

OGGETTI E SOGGETTI

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Direttore

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Università degli Studi di Bari "Aldo Moro"

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OGGETTI E SOGGETTI

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Web content

Silvia Silvestri

A Provincial Fresco

Middlemarch and the Visual Arts

Presentazione di
Franca Dellarosa





Aracne editrice

www.aracneeditrice.it

info@aracneeditrice.it

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Gioacchino Onorati editore S.r.l. – unipersonale

www.gioacchinoonoratieditore.it

info@gioacchinoonoratieditore.it

via Vittorio Veneto, 20

00020 Canterano (Rome)

(06) 45551463

ISBN 978-88-255-1742-2

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1st edition: August 2018

*To my parents,
with eternal love and gratitude*

...the novels of George Eliot
are not didactic treatises.
They are primarily works of
art, and George Eliot herself
is an artist as much as she is a
teacher.

E. DOWDEN,
George Eliot

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Presentazione

FRANCA DELLAROSA¹

Nelle pagine che seguono, si indaga un segmento nella storia plurisecolare della relazione fra le “arti sorelle” della parola scritta e dell’immagine, oggetto di meditazione e riflessione critica fin dall’antichità classica. I rapporti di interazione e di reciproca influenza fra letteratura e arti visive attraversano la storia della cultura occidentale; particolarmente densa e complessa è la loro vicenda storica nel secondo Ottocento, così come si configura distillata nel caso di studio trascelto all’interno della ‘grande tradizione’ vittoriana. Per molti il più grande romanzo inglese del suo tempo, *Middlemarch* di George Eliot è straordinario *affresco* — e il termine non è accidentale — e studio di vita provinciale, come recita il sottotitolo, ambientato nell’Inghilterra al tempo del primo Reform Bill del 1832 — ma anche indagine meticolosa, raffinata e intensissima sulle dinamiche psichiche che governano le relazioni fra individui. Silvia Silvestri ha portato a termine uno studio attento e documentato, sensibile alla parola letteraria e alle rifrazioni di ordine metaforico, concettuale, e strutturale, che ne definiscono la relazione multiforme con la dimensione dell’immagine. Lo studio, che definirei pluridimensionale, del romanzo, è inquadrato in una cornice più ampia che esplora il rapporto complesso fra la più intellettuale dei romanzieri inglesi, e le arti visive — e la misura in cui tale rapporto entra a definire la qualità della sua poetica di realismo narrativo — così come emerge nitidamente nella prassi narrativa eliotiana non meno che nella sua scrittura critica.

¹ Professoressa Associata di Letteratura Inglese presso il Dipartimento “Lettere, Lingue e Arti” dell’Università degli Studi di Bari “Aldo Moro”.

Come osservava Silvano Sabbadini nel saggio introduttivo alla prima edizione italiana del romanzo, tradotto da Michele Bottalico per Mondadori nel 1983, c'è «un senso di entropia, di autoannientamento, in *Middlemarch*, che va di pari passo con la speranza nel futuro: è come se di fronte al chiudersi di un'epoca [...], George Eliot fosse l'unica grande figura capace di reggere allo schianto ponendosi nella dimensione comprensiva della pazienza e della rappresentazione» (XIV). Elemento integrante di un affresco che “mira alla totalità” (ivi) nella raffigurazione del proprio tempo, la dimensione visiva nel senso più ampio si pone nel romanzo come strumento ad un tempo di costruzione e di interrogazione del mondo (narrato), in una relazione di scambio con la parola scritta che la persona narrativa, figura dell'intelligenza che costruisce il racconto, governa, avendo di fronte a sé la direzione maestra — “the extension of our sympathies” — cifra essenziale dell'impegno etico ed estetico che definisce l'universo narrativo dell'artista.

Acknowledgements

My deepest gratitude goes to Professor Franca Dellarosa, Professor Alessandra Squeo and Professor Rosella Mallardi, who made the publication of this book possible and whose engaging lectures had the merit of arousing my passionate interest in English Literature.

I am also indebted to the staff of the “Lettere, Lingue e Arti” Department of the University of Bari for the keen enthusiasm with which they helped me to collect my sources.

Last but not least, heartfelt thanks to my beautiful family — particularly to my parents Marilena and Francesco, to whom this book is dedicated: thank you for blindly believing in me, no matter what, and for teaching me how important it is to work hard and always pursue my dreams. I owe all my accomplishments to you and your unconditional love.

Foreword

In *The Art of Fiction* (1884) Henry James indulges in a thought-provoking parallel between the work of the painter and that of the writer, thereby remarking the affinity between the arts they represent:

The analogy between the art of the painter and the art of the novelist is, so far as I am able to see, complete. Their inspiration is the same, their process (allowing for the different quality of the vehicle), is the same, their success is the same. They may learn from each other, they may explain and sustain each other. [...] It is here that [the novelist] competes with *his brother* the painter in his attempt to render the look of things, the look that conveys their meaning, to catch the colour, the relief, the expression, the surface, the substance of the human spectacle¹.

Endorsing the predominant aesthetic credo of the nineteenth century, the writer depicts literature and painting as two siblings, capable of “explain[ing] and sustain[ing] each other” in their common effort to frame reality, and he pivots such a belief on their shared source of “inspiration” (“the human spectacle”), creative process, aim (the representation of life) and popularity. Nevertheless, James, while acknowledging such similarities, does not gloss over these arts’ ancient sibling rivalry; on the contrary, in the lines that follow, he grudgingly admits to the superior straightforwardness of paintings, whose subjects are indeed clearly set «in the honesty of pink and green and a gilt frame»², and he calls out the evanescence of literary characters, which may trick us by means of their blurred, black-and-white contours.

¹ H. JAMES, *The Art of Fiction*, in *Partial Portraits*, Macmillan & Co., London 1894, pp. 378–390. My italics.

² *Ivi*, p. 381.

These observations serve as a point of departure for our study, as they encapsulate the Victorian response to the centuries-old debate concerning the relationship between words and images — two “sisters” whose status has been a bone of contention ever since the dawn of Western culture.

In fact, as related in the annals of history, this sorority originally sprouted up in the sunlight of the Greek civilisation, nourished by the thought of Plato and Aristotle, and then it thrived under the aegis of the Roman Empire, blossoming into Plutarch’s and Horace’s influential comparisons. Interestingly, these eminent thinkers unanimously acknowledged the affinity between poetry and painting, thus conceiving these arts as fully-fledged siblings or, at least, as relatives belonging to the same broad family of the “representational arts”³.

Such a cast-iron affiliation of the pen to the brush started to crumble only with the advent of the Modern Age, when the European intelligentsia tried to demolish the ancient sisterhood by tracing clear boundaries between the visual and the verbal, in an attempt to assert the superior epistemological value of the former art. Glaring examples of this mind-set are offered by the works of Leonardo, Burke and Lessing, who strove to differentiate the arts by ascribing them to opposite domains of human experience. Nevertheless, such arguments could not resist the wind of change blown by Victorian England, when visuality and literature were virtually merged once again in order to enhance the poignancy and vividness of fiction and poetry.

It is from such an effervescent aesthetic debate, from the restless interest intellectuals of all times proved to have in the relationship between text and image that my research stems: building upon this never-ending dispute and, mostly, on the nineteenth-century articulation of such an entangled matter, the present study hopes to shed light on the key role played by the vis-

³ L. LOUVEL, *Poetics of the Iconotext*, Ashgate, Farnham 2011, p. 31.

ual arts in the erection of a landmark of Victorian realism, i.e. *Middlemarch*, published by George Eliot in 1871–72.

One of the most striking characteristics of this novel is, indeed, the vividness in which every scene seems to be cloaked: Eliot *painted* her characters, rather than simply writing about them, and such a vibrant *modus operandi* allowed her to dispel the readers' scepticism, making them sympathise with the vicissitudes of her protagonists. This sort of "moral empathy" is arguably the hallmark of Marian Evans's mature literary endeavours: as stated in *The Natural History of German Life* (1856), the main duty of an artist,

whether painter, poet or novelist, [is] the extension of our sympathies. [...] [A] picture of human life such as a great artist can give, surprises even the trivial and the selfish into that attention to what is apart from themselves, which may be called the raw material of moral sentiment⁴.

In this foundational passage, a phrase such as "picture of human life" testifies to the profound contamination between word and image that was to characterise her later fiction. In fact, this author's "faithful", but striking "account of men and things"⁵ was attained precisely through an attentive, constant intermingling of *pictura* and *poesis* — a crucial union by means of which she could effectively breathe life into her narratives. As this study hopes to demonstrate, such a vital interplay was the very bedrock of *Middlemarch*, so much so that James himself believed it appropriate to liken the novel to «a picture — vast, swarming, deep-colored, crowded with episodes, with vivid images, with lurking master-strokes, with brilliant passages of expression»⁶.

It is into this rich fresco that I wish to delve, in order to expose its painterly backbone and show the degree to which visu-

⁴ G. ELIOT, *The Natural History of German Life*, in Pinney T. (ed), *Essays*, Routledge, London 1963, p. 270.

⁵ ID., *Adam Bede* (1859), quoted in HORNBACK B.G., *Middlemarch: An Authoritative Text*, Norton & Co., London 1977, p. 523.

⁶ [H. JAMES], Unsigned Review, «Galaxy» (1873), in Carrol D. (ed), *George Eliot: The Critical Heritage*, Routledge, New York 2000, p. 357.

ality permeated its verbal texture, thereby meeting the primary goal of Eliot's "ethic realism", i.e. «feel[ing] the pains and the joys of those who differ from [our]selves in everything but the broad fact of being struggling erring human creatures»⁷.

With this objective in mind, Part I is devoted to retracing the centuries-old history of the "*ut pictura poesis*", so as to identify the theoretical and analytical tools needed to tackle our reading of *Middlemarch*. Specifically, Chapter I briefly surveys the motley ways in which the academia has valued and studied the bond between the sister arts, laying particular emphasis on the devices of *ekphrasis*, *hypotyposis* and mnemopictoriality; Chapter II traces the milestones of this kaleidoscopic sisterhood, from ancient Greece up to the pivot of our inquiry, i.e. Victorian England.

An introductory section thus structured is intended to pave the way for the critical reading carried out in Part II, in which our attention is entirely focused on George Eliot and our case study. After a necessarily partial reconstruction of Evans's aesthetic education, Chapters II to IV harbour a careful examination of the strategies adopted by the author to mingle the arts with her ink "fresco": following a sort of pictorial crescendo, at first we explore the multifaceted manifestations of *hypotyposis* embedded in the narrative, starting from Eliot's skilful remoulding of colours, light and space up to her vibrant depictions of landscapes and characters; thereafter, we unfold this writer's silent mnemopictorial references to Pre-Raphaelite and Nazarene paintings, so as to prepare the groundwork for the analysis of the novel's ekphrastic interludes.

In so doing, I hope to contribute to the lively area of the academia that investigates the relationship between word and image, and pay homage to one of the most extraordinary authors of the Victorian Age, a thirst-for-knowledge, brilliant woman

⁷ G. ELIOT, *The George Eliot Letters*, G. S. Haight (ed), vol. III, Oxford University Press, London 1954, p. 111.