

## 'An inordinate number of words': Epigraphs in *Daniel Deronda*

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The mysterious sentences, snatched from an unknown context, — like strange horns of beasts, and leaves of unknown plants, brought from some far-off region — gave boundless scope to her imagination, and were all the more fascinating because they were in a peculiar tongue of their own, which she could learn to interpret. It was really very interesting [...] and she was proud because she found it interesting.<sup>1</sup>

George Eliot thus describes a young Maggie Tulliver poring over her brother's book of Latin grammar. Though *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) contains no chapter epigraphs, the extent to which this passage anticipates their use, labour, and function is striking. As a writer, Eliot professed scepticism regarding the use of quotations, claiming to 'hate a style speckled' with them.<sup>2</sup> But, as the epigraph above suggests, she also delighted in their imaginative and interpretative possibilities. Like Maggie, she found them 'so absorbing' and delighted in their power to transport the reader's imagination beyond the boundaries of the page (p. 130). Most importantly, she recognized their paratactic potential: by setting texts alongside each other, Eliot invites the reader into a 'great deal of pleasant conjecture' and to make connections (p. 130). In her novels, epigraphs are 'a peculiar tongue' the reader must learn to interpret, rather than a tool for the efficient communication of information. The author becomes a travelling naturalist, who has brought back fragments from foreign lands to intrigue, amuse, and educate the reader. Reading epigraphs is figured both as an experience (the reader travels beyond the boundaries of the narrative) and as an experiment (the reader must speculate on the meaning of an epigraph and must readjust her expectations once she has read the chapter). It is also gendered. In *Daniel Deronda* (1876), Gwendolen claims that 'women can't go in search of adventures — to find out the North-West Passage or

<sup>1</sup> George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, ed. by Gordon S. Haight (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), p. 130 (Book 2, Chap. 1).

<sup>2</sup> Letter to Alexander Main, 27 April 1873, in *The George Eliot Letters*, ed. by Gordon S. Haight, 9 vols (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954–78), v: 1869–1873 (1955), 404.

the source of the Nile, or to hunt tigers in the East. We must stay where we grow.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps Eliot sought to bring a sense of adventure to the page, refusing to institutionalize cultural exclusion based on sexual difference. The phrases ‘strange horns of beasts’ and ‘leaves of unknown plants’ evoke different textures, from smooth bone to rough leaf. This suggests that linguistic problems should be solved through intuition, even haptic perception: the reader is invited to feel her way among the mysterious sentences in order to decipher them.

Inspired by Walter Scott’s use of chapter epigraphs in his Waverley novels, Eliot first intended to use epigraphs in her own historical romance, *Romola* (1862–63). Bulwer Lytton, a favourite among Victorian readers, also offered her a model. In preparation for *Romola*, Eliot read Bulwer Lytton’s *Rienzi: The Last of the Roman Tribunes* (1835), which contains chapter epigraphs, wanting to examine his treatment of a historical subject. Bulwer was a good friend of Eliot’s publisher John Blackwood and was acquainted with both Eliot and her partner, George Henry Lewes. Early on, in a letter to Sara Hennell containing feedback on the proofs for Hennell’s *Thoughts in Aid of Faith* (1860), she wrote: ‘Beginnings are always troublesome, “μῖσος παντός” as Bulwer would say. (I like to follow great models).’<sup>4</sup> The difficulty of beginning is given lengthly and serious treatment in *Daniel Deronda*’s epigraphs, but Eliot first experienced this challenge when writing *Romola*. She left blank, ruled space for epigraphs at the head of the first nine chapters of the manuscript, and most of these were filled with untranslated Italian and Latin epigraphs. In the end, she must have decided against them, since no epigraphs appeared in printed form. Critics ascribe these omissions to the requirements of serial publication.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, in May 1862, when Eliot finally agreed to publish *Romola* in the *Cornhill* with the first of twelve instalments appearing in July, she had only written the first eight chapters of her novel, and was likely feeling pressured to advance the narrative itself, without having the additional burden of complementing it with paratext. Perhaps she also wished to lighten the burden of erudition for her readers, the *Cornhill* being a family-friendly magazine with a broad, middle-class audience.

Eliot began using epigraphs in earnest while writing *Felix Holt* (1866). On 30 April 1866, as she awaited the proofs, Blackwood wrote to her saying, ‘By the way, how admirable your mottoes are. Many of them I imagine

<sup>3</sup> George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, ed. by Graham Handley (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), p. 119 (Chap. 13).

<sup>4</sup> Letter to Sara Hennell, 15 October 1859, *Eliot Letters*, ed. by Haight, III: 1851–1861 (1954), 130.

<sup>5</sup> J. R. Tye, ‘George Eliot’s Unascribed Mottoes’, *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 22 (1967), 235–49 (p. 237); Andrew Sanders, ‘Appendix B: The Unused Epigraphs to *Romola*’, in George Eliot, *Romola*, ed. by Andrew Sanders (London: Penguin, 1980), pp. 682–85 (p. 682); Andrew Thompson, *George Eliot and Italy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998), p. 88.

to be your own. I see you have left blanks in many cases. Do you mean to fill them up?'.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, on 17 May, Eliot recorded doing nothing but writing mottoes.<sup>7</sup> Some scholars have read this as 'a confession of artistic weariness' (Tye, p. 235). In the manuscript, a quarter of the chapters are without epigraphs, and there are more blank spaces in the second and third volumes. This does suggest she laboured to produce the epigraphs, but she could have given them up at any time, as she had before. Her perseverance alone demonstrates their value. In *Middlemarch* (1871–72), Eliot redoubled her efforts in both writing and choosing them. She recorded quotations in both the 'Quarry for *Middlemarch*' and in her commonplace notebook, some of which became epigraphs. Unlike the *Felix Holt* manuscript, only one of the epigraphs in *Middlemarch* was added at proof stage. 'On at least four occasions,' observes David Carroll, 'it is possible from the manuscript to witness the novelist coming upon the idea for a motto in the course of writing a chapter', which confirms their structural importance.<sup>8</sup>

While it may be the modern reader's habit to skip, or skim over epigraphs, their use in Eliot's novels generated a substantial amount of notice. Not all of it was positive. By the time Eliot published *Daniel Deronda*, her epigraphs had grown substantially, both in number and in length, and most readers found them tiresome: 'instead of increasing our admiration for the book,' one anonymous reviewer wrote in the *Spectator*, '[they] rather overweight and perplex it.'<sup>9</sup> A. V. Dicey, writing for the *Nation*, was ambivalent at best, claiming the epigraphs in turns 'adorned' and 'defaced' the chapters. He stated that

anyone who doubts that the long-winded reflections taken from the commonplace book or the unpublished works of George Eliot afford examples of the way in which a statement that has meaning may be overloaded by the conceits in which it is expressed, should examine carefully the motto to the first chapter, and consider honestly whether a rather commonplace sentiment is not beaten out into an inordinate number of words.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Letter to George Eliot, 30 April 1866, *Eliot Letters*, ed. by Haight, iv: 1862–1868 (1955), 250.

<sup>7</sup> Fred C. Thomson, 'Introduction', in George Eliot, *Felix Holt, the Radical*, ed. by Fred C. Thomson (Oxford: Clarendon Press: 1980), pp. xiii–xxx (p. xxviii).

<sup>8</sup> David Carroll, 'Introduction', in George Eliot, *Middlemarch, A Study of Provincial Life*, ed. by David Carroll (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), pp. xiii–lxiii (p. lvii).

<sup>9</sup> Anonymous review of *Daniel Deronda*, *Spectator*, 9 September 1876, p. 1131.

<sup>10</sup> A. V. Dicey, review of *Daniel Deronda*, in *George Eliot: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by David Carroll (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 399–404 (p. 401) (first publ. in *Nation*, 19 October 1876, pp. 245–46).

The long prose epigraph Dicey refers to in his review relates to the arbitrary nature of all beginnings. Eliot writes:

Men can do nothing without the make-believe of a beginning. Even science, the strict measurer, is obliged to start with a make-believe unit, and must fix on a point in the stars' unceasing journey when his sidereal clock shall pretend that time is at Nought. His less accurate grandmother Poetry has always been understood to start in the middle; but on reflection it appears that her proceeding is not very different from his; since Science, too, reckons backward as well as forward, divides his unit into billions, and with his clock-finger at Nought really sets off *in medias res*. No retrospect will take us to the true beginning; and whether our prologue be in heaven or on earth, it is but a fraction of that all-presupposing fact with which our story sets out. (*Daniel Deronda*, p. 3 (Chap. 1))

Epigraphs illuminate the difficulty of deciding where a narrative actually 'begins'. They raise questions about the extent to which beginnings establish the parameters of what will follow, and whether endings determine how we understand beginnings. The epigraph to Chapter 1 enacts its own assertion: the generalization that 'Men can do nothing without the make-believe of a beginning' becomes true of the novel's readers. The reader must start with this make-believe beginning, which gives the novel's first paragraph, and its famous opening line, 'Was she beautiful or not beautiful?', its full significance (p. 3). The epigraph calls attention to itself as 'a make-believe of a beginning' through its marginal placement — paratext and text both have their own beginnings — and through its own fictional construct. The epigraph subsumes its scientific and literary references, which include *Hamlet* and Goethe's *Faust*.<sup>11</sup> Thus, the epigraph makes an implicit comment about the derivative nature of literature, and the inescapability of literary precedence. As Hugo Mallinger observes in the narrative, 'One couldn't carry on life comfortably without a little blindness to the fact that everything has been said better than we can put it ourselves' (p. 161 (Chap. 16)). (This, of course, does not preclude anyone from trying.)

<sup>11</sup> The impossibility of recovering true beginnings is an idea that George Eliot may have drawn from R. A. Proctor's essay, 'The Past and Future of Our Earth', *Contemporary Review*, December 1874, pp. 74–92. See Gillian Beer, *Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 176–77. Robert Macfarlane claims that this epigraph is in part abstracted from *Hamlet*. See Macfarlane, *Original Copy: Plagiarism and Originality in Nineteenth-Century Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 104. The phrase 'our prologue be in heaven or on earth' is a reference to Goethe's *Faust*, which Barbara Hardy has shown relates to various moral concerns in the novel. See George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, ed. by Barbara Hardy (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), p. 885.

On the opening page of *Daniel Deronda*, the precise two o'clock 'On the first of September, in the memorable year 1832' of *Felix Holt* has given way to a vague 'near four o'clock on a September day'.<sup>12</sup> While, in *Middlemarch*, Eliot expected her reader to know what 'kind of beauty' Dorothea possesses (p. 7 (Chap. 1)), she now required the reader to make aesthetic judgements: 'Was she beautiful or not beautiful?' is, arguably, *Daniel Deronda*'s first sentence. As we have already seen, her use of a prose epigraph as the opening to the first chapter leaves this open to debate. But what is clear from *Daniel Deronda*'s inception is that its epigraphic project exceeded anything that had come before it. This is manifested in the sheer number of epigraphs, their length, and their multilingualism. While Shakespeare is still quoted in an important number of epigraphs, as he was in those for *Felix Holt* and *Middlemarch*, a larger proportion of the epigraphs are autographic and, for the first time, written in prose.<sup>13</sup> Eliot also continued to compose epigraphs in verse and in dialogue form. With her dialogue, she became more playful, using both her traditional '1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Gent' (p. 89 (Chap. 10)) — characters that appear in her previous two novels' epigraphs — and the more unusual 'Aspern and Fronsberg' (p. 424 (Chap. 37)). Sources for her allographic epigraphs spanned several languages and genres. Eliot quoted poets, novelists, historians, philosophers, and religious texts, making of her novel a true cabinet of curiosities. *Daniel Deronda*'s epigraphs illustrate the wonderful range and extent of Eliot's reading and the full force of her imagination.

My reading of the epigraphs in *Daniel Deronda* contests Dicey's assertion that 'a rather commonplace sentiment is [...] beaten out into an inordinate number of words' (Dicey, p. 401). The first part of this article considers the influence of Laurence Sterne on Eliot's novel to argue for the importance of digression to the novel's form. The second part examines Eliot's use of maxims, quoted as epigraphs, and her mimesis of them, in order to demonstrate the moral implications of the form. Finally, I use Barthes to trace the maxim to the character most associated with it: Grandcourt. His linguistic concision suggests that, in this novel, digression and concision are loaded with their own moral valences; and although Eliot was in some ways more playful with epigraphs, her use of maxims underlines the grief and violence at the heart of this novel.

<sup>12</sup> *Felix Holt*, p. 13 (Chap. 1); *Daniel Deronda*, p. 3.

<sup>13</sup> Gérard Genette defines autographic epigraphs as those written by the author of the work in question, as opposed to allographic epigraphs, which are attributed to another author. See Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, ed. by Richard Macksey and Michael Sprinker, trans. by Jane E. Lewin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 153.

### George Eliot and Laurence Sterne

Although *Daniel Deronda*'s first epigraph disavows beginnings, the past plays a crucial part in this novel. Dicey was not the only reviewer to take special notice of the novel's first epigraph. An anonymous reviewer for the *Scotsman* singled it out too:

In the somewhat enigmatical motto prefixed to the first chapter it is indicated that neither a story nor anything else can be truly begun at the beginning; that a starting-point, where ever chosen, must be arbitrary; and so as it is, we presume, no longer permissible to adopt a *Tristram Shandy* method, we have Gwendolen starting forth, as Minerva did from the head of Jove, fully equipped.<sup>14</sup>

This passage suggests that *Daniel Deronda*'s daring first chapter attempted to circumvent Victorian propriety, which precluded writing about pregnancy. What the reviewer would not have known is that Eliot, in her preparation for *Daniel Deronda*, turned to *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759–67) as one of the earliest novels to deal with the arbitrary nature of beginnings. It seems to have served as an example for her own ambitious form. *Tristram Shandy* appears under Eliot's list of what she had 'Read since September 1872' in the form of a quotation from the novel, and in her 'Catena of Novelists' (catena being a chain or connected series) in the Pforzheimer Notebook. Lewes also records in his diary that Eliot began reading *Tristram Shandy* aloud on 13 January 1873, and that she continued reading it for the next month.<sup>15</sup> In this novel, what claims to be a beginning is in fact an entire narrative. Edward Said has identified this postponement as 'a kind of encyclopaedic, meaningful playfulness'.<sup>16</sup> While *Daniel Deronda* purports to begin *in medias res*, the use of the epigraph is itself an investigation of beginnings. It, too, 'delays one sort of action for the sake of undertaking another' (Said, p. 44). The novel's epigraphs are often followed by aphorisms, which are followed by narrative, so that the chapters give the impression of beginning, and then beginning again, and again.

In a short piece titled 'Story-telling', first published in *Essays and Leaves from a Note-Book*, Eliot defends Sterne: 'Why should a story not be told in the most irregular fashion that an author's idiosyncrasy may prompt, provided that he gives us what we can enjoy?', she asked. 'The dear public

<sup>14</sup> Anonymous review of *Daniel Deronda*, 'George Eliot's New Novel', *Scotsman*, 29 January 1876, p. 7.

<sup>15</sup> See *George Eliot's 'Daniel Deronda' Notebooks*, ed. by Jane Irwin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 218, 244.

<sup>16</sup> Edward W. Said, *Beginnings: Intention and Method* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), p. 44.



would do well to reflect that they are often bored from the want of flexibility in their own minds.<sup>17</sup> In this piece, she reflects on the possible orders of narration, comparing early poetry and its way of ‘telling a daring deed, a glorious achievement, without caring for what went before’ (the ‘*in medias res*’ she references in *Daniel Deronda*’s first epigraph) to the novel and its preference for the ‘*ab ovo*’ (p. 369). While the latter has its merits, she concludes that ‘the only stories life presents to us in an orderly way are those of our autobiography’ (p. 369). In other words, we construct autobiography in a linear fashion because this is how we choose to make sense of our life. Life itself is not linear, but we impose retrospective order upon it, which is why it is so difficult to determine a beginning. Fiction, however, relies on the incompleteness of information. For Sterne, digression allowed a more precise description of real life than the chronological. ‘A life’s plot so often escaped the person who was living it’, explains Adam Thirlwell: ‘What was a true cause, and what was an imaginary one?’<sup>18</sup> This is a similar question to that posed in *Daniel Deronda* and, the reader will note, the narrative is not chronological. The result is such that, as Hilary Schor demonstrates, ‘only well into the middle of the novel [when Daniel and Gwendolen meet for the first time] are we in a position to understand the book’s beginning’.<sup>19</sup> (Note how similar this is to the nature of epigraphs, whose meaning is speculative at best until the end of a chapter or, in some cases, the end of a novel. These beginnings, in need of narrative and explanation, are therefore not beginnings at all.) While it is difficult to date these ‘leaves from a note-book’, the editor of the volume places them sometime between the publications of *Middlemarch* and *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* (1879). What has gone unnoticed is that, in ‘Story-telling’, Eliot is working through the same sets of ideas that she expresses in *Daniel Deronda*’s first epigraph. So, although *Daniel Deronda* is thought to have pushed the boundaries of the realist novel, I would like to suggest that it owes part of its experimental features to the pioneering *Tristram Shandy*, including a constant need to backtrack and a mania for comprehensiveness. Both novels are also unified around similar central themes.

Eliot used Sterne as the source for the first epigraph of the second volume of *Daniel Deronda*, quoting not from *Tristram Shandy* but from *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy* (1768): ‘I pity the man who can travel from Dan to Beersheba, and say, “Tis all barren;” and so it is: and so is all the world to him who will not cultivate the fruits it offers’ (p. 189

<sup>17</sup> George Eliot, *Essays and Leaves from a Note-Book*, ed. by Charles Lee Lewes (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1884), pp. 366–71 (p. 371).

<sup>18</sup> Adam Thirlwell, *Miss Herbert* (London: Vintage, 2009), p. 170.

<sup>19</sup> Hilary M. Schor, ‘The Make-Believe of a Middle: On (Not) Knowing Where You Are in *Daniel Deronda*’, in *Narrative Middles: Navigating the Nineteenth-Century British Novel*, ed. by Caroline Levine and Mario Ortiz-Robles (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2011), pp. 47–74 (p. 49).

(Chap. 19)). In a letter in which Sterne discussed this novel, he wrote, ‘My design in it was to teach us to love the world and our fellow creatures better than we do.’<sup>20</sup> This is not far off from Eliot’s own belief in the power of literature to extend our sympathies. Both Sterne and Eliot developed a playful form in order to accomplish this, but while Sterne was celebrated for his ‘preacher’s enthusiasm and conviction’, Eliot was accused of too much preaching and too little humour (Lukács, p. 169). Indeed, one chapter is affixed with a passage from Leopold Zunz, and opens with the assertion that Daniel had just been reading this same passage, suggesting that epigraphs are to chapters what exegesis is to a religious text. Yet this is just one aspect of Eliot’s diverse practice. The use of *A Sentimental Journey*, which is full of sexual subtext, suggests an Eliot more mischievous than we often give her credit for. It is interesting to note that Sterne’s anthologists had a hard time extracting passages from his novel because of its subtext. As Thirlwell notes, ‘it is not easy, turning an unserious novel into a serious extract’ (p. 171). Eliot’s novels, on the other hand, lend themselves to excerption. Leah Price has argued that Eliot began to write in anticipation of excerption, which contributed to what has been seen as the sententiousness of her late work.<sup>21</sup> It was these sententious, narratorial passages, and her autographic epigraphs, that provided the content for Alexander Main’s *Wise, Witty, and Tender Sayings in Prose and Verse Selected from the Works of George Eliot* (1873).<sup>22</sup> Main placed the epigraphs under the heading ‘George Eliot: *in propria persona*’, problematizing the interpretation of the epigraphic voice in her novels. In the case of *Daniel Deronda*, Main’s excerption of the epigraphs also obscured the relationship between the sententious and the playful. It is the placement of Eliot’s epigraphs in relation to the narrative that so often opens up the possibility of linguistic play.

### In defence of sententiousness

In 1876 Henry James published a review of *Daniel Deronda* in the *Atlantic Monthly*. This bizarre review took the form of a conversation between three characters: Theodora, Pulcheria, and Constantius. The latter, thought to be James’s spokesman, claims that ‘the epigraphs in verse are a want of tact; they are sometimes, I think, a trifle more pretentious than really pregnant’.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Cited in Georg Lukács, *Soul and Form* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), p. 169.

<sup>21</sup> Leah Price, *The Anthology and the Rise of the Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 105–37.

<sup>22</sup> Every new book by Eliot gave rise to a new edition by Main.

<sup>23</sup> Henry James, ‘*Daniel Deronda: A Conversation*’, *Atlantic Monthly*, December 1876, pp. 684–94 (p. 690). For James’s initial thoughts on the novel, see his unsigned review of *Daniel Deronda*, *Nation*, 24 February 1876, p. 131.



For James, ‘a want of tact’ is analogous to an excess of information and control.<sup>24</sup> In response to the dominance of ‘knowing’ in the nineteenth-century novel, epitomized by Eliot’s narratorial omniscience (‘she talks too much’, he wrote in this review), James introduced techniques of narratorial reserve, and he called this restraint ‘tact’.<sup>25</sup>

Sententiousness lies at the other end of the stylistic spectrum. The term ‘sententious’ is akin to ‘pompous moralizing’. A sententious style abounds in maxims, aphorisms, and generalizations. Eliot became famous for it, earning her the reputation of a sage. As Roland Barthes notes in his introduction to La Rochefoucauld’s *Réflexions; ou, sentences et maximes morales* (1665), ‘in our collective imagination that which is divine and that which is knowledge remain very close.’<sup>26</sup> While Eliot’s sententiousness did not prove so popular in her novels, Main’s *Sayings* had gone through ten British editions by 1896. It is this paradox with which Barthes opens his introduction to La Rochefoucauld, the idea that such a book of maxims seems to offer two opposite projects:

here one for me (and what an address it is! — this maxim travelling across three centuries to come and speak to me), and there: another for you, that of the author, which is said, is repeated, and which imposes itself, as if locked in a discourse without any end or order, like an obsessive monologue.<sup>27</sup>

Maxims at once address the singularized reader and tend towards abstraction and grand moralization. Ironically, one overlaps with the other. Although some of Eliot’s readers found her narrators imposing, they valued the wisdom she could provide.

The origins of Eliot’s sententiousness, however, are in seventeenth-century French wisdom literature: La Rochefoucauld, Pascal, and La Bruyère are some of the writers that she read and quoted in her epigraphs. Ruth Livesey situates *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* alongside Eliot’s essay ‘Woman in France’ in order to illustrate Eliot’s positive embrace of this

<sup>24</sup> Samuel Cross, ‘The Ethics of Tact in *The Wings of the Dove*’, *Novel*, 43 (2010), 401–23.

<sup>25</sup> David Russell, ‘A Literary History of Tact: Sociability, Aesthetic Liberalism and the Essay Form in Nineteenth-Century Britain’ (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Princeton University, 2011), p. 17.

<sup>26</sup> Roland Barthes, ‘La Rochefoucauld: “Réflexions; ou, sentences et maximes”’, in *Nouveaux essais critiques* (Paris: Seuil, 1972), pp. 69–87: ‘dans notre imagination collective le thème divin et le thème savant restent très proches’ (p. 74). All translations are by Paul Murray and Eirian Yem.

<sup>27</sup> ‘Ici un pour moi (et quelle adresse! cette maxime traverse trois siècles pour venir me raconter), là, un pour soi, celui de l’auteur, qui se dit, se répète, s’impose, comme enfermé dans un discours sans fin, sans ordre, à la façon d’un monologue obsédé’ (p. 69).

genre.<sup>28</sup> I would like to suggest that her fictional experiments with wisdom literature began earlier, in *Daniel Deronda*, and that these had to do with the contingent. Epigraphs capture the paradox contained in this word ‘contingent’ (meaning both that which depends upon another, and that which is subject to chance) and the power of epigraphs to represent this paradox. Through epigraphs, she considered the potential of the sententious to transcend its contingent relationship to the diegesis, and its limits. While Barthes tells us ‘the contingent: it’s everything that depends on chance (and for Rochefoucauld it is one of the great masters of the universe)’, the novel’s plot suggests that what we think of as chance is not chance at all, but the crossing of causal chains.<sup>29</sup> Eliot’s interest in maxims, the form to which she was responding in her own prose epigraphs, illuminates this problem in a particularly intriguing way.

Maxims, a form that Eliot quotes in her allographic epigraphs and engages with in her autographic epigraphs, are a transcendent form of literature (that is, not bound to context) with a liturgical lineage. Scripture is claimed to contain eternal truths, and the most famous examples of wisdom literature are to be found in the Old Testament. However, Geoffrey Bennington correctly observes that ‘maxims appear to offer independent assertions which can be read on their own terms [but are] also fragments of books, parts of a great “whole”’.<sup>30</sup> While maxims are extracted with considerable ease, Eliot’s epigraphs are more difficult to excise, which is why it is puzzling that Main would include them in his anthology.

In *Daniel Deronda* maxims are taken from one book and integrated into another as epigraphs. La Rochefoucauld’s *Réflexions*, for instance, is quoted twice in the novel. In her article ‘Woman in France’, Eliot wrote of La Rochefoucauld’s maxims:

as to form, they are perfect, and [...] as to matter, they are at once undeniably true and miserably false; true as applied to that condition of human nature in which the selfish instincts are still dominant, false if taken as a representation of all the elements and possibilities of human nature.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Ruth Livesey, ‘George Eliot, Marian Evans, and the Work of Sententiousness’, in *The Labour of Literature in Britain and France, 1830–1930: Authorial Work Ethics*, ed. by Marcus Waithe and Claire White (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 111–26.

<sup>29</sup> ‘Les contingences: c’est tout ce qui dépend du hasard (et pour La Rochefoucauld, c’est l’un des plus grands maîtres du monde)’ (p. 80).

<sup>30</sup> Geoffrey Bennington, *Sententiousness and the Novel: Laying Down the Law in Eighteenth-Century French Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 22.

<sup>31</sup> George Eliot, ‘Woman in France: Madame de Sablé’, in *Selected Essays, Poems and Other Writings*, ed. by A. S. Byatt and Nicholas Warren (London: Penguin, 1990), pp. 8–37 (p. 31).

It seems that La Rochefoucauld was a little too cynical for Eliot's liking. While she appreciated the form of the maxim (all maxims tend towards antithesis, that is to say towards symmetry), she did not find them capacious enough to encompass all of human variety — or perhaps she found them so capacious as not to allow for nuance. Indeed, in *The Mill on the Floss*, she claimed that

all people of broad, strong sense have an instinctive repugnance to the men of maxims; because such people early discern that the mysterious complexity of our life is not to be embraced by maxims, and that to lace ourselves up in formulas of that sort is to repress all the divine promptings and inspirations that spring from growing insight and sympathy. (p. 438 (Book 7, Chap. 2))

From the beginning of her novelistic career, Eliot speaks of maxims in gendered terms: maxims are the realm of the masculine, a dominant culture exerting its force.<sup>32</sup> The act of lacing ourselves up, which gestures to the maxim's self-containment, brings to mind a corset: tight, constricting, almost violent. This image cannot be separated from the idealization of women's bodies and the politics surrounding them.

While it is not unusual for us to think of the aphoristic voice as analogous to divine communication, it is important to note that Eliot considered it the opposite. Insight was to be found in the particular. It is this tension between the general and the particular that she explores in the epigraph to Chapter 28, the opening of Book 4 of *Daniel Deronda*, when she quotes La Rochefoucauld: 'It is easier to know man in general than to know a man individually.'<sup>33</sup> After weeks of waiting for the next number, readers would have started with this quote, and then been reminded of Gwendolen's engagement to Grandcourt. In this chapter both Gwendolen and Grandcourt make assumptions about each other's character. While Gwendolen 'devised little schemes for learning what was expected of men in general' (p. 289), Grandcourt 'believed that this girl was rather exceptional' (p. 293). Neither are vindicated. The conclusion to be taken from this chapter is that, as the narrator claims with bitter irony, 'suitors must often be judged as words are, by their standing and the figure they make in polite society: it is difficult to know much else of them' (pp. 287–88). This sentence adopts the sententiousness and comparative structure of the maxim, although it is one of equivalence, as opposed to the epigraph's

<sup>32</sup> See Mary Jacobus, 'The Question of Language: Men of Maxims and *The Mill on the Floss*', *Critical Inquiry*, 8 (1981), 207–22.

<sup>33</sup> 'Il est plus aisé de connoître l'homme en général que de connoître un homme en particulier' (p. 238).

relationship of surplus ('plus [...] que [...]').<sup>34</sup> Eliot's sententiousness serves as a defence of the practice: as she reminds us, characters are just words, and without the help of an intrusive and voluble narrator, both would remain opaque. As Gwendolen later concedes, 'general maxims about husbands and wives seemed now of a precarious usefulness' (p. 512 (Chap. 44)). The epigraph's defining term 'aisé' is not precisely defined, and the word carries implications of both ease as a lack of complication, and ease as comfort. In practical terms it might be easier to know a single man as opposed to man in general, but it might be 'less oppressive' to think in general terms. The use of the word 'often' also points to the limitation of the maxim as a form: all generalities have their exceptions. The chapter at once invites prediction — think, for instance, of the rector and his 'serious reflection [on] how death and other causes do sometimes concentrate inheritances on one man' (p. 284) — and registers the difficulty of ascertaining how the larger workings of human interaction might work out in the individual instance.

Appearances can be deceiving. This is the moral to be extracted from Eliot's second use of La Rochefoucauld, whom she quotes at the head of Chapter 52: 'That same hardness which serves to resist love also makes it violent and long lasting; and weak people who are always moved by passion are almost never really filled with it.'<sup>35</sup> This epigraph illustrates Daniel's conclusion:

Hans Meyrick's nature was not one in which love could strike the deep roots that turn disappointment into sorrow: it was too restless, too readily excitable by novelty, too ready to turn itself into imaginative material, and wear its grief as a fantastic costume. (p. 602)

But it has taken Daniel a long time to realize this. Through this epigraph, Eliot is testing the general, in the form of a maxim, against the particulars of her narrative. The chapter does not disprove this general rule (the epigraph is, in fact, a rather felicitous description of Daniel and Hans), but the novel as a whole suggests that felicitous, or contingent, is perhaps all it is. Applied to Gwendolen, the first clause of the maxim becomes sinister, evoking her initial resistance to Grandcourt's offer, and the consequent (implied) violence and claustrophobia of their marriage. When the poet Don Paterson writes of the aphorism's ability 'to induce a horrific paralysis of boredom in the reader, in the compass of one sentence',<sup>36</sup> we are reminded

<sup>34</sup> Barthes writes at length on the structure of the maxim, which he claims has three degrees of comparison: 'More, as much as, less.' ('Plus, autant, moins').

<sup>35</sup> 'La même fermeté qui sert à résister à l'amour sert aussi à le rendre violent et durable; et les personnes foibles qui sont toujours agitées des passions n'en sont presque jamais véritablement remplies' (p. 597).

<sup>36</sup> Don Paterson, *The Fall at Home: New and Collected Aphorisms* (London: Faber, 2018), p. 214.

of Gwendolen, whose marriage to Grandcourt leaves her ‘look[ing] like a melancholy statue of the Gwendolen whose laughter had once been so ready when others were grave’ (p. 717 (Chap. 65)). The epigraph to this chapter therefore demonstrates the contingencies of language that arise in the process of interpretation. (As Maggie tells Tom in *The Mill on the Floss*, ‘It may mean several things; almost every word does’ (p. 127 (Book 2, Chap. 1)). Maggie has what Mary Jacobus calls a gift for ambiguity (p. 214), which is also what one needs when reading epigraphs.) What I think Eliot is suggesting here, through the maxim, is not the incompatibility of general laws with moral realism but, as Barthes writes of La Rochefoucauld, her desire ‘to rediscover the being beneath appearances, the real passion under the veil of grand sentiments’.<sup>37</sup> In other words, despite her own playfulness, Eliot placed more value on the moral rather than the stylistic implications of the form.

### Epigraphs and entomology

The literary fragment was born in part out of the fact that the works of even the most authoritative Greek and Roman authors have been passed down to us in fragment form. Think, for instance, of Sappho and Erinna, whose scattered fragments are all that remain of their output. ‘The writing implies a great deal around it’, writes Brian Dillon, and ‘arrives haloed by conjecture and mystery.’<sup>38</sup> The classical fragment had a marked effect on Romantic literature. Friedrich Schlegel, in the *Athenaeum* Fragment 206, wrote that ‘A fragment, like a miniature work of art, has to be entirely isolated from the surrounding world and complete in itself like a porcupine’.<sup>39</sup> One pictures the small animal rolling itself up into a protective ball. A distinction thus arises between the fragment and the epigraph, which stands apart but not alone.

Eliot read Sappho and Erinna in Lewes’s copy of Theodorus Bergk’s *Poetae Lyrici Graeci* (1843). She annotated these pages, writing at the end of the section on Sappho: ‘Read 2nd time Feb. 1873.’<sup>40</sup> It is likely she also reread Erinna before composing her own poem ‘Erinna’ (1873–76) based on these verse fragments. In a notebook, she referenced

<sup>37</sup> ‘Retrouver l’être sous l’apparence, le réel des passions sous l’alibi des grands sentiments’ (p. 85).

<sup>38</sup> Brian Dillon, *Essayism* (London: Fitzcarraldo, 2017), p. 67.

<sup>39</sup> Friedrich Schlegel *Kritische Ausgabe*, ed. by Ernst Behler (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1958–), II, 197.

<sup>40</sup> *The Complete Shorter Poetry of George Eliot*, ed. by Antonie Gerard van den Broek, 2 vols (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2005), II, 109.

Erinna's poem of 'the Spindle' [...] in which, says O. Müller, she probably expressed the restless & aspiring thoughts which crowded on her youthful mind as she pursued her monotonous work. Erinna died in early youth, when chained by her mother to the spinning wheel.<sup>41</sup>

This passage must have affected her, for when she wrote 'Erinna', she prefaced it with this same quotation from Müller. When she quoted from her poem in one of the epigraphs to *Daniel Deronda*, it is also this image she returned to:

She held the spindle as she sat,  
 Erinna with the thick-coiled mat  
 Of raven hair and deepest agate eyes,  
 Gazing with a sad surprise  
 At surging visions of her destiny —  
 To spin the byssus drearily  
 In insect-labor [*sic*], while the throng  
 Of gods and men wrought deeds that poets wrought in song.  
 (p. 582 (Chap. 51))

In this epigraph, domestic labour is opposed to artistic creation. Chained to the spinning wheel, Erinna is overcome with images of a life spent in isolated toil, like that of a spider, while poets sing of 'gods and men'. In *Silas Marner* (1861), for instance, the spider weaves out of 'pure impulse, without reflection'.<sup>42</sup> Erinna, whose 'raven hair' and 'agate eyes' bring to mind the spider, seeks to escape this domestic imprisonment through her imagination. The reader, however, knows that Erinna will die as a result of her labour. There is a latent violence in her 'thick-coiled' hair: she spins her own shroud. The repetition of 'wrought' in the epigraph's last line invites us to think of it as a skein being finely threaded from the 'throng' that precedes it. The phrase 'of gods and men' perhaps gestures towards Arachne, the talented mortal weaver who challenged Athena, goddess of wisdom and craft, to a weaving contest. While, etymologically, text and web derive from the same Latin word 'textum', Eliot seeks to distance the act of writing from that of weaving. As the epigraph suggests, she prefers the idea of a well-wrought text ('deeds that poets wrought in song'), in the sense of metalwork.<sup>43</sup> This metaphor is reflective of the dialectical relationship

<sup>41</sup> Yale University, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale MS Eliot VII, p. 13. Her source, here, was Karl Ottfried Müller's *History of the Literature of Ancient Greece* (London: Baldwin and Cradock, 1840). See Wendy S. Williams, *George Eliot, Poetess* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), pp. 28–38.

<sup>42</sup> George Eliot, *Silas Marner: The Weaver of Raveloe*, ed. by Terence Cave (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 15 (Chap. 2).

<sup>43</sup> 'wrought, adj.' (sense 10), *OED Online*, Oxford University Press <<https://www.oed.com>> [accessed 8 November 2019].



between epigraph and narrative, which advances through struggle as well as agreement.

Victorians were keen entomologists and the discourse surrounding insects in this period was wide-ranging. Social insects, such as ants, served as laudable models of hard work and task organization, while other insects, such as butterflies, allowed entomologists to engage in contentious debates about the relative roles of instinct and reason in animals.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, insects became the focus of religious and political questions, from social and educational reform to religious design and secular evolutionism. This cultural interest in the insect and its ideologies is present in *Daniel Deronda*. Eliot seems to have been particularly interested in protective mimicry, whose evolutionary accounts provided strong supporting evidence for natural selection. In 1861 Henry Bates produced a paper which used Charles Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection to explain the beauty of the colour of butterflies. In this paper, he argued for insectivorous predators as agents of natural selection. He observed that one family of butterflies (the mimics) changed across a geographical region to resemble another family of butterflies (the models) whose conspicuous coloration warned predators of their acrid taste. Importantly, Bates provided 'a secular naturalistic explanation for a phenomenon traditionally celebrated as evidence of providential design' (Clark, p. 117). In *Daniel Deronda*, Eliot refers to this process as 'the marvels of imitation in insects' (p. 470 (Chap. 40)). It is interesting to note the extent to which Eliot herself makes use of formal and stylistic mimicry in order to create her epigraphs, the maxim being only one example of her tendency towards imitation. As Will Abberley explains, imitation in the nineteenth century was considered to be instinctual, as opposed to cognitive, and was therefore frequently associated with primitive mindlessness. However, this view clashed with psychological theories that placed imitation at the centre of learning and selfhood.<sup>45</sup> Eliot's epigraphs are both reproductions of texts and echoes of, or replies to, them. This imitation transcends mere replication: it allowed Eliot to develop a distinctive epigraphic voice, most evident in this novel's autographic prose epigraphs.

While Eliot marvelled at insect imitation, most of the references to insects in *Daniel Deronda* posit them as undesirable templates for human life. She used them as examples of 'narrow tenacity [...] unshaken by thoughts beyond the reach of their antennae' (p. 637 (Chap. 55)). Gwendolen is the

<sup>44</sup> See Charlotte Sleight, *Six Legs Better: A Cultural History of Myrmecology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007); and J. F. M. Clark, *Bugs and the Victorians* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

<sup>45</sup> Will Abberley, 'Introduction: Replicating Bodies in Nineteenth-Century Science and Culture', *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 24 (2017) <<http://doi.org/10.16995/ntn.789>>.

human embodiment of this narrowness.<sup>46</sup> ‘Could there be a slenderer, more insignificant thread in human history than this consciousness of a girl, busy with her small inferences of the way in which she could make her life pleasant?’, asks the narrator (p. 109 (Chap. 11)). For Gwendolen, the insect represents having ‘no choice but to endure insignificance and servitude’ (p. 289 (Chap. 28)). She invokes the insect often, as an example of what she fears most. When she first meets Daniel, he gives her what she interprets as an ironic smile, ‘but it was at least better’, she thinks, ‘that he should have kept his attention fixed on her than that he disregarded her as one of an insect swarm who had no individual physiognomy’ (p. 7 (Chap. 1)). Gwendolen wishes to be distinctive, to stand out from the crowd, and she does. Although her beauty is debated, everyone agrees she is striking. (This lack of protective mimicry turns out to be her downfall.) The narrator also tells the reader that Gwendolen ‘[was] never even as a child thoughtlessly cruel, nay delighting to rescue drowning insects and watch their recovery’ (p. 20 (Chap. 3)). This passage does less to absolve Gwendolen than it does to illustrate the behaviour learned from these small creatures: the insect comes to stand for her fear of insignificance, of being subject to the whims of others — or of becoming someone else’s whim. The childhood anecdote becomes a prophecy: before her marriage, Gwendolen tells her mother that ‘I shall dream that night that I am looking at the extraordinary face of a magnified insect — and the next morning [Grandcourt] will make an offer of his hand’ (p. 86 (Chap. 9)). Grandcourt’s insidious past later ‘present[s] itself as an array of live caterpillars, disastrous to the green meat of respectable people’ (p. 703 (Chap. 64)). Ultimately, Gwendolen chooses to let this particular insect drown.

If the insect is a common trope for the human’s own narrowness and insignificance, it is also, in *Daniel Deronda*, a metaphor for the limits of what is knowable. As John Clark has shown, the struggle to understand the mental powers of insects occupied central ground in nineteenth-century entomological research (pp. 34–53). When Lush attempts to guess whether Grandcourt will make Gwendolen an offer, he reflects on Grandcourt’s tendency to ‘lapse hither and thither with no more apparent will than a moth’ (p. 261 (Chap. 25)). It is interesting to note that the moth is an insect pest and therefore the mark of a threat.<sup>47</sup> Lush reflects:

To know Grandcourt was to doubt what he would do in any particular case. [...] But Lush had some general certainties

<sup>46</sup> For a different reading of insect tenacity, see Sally Shuttleworth, *George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Science: The Make-Believe of a Beginning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 190.

<sup>47</sup> Clark notes that “‘Pest’ is not a natural category — it refers to those species that interfere with human activities: much like gardeners refer to a weed as a plant growing where we do not want it’ (p. 133).

about Grandcourt, and one was that of all inward movements those of generosity were least likely to occur in him. Of what use, however, is a general certainty that an insect will not walk with his head hindmost, when what you need to know is the play of inward stimulus that sends him hither and thither in a network of possible paths? (p. 261)

Like the entomologist who must conjecture about the insect's 'inward stimulus' based on outward appearances, Lush must speculate about particular instances based on general observations. This is an issue of both form and content: implicit in this passage is a criticism of the maxim and its 'general certainties'. Interestingly, Barthes compares the form of the maxim to the brittle casing of an insect:

The maxim is a hard, gleaming object, and fragile too, like the armoured skin of an insect; and like the insect it has a pointed end, a tentacle of sharp words that end it and crown it — and close it shut while arming it (it is armed because it is closed).<sup>48</sup>

What emerges from Barthes's description is a careful balance of strength and vulnerability. Form is worn as a suit of armour: if it is violent, it is in order to protect itself. The form itself is a defence. (Remember Schlegel, comparing the fragment to a porcupine; and Eliot, comparing the maxim to a corset, which in retrospect suggests the possibilities of female empowerment, as opposed to male domination.) It is therefore unsurprising that the novel's most violent character is the hardest to read. Like the maxim, Grandcourt (insectivorous predator) puts on a performance, puts up a defence. 'His soul was garrisoned against presentiments and fears', the narrator tells us; 'he had the courage and confidence that belong to domination, and he was at that moment feeling perfectly satisfied that he held his wife with bit and bridle' (p. 633 (Chap. 54)). This is an illusion of control, whereas Gwendolen holds an actual rope: instead of throwing it to her husband, she chooses to regain control over her life.

The novel offers numerous observations on Grandcourt's linguistic concision — 'He was not a wordy thinker' — that extend analogies between Grandcourt and insects to maxims also (p. 118 (Chap. 13)). We are told, for instance, that Grandcourt's speeches are of the brief sort: 'Stopping so soon, they give signs of a suppressed and formidable ability to say more, and have also the meritorious quality of allowing lengthiness to others' (p. 117). Implicit within these (ironic) observations are comments on the

<sup>48</sup> 'La maxime est un objet dur, luisant — et fragile — comme le corselet d'un insecte; comme l'insecte aussi, elle possède la pointe, ce crochet de mots aigus qui la terminent, la couronnent — la ferment, tout en l'armant (elle est armée parce qu'elle est fermée)' (p. 70).

epigraphic form: an epigraph both conceals and reveals, requiring the reader to unpack it. Like Grandcourt's 'Damn her!' the epigraph is an 'explosive phrase [that] stood for mixed impressions which eloquent interpreters might have expanded into some sentences full of an irritated sense that [they were] being mystified' (p. 118). *Daniel Deronda's* epigraphs are often puzzling, and readers of Eliot's late novels are trained to be eloquent interpreters of fragments. But Eliot, too, becomes an eloquent interpreter. The deliberate reproduction of maxims through their quotation and mimesis allows Eliot to better know, and therefore to expose, what she mimics (Jacobus, p. 210).

Eliot's mimesis is not a complete undoing of the ideas that pass for the truth of human experience, but a nuancing of this truth. In the novel's longest epigraph, Eliot imagines an alternative to the maxim 'Knowledge is power'. This is a variant of Francis Bacon's phrase '*ipsa scientia potestas est*' (or 'knowledge itself is power') which appears in his *Meditationes Sacrae* (1597). Gesturing towards Bacon's scientific method, Eliot tests his hypothesis about power, challenging and improving upon his original idea:

It is a common sentence that Knowledge is power; but who hath duly considered or set forth the power of Ignorance? Knowledge slowly builds up what Ignorance in an hour pulls down. Knowledge, through patient and frugal centuries, enlarges discovery and makes record of it; Ignorance, wanting its day's dinner, lights a fire with the record, and gives a flavour to its one roast with the burned souls of many generations. Knowledge, instructing the sense, refining and multiplying needs, transforms itself into skill and makes life various with a new six days' work; comes Ignorance drunk on the seventh, with a firkin of oil and a match and an easy 'Let there not be,' and the many-coloured creation is shrivelled up in blackness. Of a truth, Knowledge is power, but it is a power reined by scruple, having a conscience of what must be and what may be; whereas Ignorance is a blind giant who, let him but wax unbound, would make it a sport to seize the pillars that hold up the long-wrought fabric of human good and turn all the places of joy dark as a buried Babylon. And looking at life parcel-wise, in the growth of a single lot, who having a practised vision may not see that ignorance of the true bond between events, and false conceit of means whereby sequences may be compelled — like that falsity of eyesight which overlooks the gradations of distance, seeing that which is afar off as if it were within a step or a grasp — precipitates the mistaken soul on destruction? (p. 190 (Chap. 21))

This epigraph demonstrates the competing impulses of concision and dispersal that are contained within the maxim. It proceeds through dialectical opposition: the original premise is, as Schlegel claims philosophical

thoughts should be, ‘turned around and synthesized with [its] antipodes’.<sup>49</sup> In the process of elaboration, Eliot loses none of the violence of the fragment form. ‘[The fragment] can be prolonged like agony’, wrote Maurice Blanchot.<sup>50</sup> The epigraph itself is full of extraordinary violence, raising the stakes of ignorance through apocalyptic imagery. Eliot writes of ‘the burned souls of many generations’, of a world ‘shrivelled up in blackness’, and of ‘burial’ and ‘destruction’. More generally, she demonstrates that correlation (‘false conceit of means’) does not imply causation (‘the true bond between events’). However, she does not do away with causation altogether. ‘Of a truth,’ Eliot writes, ‘Knowledge is power’, suggesting that this is one scheme of knowledge among many. As Sally Shuttleworth argues of *Daniel*, Eliot also ‘refuses [...] to assume that because one causal chain has been traced there cannot be another’ (p. 187). Just as the novel concedes that there are viable alternatives to empiricism, Eliot’s epigraphic digressions make room for life’s complexities. Most importantly, by rewriting this well-known maxim, Eliot undoes the repression of the feminine in Bacon’s scientific discourse.<sup>51</sup> Advancing the cause of human knowledge should not be gendered, but open to any reader with the intelligence and dedication to contribute.

By keeping in mind Eliot’s interest in the study of classical epigraphy, the field through which the epigraph migrated to literature, her epigraphs gain important intellectual contexts: the materiality of texts, the archiving and transmission of knowledge, monumentalization, and dedication. In *Daniel Deronda*, we see a conflict between Eliot’s desire to transmit knowledge and her reservations about what might be lost in the petrification of experience into maxims and other forms of quotation. In his article on Eliot’s relationship to wisdom literature, Carroll states that ‘living truth can so often turn into the stale aphorism’. This fear, he argues, impelled Eliot to write novels as opposed to moral treatises: ‘She satisfied herself by smuggling nuggets of wisdom into the text in the form of mottoes.’<sup>52</sup> This suggests that epigraphs were self-indulgent but, as Price has also shown, Eliot turned them into the opposite use: production as opposed to consumption (p. 128). The pleasure of epigraphs, although contingent on anticipation, is retrospective in nature. Untangling them requires us to both read forwards and think backwards: we must allow the epigraphs to infuse our judgements about the narrative, and permit the narrative to colour our inferences

<sup>49</sup> Friedrich Schlegel, ‘Athenäum Fragment 39’, in *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. by Peter Firchow (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), p. 23.

<sup>50</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. by Ann Smock, new edn (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), p. 46.

<sup>51</sup> The writings of Francis Bacon have been singled out as an especially egregious instance of the use of misogynous metaphors in scientific philosophy.

<sup>52</sup> David Carroll, ‘George Eliot: The Sibyl of Mercia’, *Studies in the Novel*, 15 (1983), 10–25 (p. 20).

about the epigraphs. In the case of allographic epigraphs, we must also be alert to the possible nuances of original context. Through this process, we appreciate how well the groundwork of narrative has been laid, we savour the patterns of significance, or we reflect on the limits of our perceptions and conclusions.<sup>53</sup> Indeed, *Daniel Deronda's* epigraphs are less prescriptive than those in *Felix Holt* or *Middlemarch*, allowing the reader greater freedom amid Eliot's own sententiousness. Because epigraphs operate at the margins of what can be known, readers must use intuition and experiential knowledge, as opposed to intellectualism, in order to decipher their meaning. This form is at once transgressive and liberating, since it brings to light masculine artifice and recovers the feminine.

While her interest in maxims was not concomitant with her use of epigraphs, it is a shame that Carroll dismisses them altogether, because they illuminate the problem of conveying (without congealing) truth in a particularly compelling way. Eliot placed maxims in her paratext and allowed them to interact with a new context, and she wrote her own in order to question what passes as accepted truth. And her use of maxims did not end with her novels: *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, rooted in a tradition of wisdom literature, reads like a series of extended epigraphs. In 1878 Eliot wrote a letter to Blackwood about her first acquaintance, and rereading, of Pascal, praising his 'deep though broken wisdom'. In this letter, she also laments the fact that La Bruyère 'cannot be done justice to by any merely English presentation' and quotes him to describe the current literary culture: 'The pleasure of criticism robs us of the pleasure of being greatly moved by very beautiful things.'<sup>54</sup> La Bruyère was the author of *Les 'Caractères' de Théophraste*, which, as Gordon Haight has noted, makes this passage interesting in connection with *Impressions* (*Eliot Letters*, vii, 11). But as the epigraphs in *Daniel Deronda* demonstrate, Eliot had already been searching for a form that could instruct and seduce in equal measure. What she achieved is specificity without specifics. By reinscribing and rewriting the maxim, she made it possible to generally love the particular, and to universally admire the individual instance.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>53</sup> Vera Tobin's *The Elements of Surprise: Our Mental Limits and the Satisfactions of Plot* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018) helped me to articulate the demands and rewards of reading epigraphs.

<sup>54</sup> 'Le plaisir de la critique nous ôte celui d'être vivement touchés de très belles choses.' Letter to John Blackwood, 26 January 1878, in *Eliot Letters*, ed. by Haight, vii: 1878–1880 (1955), 11.

<sup>55</sup> I borrow Dillon's formulation in *Essayism* about detail in the essay form (p. 80).