

Introduction

When, in George Eliot's *Middlemarch* of 1871–2, Dorothea and her new husband Edward Casaubon travel to Rome and visit the artist Adolf Naumann's studio with Will Ladislaw, Eliot uses the scene as a meeting point of two opposed conceptions of artistic creativity. On the one hand, there is the rapturous, transcendent view of art Ladislaw represents. In commenting on one of Naumann's works in progress, for example, Ladislaw's admiration is apparently too deep to be expressed verbally. Eliot's narrator records how 'Will vented those adjuring interjections which imply that admiration is too strong for syntax'.¹ On the other hand, there is Casaubon's pejorative judgement of art, in which sitting for a portrait and devoting oneself to aesthetic creativity alike are effectively non-activities. When asked to prolong his posing for Naumann, for instance, Casaubon's reply casts the whole business as a species of 'idleness': "I am at your service, sir, in this matter," said Mr Casaubon, with polite condescension. "Having given up the interior of my head to idleness, it is as well that the exterior should work in this way".² It may seem as though Casaubon's association of sitting for his portrait with 'idleness' simply opposes that task to his vocation and monomania, his scholarly research for the *Key to All Mythologies*. But in fact, the term 'idleness' is associated, both in Eliot's novel and in Victorian culture more broadly, with artistic practice itself, and especially with the type of aesthetic consciousness Ladislaw's wordless ecstasy implies. When Ladislaw is first introduced to the novel's action, for example, when he is found sketching in the grounds of Lowick, his penchant for artistic creativity is cast as a tendency towards 'indolence' by Arthur Brooke, as being 'idle' by Dorothea and as a 'dislike to steady application' by Casaubon.³ These terms serve very clearly as synonyms, at this point in the novel, for a devotion to aesthetic consciousness, because Ladislaw's attitude to the acquirement of knowledge is summarized by Casaubon as the belief that 'there should be some unknown regions preserved as hunting-grounds for the poetic

imagination'.⁴ Again, the clear opposite to these judgements is the diligent work ethic and the rigorous pursuit of factual knowledge Casaubon sees himself as embodying. In this scene at least, Dorothea and her uncle defer to his perspective.

But Eliot's novel stages a more even debate between these poles of aesthetic passivity and diligent 'application' than these two scenes imply. On several occasions, it might seem as though the novel's balancing of these alternatives even tips entirely against Casaubon. Ladislav is given his first conquest over Casaubon in this sense later in the novel's Roman scenes, for example, just after the episode in Naumann's studio, when he reveals to Dorothea that his aesthetic passivity also connotes a greater breadth of cultural knowledge than Casaubon. He refers there, in a one-on-one conversation with Dorothea, to the German 'Higher Criticism' that will render Casaubon's life's work obsolete before it is even composed.⁵ This reference casts Casaubon himself as an idling amateur, and the professionalized world of German scholarship – which Ladislav, through Naumann, is more in touch with – as genuinely diligent labour. There is also the striking moment of direct judgement, within the passage where Eliot has her narrator delineate Casaubon's consciousness for the first time, in which a set of priorities that seem to invoke Ladislav's 'poetic' or artistic 'imagination' are overtly used to critique Casaubon's apparently dry diligence:

For my part I am very sorry for him. It is an uneasy lot at best, to be what we call highly taught and yet not to enjoy: to be present at this great spectacle of life and never to be liberated from a small hungry shivering self – never to be fully possessed by the glory we behold, never to have our consciousness rapturously transformed into the vividness of a thought, the ardour of a passion, the energy of an action, but always to be scholarly and uninspired, ambitious and timid, scrupulous and dim-sighted.⁶

Because Casaubon is 'uninspired', and never 'rapturously transformed' or 'liberated' from his 'small hungry shivering self', the priorities structuring this scathing judgement would seem to be exactly the transcendent, passionate, arduous style of aesthetic thought that Ladislav felt, but stumbled over and failed to fully express, in Naumann's studio. This passage also associates aesthetic transcendence with religious ecstasy, through Eliot's use of terms such as 'glory' and 'rapture'. In other words, Eliot's narrator is here throwing his or her lot in with aesthetic consciousness, with transcendent imagination, and quite aggressively deprecating diligent, steady, 'uninspired' 'application'.

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Middlemarch's staging of this debate between idle, aesthetic passivity and narrow, industrious labour soon transcends the immediate quarrel between Ladislav and Casaubon and becomes a matter of broader concern for the community the novel focuses on, and for Victorian society more generally. Ladislav's aesthetic passivity and the broad intellectual culture that seems to attend on it serve, for instance, as the foundation for his political activities and his support for the first Reform Act. Eliot indeed overtly invokes and links these characteristics at the moment that Brooke's purchase of the *Pioneer*, and Ladislav's involvement in that publication, is revealed:

For it seemed that Will was not only at home in all those artistic and literary subjects which Mr Brooke had gone into at one time, but that he was strikingly ready at seizing the points of the political situation, and dealing with them in that large spirit which, aided by adequate memory, lends itself to the quotation and general effectiveness of treatment.⁷

What Casaubon and the opening sections of the novel cast as narrow, solipsistic passivity, is thus, by this midpoint in Eliot's plot, rendered a moral and politically progressive force that has the potential to sway the course of the entire nation. Ladislav's 'large spirit', fostered by the apparent idleness of aesthetic contemplation, even has him denominated a 'Shelley', by Brooke, just after this quotation, though Brooke makes sure to specify that he is not referring to 'laxities or atheism, or anything of that kind'.⁸ This association again demonstrates – contra Casaubon – the power and positive effect that aesthetic passivity can ultimately engender. For in this context Shelley's famous conclusion to his *Defence of Poetry* of 1821 is very clearly invoked: poets, or artists, are 'the unacknowledged legislators of the world'.⁹ But we should remember too that Shelley's portrayal of aesthetic inspiration with which that essay begins stresses the poet's extreme passivity and therefore intellectual receptivity: 'Man is an instrument over which a series of external and internal impressions are driven, like the alternations of an ever-changing wind over an Aeolian lyre.'¹⁰ Eliot's interest in Shelley and Coleridge's 'Aeolian harp' motif is demonstrated back in the Lowick sketching scene. There, Ladislav's first observations of Dorothea include his rapturous thoughts concerning her voice: 'But what a voice! It was like the voice of a soul that had once lived in an Aeolian harp.'¹¹

This highlighting of Ladislav's 'large spirit' and its association with both Romantic poetics and political progress is not Eliot's last word on aesthetic creativity and poetic consciousness in *Middlemarch*, however.

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Indeed, following Casaubon's death, the novel's narrative perspective might be described as swinging back towards that character's emphasis on diligence and arduous labour, because Eliot's narrator more than once portrays Ladislav as fundamentally unfocused and unproductive. Once Ladislav has fully immersed himself in his work for the *Pioneer*, for instance, the actual level of his commitment to politics, and to reform, is made clear:

It is undeniable that but for the desire to be where Dorothea was, and perhaps the want of knowing what else to do, Will would not at this time have been meditating on the needs of the English people or criticising English statesmanship: he would probably have been rambling in Italy sketching plans for several dramas, trying prose and finding it too jejune, trying verse and finding it too artificial, beginning to copy 'bits' from old pictures, leaving off because they were 'no good', and observing that, after all, self-culture was the principal point; while in politics he would have been sympathizing warmly with liberty and progress in general. Our sense of duty must often wait for some work which shall take the place of dilettantism and make us feel that the quality of our action is not a matter of indifference.¹²

A passage such as this is a critique of aesthetic 'self-culture' as dilettantish, unfocused and immature. It also opposes this aesthetic realm to the 'duty' of 'work' and to 'action' that matters for the world, that 'is not a matter of indifference'. The perspective of this passage thus stands quite close to that espoused by Casaubon in the opening sections of the novel. It also demonstrates the extent to which *Middlemarch* sublimates its debate between Casaubon and Ladislav, and between aesthetic idleness and diligent application, into the very perspective from which it is narrated.

Eliot should ultimately be understood, however, to invoke in *Middlemarch* a synthesis of Casaubon's arduous application and Ladislav's aesthetic passivity. The novel's dénouement allows Ladislav to continue to use his 'large spirit' and sympathy with 'liberty and progress', but to work towards reform in a more focused and committed manner. And it is diligent, arduous and honest work that provides the moral blueprint for this future success. Ladislav, we are told, becomes an 'ardent public man' who 'work[s] well' towards reform and eventually becomes an MP with the support of Dorothea as his wife.¹³ And the novel's touchstone for moral values, Caleb Garth, succeeds, at this same final moment in the narrative, in exerting his positive influence on his future son-in-law Fred Vincy, by inspiring him with his modest and honest work ethic that matches Ladislav's. The scene in which this triumph is made clear thus demonstrates the necessary supplement to Ladislav's youthful aesthetic

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imagination and self-culture: Caleb explains to his daughter, Mary, that honest, diligent ‘work’ is his ‘delight’.¹⁴

This trajectory in *Middlemarch* towards the synthesis of apparent opposites has of course been noted – in general terms – in the novel’s critical reception. Donald Stone, for example, uses the Arnoldian vocabulary of ‘Hebraic and Hellenic impulses’ to explain this aspect of the novel’s design: ‘In the persons of the overly self-denying Dorothea Brooke and the benignly hedonistic Will Ladislaw, [Eliot] shows how each gains from contact with the other. Dorothea becomes aware of the value of beauty and of her own sensual needs, while Will learns to apply his scattered energies and talents to a useful vocation.’¹⁵ What is left out of an assessment such as this, however, is the manner in which Eliot renders Ladislaw’s Hellenism an issue of ‘idleness’, passivity, ‘indolence’ and transcendent consciousness, and the extent to which the real opposite force in the novel for this cluster of ideas is something very like the Carlylean ‘gospel of work’, which has its locus not simply in the character of Dorothea, in Eliot’s design. It is also important to note the level of anachronism latent in Stone’s approach. Matthew Arnold’s exposition of the terms Hebraism and Hellenism is the fruit of the 1860s, the years just preceding Eliot’s composition of *Middlemarch*. But the novel itself is set in what Henry Staten calls ‘a carefully realized historical conjuncture, the years 1829–31, when England, in the grip of economic crisis, trembled on the brink of the first great Reform Act’.¹⁶ It is in this ‘carefully’ historical sense that Eliot has Ladislaw referred to as a ‘Shelley’ (and indeed elsewhere as a ‘Byron’¹⁷), because her design includes the recreation of historical attitudes and associations in quite exact detail. What this dimension of the novel points us to, and what Stone’s assessment of the novel cannot access, is thus that *Middlemarch* invokes the nineteenth century’s long history of associating ‘idleness’ and passivity with aesthetic consciousness. Arnoldian Hellenism is in fact an overt and conscious continuation of this trend, while Shelley’s celebration of the poetic imagination in his *Defence* and Coleridge’s ruminations on the ‘Æolian harp’ are two of this tradition’s key documents. Eliot’s novel thus explores in some detail this tradition of aesthetic passivity by dramatizing its various failings, powers and counterarguments. This focus to *Middlemarch* has remained all but unnoticed because, as Felicia Bonaparte observes, the novel’s exploration of the subject of art has been significantly overlooked,¹⁸ and because, according to Joseph Wiesenfarth, Ladislaw’s pivotal role in the novel also goes frequently unrecognized.¹⁹ The association of Ladislaw’s aesthetic consciousness with idleness, passivity and unworldly dilettantism, and the links –

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through Shelley – between that passivity and ‘liberty’, reform and the ‘large spirit’ of human progress, thus lie at the heart of Eliot’s design for *Middlemarch*. Eliot’s novel, in other words, invokes, refers to and explores the centrality of idle, aesthetic consciousness to nineteenth-century culture in the broadest terms.

The present study is an attempt to reconstruct and explore the nineteenth century’s many debates over idleness and aesthetic consciousness that stand behind – and that are reflected in – Eliot’s novel. For it is by no means simply Shelley, Coleridge and Arnold that consider these categories in detail in the years leading up to the composition of *Middlemarch*. On the contrary, a wide constituency of figures, and a wide variety of discourses, position repose, idleness, contemplation, aesthetic transcendence and several other species of passivity as central to contemporary individual and social life. Nineteenth-century political economy, as one example, pays such attention to the human tendencies towards idleness, repose and contemplative leisure that it often leaves economic activity itself looking like a rare and delicate occurrence. The thought of highly influential figures such as Thomas Carlyle and John Ruskin – to both of whom Eliot is considerably indebted – also returns, again and again, to questions of contemplative passivity and aesthetic transcendence. Even the nineteenth century’s most successful mode of populist gothic writing consistently dramatizes contemplative idleness in sustained and visceral detail. This study will chart this complex terrain standing behind Eliot’s novel, and will identify and account for the marked transformation in conceptions of idle aesthetic contemplation that takes place across the century. For *Middlemarch*’s overall ambivalence over Ladislaw’s idle contemplation marks the novel out as a nuanced reflection of the differing associations and connotations aesthetic consciousness has acquired by the 1870s. Eliot’s novel partakes at once, that is to say, of both the early century’s marked positivity regarding idle contemplation (that which is contemporary to its action) and of the mid- to late century’s distrust – or even vilification – of such passivity, especially when divorced from the ideologies of labour and social amelioration.

This study will thus begin with a consideration of the body of thought that Eliot uses to denote the positive social potential of aesthetic passivity, Percy Shelley and his contemporaries’ celebrations of idle contemplation. Chapter 1 will examine the manner in which Shelley and John Keats allude to and extend first-generation Romanticism’s analyses of contemplative and aesthetic repose, and specifically the extent to which both poets frame idle contemplation as a matter of moral and social utility. The chapter will

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touch on Shelley's *Defence of Poetry*, but will initially focus on his 1816 poem, 'Mont Blanc'. It will then consider Keats's correspondence, specifically his accounts of the poetic character, aesthetic democracy and 'negative capability'.

Chapter 2 of the study will survey the discourse of political economy across the first half of the nineteenth century, and examine that body of thought's surprising receptivity to the ideas and concerns espoused by Keats and Shelley. While late eighteenth-century political economy had been markedly limited in the space and standing it gave to human repose, in the nineteenth century David Ricardo, Thomas Malthus and John Stuart Mill all follow a kind of logic of idleness in their political economic writings, and all allow the concerns of human repose to influence their primary conclusions. Because this receptivity increases markedly across the first decades of the century, Mill's 1848 *Principles of Political Economy* represents a significant flowering of positivity surrounding idle contemplation, not just in economic thought, but in the century as a whole.

Chapter 3 will contrast political economy's surprising positivity surrounding idleness with the contemporary ideology of the 'gospel of work'. In order to assess this far-reaching and widespread ideology, this chapter will consider the thought of Thomas Carlyle and Karl Marx in detail, before examining one of the effects of this body of thought, the negativity – from mid-century onwards – around idleness and aesthetic consciousness to be found in that period's contemplative poetry. The 'gospel of work' is not just significant for this study because of its very influential opposition to the earlier, positive conceptions of repose discussed in the previous two chapters. Carlyle's and Marx's formulations of this ideology are also in fact constructed on earlier, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century aesthetic theorizations of idleness itself. The 'gospel of work' is thus a paradoxical and double-edged decree.

After exploring this primary counterforce to positive conceptions of idleness across the century, Chapter 4 will consider high Victorian cultural theory in the form of the writing of Ruskin, Arnold and Walter Pater. These figures all contend – overtly and directly – for the power, and social benefit, of aesthetic consciousness, but do so at the same time as introducing a series of practical hurdles to the widespread adoption of that state. The writings of these figures must also be understood to bear the imprint of Carlyle and his contemporaries' 'gospel of work', because their closely connected theories of culture and human aesthetic capability also professionalize, and significantly elongate, the aesthetic encounter.

Chapter 5, which is the final chapter of the study, draws together all of its strands by considering the tradition of vampire fiction across the breadth of the nineteenth century, and by demonstrating the extent to which that genre addresses aesthetic idleness and its social alternatives. My analysis shows how the very conservative vampire tradition villainizes – and indeed demonizes – the poetic idle contemplator, and by the end of the century, in the hands of Sheridan Le Fanu and Bram Stoker, for instance, dramatizes a kind of total warfare against that figure, and against aesthetic consciousness, waged by the Carlylean forces of modernity. This subject forms an appropriate conclusion to the study because this genre's highly focused negativity around aesthetic repose is representative of the fate of this category more broadly by the final years of the century.

The study concludes with a brief epilogue considering the afterlife of these debates over idleness and aesthetic consciousness in Sigmund Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents* of 1930. While Freud stands in a very different tradition of thought from any of the figures considered in the main body of this study, his conceptions of aesthetic creativity and receptivity nevertheless echo and encapsulate many of the developments in these fields that occurred in Britain across the long nineteenth century. Freud's overt negativity concerning the place of aesthetic thought in human life thus allows the British enquiries into this subject to be seen from a new angle and with a new clarity.

By means of these analyses, this study will construct a detailed portrait of the centrality of the categories of idleness and aesthetic consciousness to many nineteenth-century debates, ideologies and discourses. It will also identify the manner in which these categories' reputations and associations develop – and transform – with far-reaching consequences across the century. For the changing status of idle aesthetic contemplation is intimately tied, as we will see in detail, to the complex logic of democratic reform, and to that process's many moments of intensity and upheaval. This shift is also bound up with the increasing theorization of such concepts as 'capital' and 'class', and with the increasingly fraught class politics of the second half of the century. To describe and account for the changing significance of idleness and aesthetic consciousness in this period is therefore to consider Victorian cultural politics at once in terms of its broad currents and its local details. And to follow the fall in reputation of idle contemplation is to identify the rise of a significant subject of malaise, loss and nostalgia at the heart of Victorian consciousness.

This study, it should be noted, follows on from my account of the growth of widespread positive conceptions of idleness and aesthetic repose

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around the turn of the nineteenth century, which was published as *Idleness, Contemplation and the Aesthetic, 1750–1830*, in 2011. This work reconstructed the extensive reaction to the birth of political economy, and to that discourse's considerable emphasis on human labour and extremely limited account of repose and leisure. Such reaction took the form of a series of celebrations – and explanations – of the centrality of idleness and aesthetic consciousness to individual and social life in a diverse range of contexts and registers. After considering the political economy of Adam Smith and Adam Ferguson, this study therefore demonstrated the extent to which philosophies as diverse as Benthamite Utilitarianism and Friedrich Schiller's aesthetic idealism are designed to foster aesthetic repose in highly comparable terms. It then explored the string of first-generation Romantic accounts of idle contemplation – those by William Cowper, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Mary Wollstonecraft, for example – that also take issue with contemporary political economy's degradation of repose. This study then demonstrated how this poetic body of analysis is ultimately enshrined in Coleridge's more formal cultural analysis in his 1829 *On the Constitution of Church and State*. And my analysis in this work concluded with an epilogue looking ahead to the Victorian reaction to such positive conceptions of idle contemplation, in the form of Charles Kingsley and John Stuart Mill's largely problematic engagement with Romantic accounts of aesthetic consciousness.

The present study should therefore be seen to interlock with, as well as continue from, this previous work. Both books consider elements of the Romantic celebration of idle contemplation, because this field is a clear highpoint within the long nineteenth century's widely varied assessments of aesthetic repose. The previous book thus charted the dramatic rise of this body of thought. The present study maps its decline but also its transformation and modification in the complex currents of nineteenth-century intellectual and political culture. The present study must therefore, by necessity, refer to this earlier work at least in passing in its analyses, not least because both early nineteenth-century and Victorian theorists of idle contemplation see themselves as in conversation with their intellectual forebears who also considered this subject. In one sense this study is therefore an account of the complex ways in which Victorian culture inherited, and reassessed, the intellectual legacy of its early nineteenth-century and late eighteenth-century forefathers – especially because the previous book demonstrated the centrality of idleness and aesthetic contemplation to that legacy. But while unpacking Victorian culture's frequent references to Romanticism in these terms, and to the intellectual

culture around that literary phenomenon, the present study also moves beyond such conversations to assess what is new, and what is particularly Victorian, about conceptions of idleness across the later nineteenth century. In this context, the period considered by the present study is significantly marked by the development – and the repeated theorization – of a kind of aesthetics of failure, and of problematic self-consciousness, that first appears in Ruskin's architectural criticism, or in the young Arnold's poetic meditations on contemporary culture's distance from Romanticism, both of which were written around the mid-nineteenth century. This development captures a powerful force in the Victorian psyche, not least because it also anticipates and leads in to the scathing negativity of the early twentieth century around aesthetic consciousness that I address in this study's epilogue. And in this case, as throughout the study, it is my belief that the long view provided by knowledge of Romantic and late eighteenth-century cultural politics enriches, and very usefully contextualizes, the Victorian departures from that thought.

It is necessary to say a word here, too, about the geographical remit of the present analysis. This study concentrates on British thought – and, in the case of Marx, thought engaged with British industrial and political life – rather than attempting to trace a series of shared concerns across European culture. (Freud, who is considered in the study's epilogue, is the primary exception to this, but is included as a way of emblematically gesturing beyond the chronological bounds of the study.) It would have been possible, therefore, to broaden and deepen the study's analysis by reference to the numerous examples of German and French thought dealing with comparable ideas and categories at the same time as their British counterparts. The fact that such works – Arthur Schopenhauer's writing that stands in close proximity to Pater's, or Gustave Flaubert's double-edged explorations of aesthetic consciousness, for example – were also translated into English in this period means that the decision to limit my focus to British thought does cut off a range of important and influential European cross-currents. But boundaries must be drawn somewhere, and an analysis of British thought across the nineteenth century complements the focus of my former book on this subject, and allows me to follow in detail how British intellectual life engaged with the birth and then development of political economy and its related patterns of thought. It is my contention, indeed, that the British engagement with the protean significance of idleness and aesthetic consciousness across the nineteenth century constitutes a tradition in its own right. Connectedly, it is a contention of my first book on this subject that the British Romantic