea's martyrdom begins once she meets Casaubon, a grave and humourless middle-aged clergyman, whose iron-grey hair and deep eye sockets resemble a famous portrait of the philosopher John Locke, and whose spare form and sallow complexion are the antithesis of the red-blooded and non-intellectual Chettam.

Casaubon is one of the principal horizons fictionalised in the novel, as well as the oldest and most established. He represents what Eliot portrays as the high and dry church before the Oxford Movement launched catholic renewal; his life is dedicated to researching the key to all mythologies, a proxy for how many angels can dance on the head of a pin; his research is conducted in the scholastic tradition and is both substantial and systematic. Some argue Eliot is commenting on Casaubon's inability to complete his research, rather than commenting on scholasticism as such; others argue Eliot is suggesting Casaubon is trapped in earlier centuries, unable to keep up with contemporaries who have moved on to more relevant and credible speculations. Such views overlook his primary function in a novel about paradigmatic change.

CASaubon APPEARS on Dorothea's impressionable radar at a critical point in her late adolescence. When it dawns on her that he might want to marry her, she experiences reverential gratitude, as if he were a guardian angel sent to protect her from a social life that's nothing but "a labyrinth of petty courses"; a "walled-in maze of small paths" that lead nowhere. She imagines that, as his wife, she'll study with him, learn from him, help him in his research, attain complete knowledge, become his amanuensis, and otherwise be taken on a journey where everything is serious and nothing is trivial. Other characters are more knowing, and wonder whether Casaubon has a heart or even red blood in his body. That said, Middlemarchers still respect Casaubon as a person of influence.

Eliot calls Casaubon's manor house Lowick (low wick—low flame, little light, no passion). It has "an air

of autumnal decline”, is surrounded by “dead leaves”, and requires the addition of “children, many flowers, open windows, and little vistas of bright things” before it can become a real home. As Casaubon has no “bloom” he can’t make Lowick blossom. The reader is meant to view him as a worn-out horizon living in a decaying metaphor; a dour unromantic prism that carries a taper among the tombs of the past. With characteristic archness, the early modern Ladislav describes the scholastic Casaubon as a dried-up pedant groping after mouldy futilities, living in a lumber-room of refurbished broken-legged theories, elaborating small explanations that are as important as a surplus stock of false antiquities.

Mr and Mrs Casaubon go to Rome on their honeymoon where, instead of doing what honeymoon couples do, he occupies himself with his research—at the Vatican, of course, the traditional home of scholasticism and natural law—and she spends her days alone, looking young and beautiful, clad in Quakerish drapery, frustrated because she isn’t being allowed to help with his research, increasingly aware that her future isn’t going to be filled with the joyful devotedness she had expected. They run into Ladislav, who’s never far away, even on their honeymoon. He has befriended a German artist, Adolf Naumann. The two men are attracted to Dorothea and find it odd that such a beautiful young woman has married a dried-up old thing like Casaubon.

The Casaubons pay a visit to Naumann’s studio, where the artist asks Casaubon to sit for him: “a sketch of your head would be invaluable to me for the St Thomas Aquinas in my picture there. It is too much to ask; but I so seldom see just what I want—the idealistic in the real.” Many of Eliot’s characters link Casaubon with scholasticism, and the link is particularly ironic here since Aquinas, the archetypal scholastic, was fat while Casaubon is thin, physically and emotionally. It’s a joke Eliot plays on Casaubon through Naumann, but Casaubon doesn’t get the joke, as he’s a fan who believes, against the anti-scholastic temper of Eliot’s age, that Aquinas’s thinking is relevant and complex and can’t be adapted for superficial minds. He’s flattered instead and buys the painting so he can see himself as Aquinas sitting “among the doctors of the Church in a disputation too abstract to be represented”. The dispute could be over how many angels can dance on the head of a pin, or perhaps the key to all mythologies.

When husband and wife return from their honey-

moon, Mr Brooke notices Casaubon is looking pale, and Casaubon finds himself weighed down by an unfulfilled desire to render both his research and his marriage “unimpeachable” within the limits of his infertile and frail constitution. According to Eliot’s logic, though, Casaubon is incapable of fulfilling either desire. He’s worn out, like his scholastic horizon, unable to complete his research, or cope with an idealistic and passionate young wife; and, by proxy, with the early modern world Ladislav represents. Complicating this, Ladislav has sent them a letter advising that he proposes to leave the Continent and visit Middlemarch. Physically exhausted and unable to discourage the visit himself, Casaubon delegates the task of refusing Ladislav to Dorothea, but his message isn’t passed on. Instead, because of a misunderstanding, the ineffectual

Mr Brooke extends an invitation to Ladislav and becomes his patron.

When Casaubon realises what’s happened, he’s astute enough to see that Ladislav will cultivate Dorothea. He’s right, and before long she tries to convince him that Ladislav deserves a share of his estate. This causes a breach between husband and wife and he stipulates in his will that Dorothea shall forfeit his estate if she ever marries Ladislav. For the short period of her widowhood, Dorothea becomes a kind of St Theresa with an open chequebook, a patroness with the power to exercise a beneficial influence over Middlemarch during its struggle to adapt to the early modern world. She

can continue to influence Middlemarch in this beneficial way as long as she remains a virgin martyr to scholasticism, living in the virtual tomb of Lowick. If she goes against her husband’s will, she forfeits the source of her influence.

LADISLAV IS EASIER to understand once his function as a trope is understood. Although related to Casaubon, he comes from the Continent; in a novel driven by horizons, he represents those Continental discourses from the nineteenth century that evolved into the various posts of the twentieth century. Critics have noticed that, compared with Eliot’s better-defined characters, those with a coherent system of belief the reader can accept or reject, Ladislav is insouciant and insubstantial. He never appears as, say, a fully-fledged disciple of Hegel or Schopenhauer—Nietzsche hadn’t been born yet; Heidegger and Derrida were a long way off—to match Casaubon’s discipleship of Aquinas. Some see this as a weakness in Eliot’s characterisation; but, given the period in which the

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novel is set, it could equally mean Eliot wants Ladislav to represent a fledgling horizon, somewhere at the turning point where romanticism became early modernism, which becomes more definitive as the century advances. Since Ladislav isn't characterised by what he believes, but by his objection to those who represent tradition and the status quo, and since all the reader sees is the assertion of his clever but immature will, he's as definitive as a pre-*übermensch* can be: more will-to-petulance than will-to-power.

Even Ladislav's German friend Naumann calls him dilettantish and amateurish, and apart from Dorothea and her uncle, Mr Brooke, Middlemarchers have Ladislav's measure. He admits to being a freelance rebel who refuses to submit to what he doesn't like, and Casaubon notes Ladislav particularly dislikes the steady application necessary for a profession. When Casaubon once advised him of the necessity of work and patience, Ladislav's response was that genius is necessarily intolerant of fetters: "on the one hand, it must have the utmost play for its spontaneity; on the other, it may confidently await those messages from the universe which summon it to its peculiar work".

To the bumbling Mr Brooke, Ladislav seems a kind of Shelley, with the "same sort of enthusiasm for liberty, freedom, emancipation", which is "a fine thing under guidance—under guidance, you know. I think I shall be able to put him on the right track." To Mrs Cadwallader, wife of a local broad church clergyman, he's a dangerous young sprig; his opera songs and ready tongue making him a "sort of Byronic hero—an amorous conspirator". To Dr Lydgate, he's a "sort of gypsy, rather enjoying the sense of belonging to no class; he had a feeling of romance in his position, and a pleasant consciousness of creating a little surprise wherever he went".

Ladislav's romantic-cum-early-modern affectations may make him appear a kind of Shelley, a sort of Byronic hero, or a gypsy, but these things don't signify in Middlemarch; even his relationship with Casaubon doesn't commend him to Middlemarchers once it's rumoured Casaubon will have nothing to do with him. During his time in Middlemarch, Ladislav flexes what little intellectual muscle he has as Mr Brooke's amanuensis, a position similar to policy adviser for an independent candidate, where neither the adviser nor the candidate stand for anything in particular, and for a while they become a *folie à deux*. He also becomes increasingly resentful of his former guardian: "Will, who was much obliged to Casaubon in the past, was coming to regard his marriage to Dorothea as a kind of outrage that cancelled any obligation."

Apart from representing the bohemian sceptic, a faux idealist without ideals, Ladislav's primary function in the novel is to rescue the widow Casaubon from

her vocation as a virgin martyr; a vocation that's failing not because she rejects its virtue but because she comes to accept she's no longer called to live such a life. For all his insouciance, Ladislav brings a level of contemporary reality to Dorothea's life, putting her in touch with the overall thrust of Continental thought, as she works through her thrall to her husband's scholasticism towards a more vague belief that suits her:

That by desiring what is perfectly good, even when we don't quite know what it is and cannot do what we would, we are part of the divine power against evil—widening the skirts of light and making the struggle with darkness narrower.

She doesn't try to name or systematise this belief but simply accepts it:

It is my life. I have found it out, and cannot part with it. I have always been finding out my religion since I was a little girl. I used to pray so much—now I hardly ever pray. I try not to have desires merely for myself, because they may not be good for others, and I have too much already.

These nebulous sentiments are uttered just before Dorothea marries Ladislav, forfeits Casaubon's estate, and loses the influence it gave her. After their marriage, the Ladislavs move to London, where he becomes a politician, living off his constituency and fighting for any reform that's flavour of the month. Dorothea subsumes herself in his career, while many who know her look on and think it a pity that "so substantive and rare a creature should have been absorbed into the life of another, and be only known in a certain circle as a wife and mother". Because they've become poor relations, now devolved to a lower class, the Ladislavs are banned from Middlemarch. But blood is thicker than water, and, on the birth of their son, Dorothea's sister Celia convinces Sir James to allow the Ladislavs to pay regular visits to his estate. Mr Brooke lives to a good old age and his estate is eventually inherited by Dorothea's son, not by Dorothea.

The novel's final sentences return to the theme of Dorothea as a thwarted Theresa, since the novel's action has been dedicated to showing how the heroine lives in very different philosophical order compared with the saint. But Eliot believes her heroine has no more failed than the saint has succeeded, and is no less important than other Dorotheas who are the unsung heroines of millions of ordinary lives:

the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive: for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and

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that things are not 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.

Dorothea isn't unhappy in her marriage, or with the consequences of her choices, although she continues to live with the nagging feeling "there was always something better which she might have done, if she had only been better and known better". I suspect Eliot's point is that had Dorothea remained a virgin martyr to scholasticism, and done incalculable good with her open cheque-book, rather than declare her to be a saint, as Theresa's contemporaries declared her to be, Dorothea's contemporaries would have looked on and wondered why she bothered. This is what Eliot means by living in an age that has "no coherent social faith and order" to support "the ardent willing soul". In such an age, so much like our own, maturity is a personal and anonymous thing that comes at a high price, fulfillment will always be found in the other than expected, or in the other than hoped for, and those clashing horizons, which we continue to live among today, still need to be reckoned with.

### ON CASAUBON'S LEGACY

**D**OROTHEA CHOSE to forfeit Casaubon's scholastic legacy, of her own free will, fully aware of the consequences. It's unclear what happens to that legacy, within the horizon of the novel, since Eliot's narrative intention apparently ends with the forfeiture. Perhaps she assumes scholasticism will simply wear out and disappear into the obviously superior mists of modernism and its posts. Such an assumption is understandable, given her intellectual

milieu and the spirit of her age.

Scholasticism didn't disappear on cue, though, just as God didn't disappear with the proclamation of his death. If Eliot were alive today, she might be startled to hear that neo-scholasticism enjoyed a revival and lasted well into the twentieth century. She might even be challenged by the fact that some philosophers and theologians, and many novelists and poets, are still influenced by Aquinas and Aristotle, and by classical metaphysics generally. In fact, not long after Eliot died, a latter-day Casaubon, James Frazer, went on to publish his influential *Totemism* and *The Golden Bough* using scholasticism's process of dialectical reasoning and systematic way of assembling and analysing data.

Had Eliot been a contemporary of Frazer, she might have chosen something other than the key to all mythologies to critique scholasticism, and she might have been forced to turn Casaubon into a different sort of character. Still, her gaze is magisterial without claiming to be infallible. If she isn't a fan of Casaubon, she isn't a fan of Ladislav either, and any suggestion that Casaubon's scholasticism is dated is balanced by the suggestion that Ladislav's early modernism is vague. The message here, for Eliot and for us, is that horizons are horizons. Not all scholastics are dead, or necessarily passionless, and there are still lots of fluffy Ladislavs out there to contend with.

The debate over how many angels can dance on the head of a pin may seem prosaic to us, but it's still a debate worth having, since the fundamental question at the heart of the debate remains unanswered, and it's unwise to use the pulpit, or any platform, as an opportunity to mock what we don't understand.

*Michael Giffin will continue his regular book reviews in forthcoming issues of **Quadrant**.*

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### THE SPRINGFIELDS

Back farming, and lead  
drains out of a burning rail.  
Their Civil War.

*Les Murray*