George Eliot and Van Gogh: Radiant Realism

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> You'll probably find the interior the ugliest, an empty bedroom with a wooden bed and two chairs — and yet I've painted it twice on a large scale. I wanted to arrive at an effect of simplicity as described in Felix Holt. In telling you this you'll perhaps understand the painting quickly, but it's likely that it will remain ridiculous for others, not forewarned. To make simplicity with bright colours isn't easy though, and I find that it can be useful to show that one can be simple with something other than grey, white, black and brown. That is the *raison d'être* for that study.[1]

In the last year of his life, Vincent Van Gogh returned to a novel that had been a lodestar since his youth: George Eliot's *Felix Holt, the Radical* (1866). Sending his sister the third version of *Bedroom in Arles* (1889), Van Gogh thought it needed a key for viewers to understand its aesthetic of simplicity and radiant colour — the pulsing life of a small room with bare boards, blue serge jackets hanging on pegs, and two yellow chairs (*Fig. 1*). That key was Eliot's novel, *Felix Holt*, the story of a workingman's return to live in the small provincial town of his birth, passing over upward social mobility and the chance to qualify as a doctor in favour of doing some good, unrecognized, among the people there. It is easy to read the parallels Van Gogh might see between himself and Eliot's protagonist, as he turned away from his top-hatted London apprenticeship with the dealer Goupil to preaching, and then ever more threadbare modes of labour and existence. Van Gogh's letters — from his first ecstatic attempts to force the novel on friends and

[1] Vincent Van Gogh to Willemien Van Gogh, Letter 812 (21 October 1889), in *Vincent van Gogh — The Letters*, ed. by Leo Jansen, Hans Luijten, and Nienke Bakker, 6 vols (Amsterdam: Van Gogh Museum and Huygens ING, 2009). All letters are cited by number and date in the translations provided in the online version at <http://vangoghletters.org> [accessed 14 December 2019]. I am indebted to Carol Jacobi for bringing Van Gogh's interest in George Eliot to my attention in an unpublished paper, 'Vincent Van Gogh: Victorian Radical', delivered at the London Victorian Studies Colloquium, Royal Holloway, University of London, 26 April 2019. The research for this article was supported by AHRC grant ref. AH/S002545/1/.

Fig. 1: Vincent Van Gogh, *Bedroom in Arles*, 1889, oil on canvas, 57.3 × 74 cm, Musée d'Orsay, Paris. Wikimedia Commons.

family in 1876 to his return to it as a shared code with his sister in 1889 — suggest a life lived on the path mapped out by the hero of Eliot's novel.

But what of the aesthetic form of Eliot's work, rather than its content? What would happen if we read *Bedroom in Arles* as an ekphrastic reworking of Eliot's realism? Van Gogh's interest in Eliot has, I want to argue, a visible legacy in the forms and techniques of his painting. This brings into focus the radical experimentalism of Eliot's works and the redemptive forms of provincial realism. Eliot's use of settings in rural or provincial life in the recent 'just' past is often read as nostalgic and conceived of as part of a conservative aesthetics of her realism.[2] We tend to think of Van Gogh's work,

[2] On nostalgia and the 'just' past in Eliot's work, see Ruth Livesey, *Writing the Stage Coach Nation: Locality on the Move in Nineteenth-Century British Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Helen Kingstone, *Victorian Narratives of the Recent Past: Memory, History, Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2017). For Eliot's works as representative of the ideological work of bourgeois capitalism, see Raymond Williams, 'The Knowable Community in George Eliot's Novels', *Novel*, 2 (1969), 255–68 (repr. in *The Country and the City* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973)); Catherine Gallagher, 'The Failure of Realism: *Felix Holt*', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 35 (1980), 372–84; Franco Moretti, *The Bourgeois: Between History and Literature* (London: Verso, 2013). As we shall see, Frederic Jameson's recent *The Antinomies of Realism* (London: Verso, 2013) makes Eliot's *Middlemarch* the exemplar of his argument about the work of high bourgeois realism — though it enriches and teases out the complexities of 'immanent transcendence' in that work.

conversely, as part of that broad shift towards a cosmopolitan and experimental modernism in the twentieth century, as writers and artists looked beyond Britain for new ways of seeing the world. The story of Van Gogh's passion for Eliot's art reminds us that the forms of nineteenth-century realist provincialism have within them a means of radically transforming the appreciation of the everyday and stimulating modernity at large.

In what ways does Eliot's fiction 'describe' a world in a manner akin to Van Gogh? In what follows here I want to focus on two areas of convergence for both artists. The aesthetic forms of both Van Gogh and Eliot, I argue, play with colour and with perspective to achieve a shift in the horizon of possibilities for depicting rural everyday life. First, Eliot's influence upon Van Gogh emphasizes the nature of her attention to the aesthetics of dullness — the humdrum of what she termed 'provincial life'. Writer and artist alike, I suggest, use colour as a means to transform their mutual aesthetic inheritance of the traditions of genre painting and the depiction of labouring life. For both Van Gogh and Eliot there is a radical aesthetics in the depiction of everyday subjects in full colour, rather than the monochrome or dusty brown tones of generic convention. Second, Van Gogh's repeated returns to Eliot's depiction of the lonely journey of Hetty Sorrel in her first full-length novel, *Adam Bede* (1859), enables us to look again at Eliot's use of temporal perspective and point of view. The deep recession of an avenue with lone figures walking to labour; the sudden foregrounding of a group of pollard trees by a canal: Van Gogh and Eliot share a struggle to depict landscapes in which human and other lives are visibly entangled. Again and again in his letters, Van Gogh returns to moments of redemptive failure in Eliot's narratives — scenes in which protagonists stumble off into the landscape, or sit down amid the trees to resign to life as it is, feeling the largeness of life beyond self, but accepting their place among the everyday. For all that Eliot's works are associated with the godlike distance of an omniscient narrator, Van Gogh reminds us that perspectival play and temporal foreshortening was an essential part of Eliot's realist mode, and that subjective distortion was of increasing interest to her over her career.

Eliot and Van Gogh are both innovators of a radiant realism: through the craft of their respective forms the objects of everyday existence — trees, chairs, boots, roads, earthenware pots — become luminous. For both artists the drive to achieve a realism of this sort was the aftermath of a Protestant faith that had shaped their formative years and ebbed away. It is no coincidence that writers seeking to unpack the complex relations of both Eliot and Van Gogh to the aesthetic development of realism reach for theological modes: where Debora Silverman explores Van Gogh's 'search for sacred art' in a secularizing world, Catherine Gallagher teases out the 'incarnational' tendencies of Eliot's transfiguration of idea and type into fleshly,

desiring realist individuals.[3] Even Frederic Jameson has recently dwelt on the 'immanent transcendence' of realism in the hands of his 'central exhibit', George Eliot, wherein the narrative (of *Middlemarch* in this case) offers secular redemption and resurrection. Turning aside from the legacies of pastoralism and Romanticism, neither artist asks the object to be read as a signifier for transcendence or another world, as synecdoche or symbol: instead they insist on their own immanent significance. The humble object calls out: we have a right to exist and to be seen as things in and of ourselves; look at us and see the spectrum of colour under the dust.

Realisms: black and white; full colour

Van Gogh's interest in Eliot has been noted by art historians since the 1970s and has been a regular feature of exhibition catalogues and studies of the young artist and the legacies of his time working in England.[4] The 2019 exhibition, 'Van Gogh and Britain', at Tate Britain has done much to revive public awareness of his self-confessed debts to nineteenth-century literature. The show featured a shelf of his favourite works in the first room and fiction by Eliot referenced in the exhibition on sale in the gift shop. It is, unfortunately, unsurprising how much more attention was given in subsequent press reports to Van Gogh's affection for the more instantly recognizable global English 'brands' of Dickens and Shakespeare, than for Eliot.

With a few exceptions which I will explore in more detail below, the art historical accounts of Eliot's influence on Van Gogh have emphasized his response to the thematic content of her works, and with good reason. The struggles of Hetty Sorrel, pregnant and abandoned in *Adam Bede*, resonate through the letters Van Gogh wrote in 1882 about his relationship with his model Sien Hoornik — herself a 'forsaken woman' with an infant and child when they met.[5] Van Gogh quotes Felix Holt's claim to have seen through the word 'failure' to a deeper meaning of success in life and, as a result, to have chosen the life of 'the people [...] [who] have *not* what are

[3] Debora Silverman, *Van Gogh and Gauguin: The Search for Sacred Art* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2001); Catherine Gallagher, 'George Eliot: Immanent Victorian', *Representations*, 90 (2005), 61–74 (p. 73); Jameson, pp. 222, 229.

[4] Ronald Pickvance, *English Influences on Vincent Van Gogh* (London: Arts Council, 1974), p. 20; Griselda Pollock and Fred Orton, *Vincent Van Gogh: Artist of His Time* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1978) reprints the Preface to *Felix Holt* as its opening epigraph to emphasize this nineteenth-century heritage; *Van Gogh in England: Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, ed. by Martin Bailey (London: Barbican Art Gallery, 1992), pp. 69–70, 87–89.

[5] See Letters 220 (23 April 1882), 224 (*c.* 7 May 1882), 232 (28 May 1882); and *Van Gogh and Britain*, ed. by Carol Jacobi (London: Tate Britain, 2019), pp. 80–82.

called the *refinements* of the rich' at formative moments in his career.[6] *Silas Marner, the Weaver of Raveloe* (1861), in turn, gradually changes shape under the shifting perspective of the young Van Gogh. During his attempts at serving as a preacher the novel was a touchstone of the power of provincial Nonconformist religious community. A convincing case has been made for *Silas Marner*'s subsequent influence on Van Gogh's depictions of weavers in Brabant in 1884.[7]

But Van Gogh's response to Eliot's work is also near to hand when the artist brings himself to discuss the formal underpinning of his art. Writing to his friend Anthon van Rappard in 1883, Van Gogh confessed 'I dislike writing or talking about *technique* in general', noting that 'my sympathies in the literary as well as the artistic sphere are drawn most strongly to those artists in whom I see the soul most at work':

> [Jozef] Israëls, for instance, is a clever technician, but [Antoine] Vollon is equally so — I like Israëls even more than Vollon, though, because in Israëls I see something more and something very different from the masterly rendering of fabrics, something very different from the light and shade, something very different from the colour — yet that something very different being achieved by that accurate rendering of the effect of light, fabric, colour. Eliot really has that 'something different', which I see, as I said, in Israëls much more than in Vollon, and Dickens has it too.
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> Does it lie in the choice of subjects? No, that too is another *consequence*. And what I'm getting at, among other things, is that Eliot is masterly in execution, but above and beyond that is that extra something of singular genius of which I would say: perhaps one improves by reading these books — or, these books have the power to invigorate. (Letter 332 (21 March 1883), emphases in original)

It is worth emphasizing here that to Van Gogh, Eliot's subject matter is a consequence, rather than a cause, of the soul being at work in art. Like Eliot, Jozef Israëls rose to popularity during the nineteenth century through his depiction of labouring rural life, renewing an appetite for genre painting. Eliot's own self-confessed debt to genre painting is significant, as we shall see, but the dynamic effect of her work, and Israëls's, on Van Gogh is a result of formal technique; of 'something very different' being '*achieved by* that accurate rendering of the effect of light, fabric, colour'.

[6] Letters 90 (September 1876), 324 (*c.* 4 March 1883), emphases in original; George Eliot, *Felix Holt, the Radical*, ed. by Peter Coveney (London: Penguin, 1972), pp. 556 (Chap. 45), 601 (Chap. 51).

[7] Letters 82 (12 May 1876), 146 (5 August 1878); for the weavers and *Silas Marner*, see *Van Gogh in England*, ed. by Bailey, p. 78, and *Van Gogh and Britain*, ed. by Jacobi, pp. 88–89.

Van Gogh's development as a painter involved an intense mediation of a variety of nineteenth-century realist literary forms and graphic arts. But the letter to van Rappard foreshadows something distinctive about Eliot's work in relation to Van Gogh's use of colour; associations which re-emerge in his later statement about *Bedroom in Arles*. The painting is in part, he writes, expressive of a desire to 'make simplicity with bright colours' — with something other than 'grey, white, black, and brown'. That allusion to the presumed simplicity of monochrome suggests Van Gogh is here thinking of the social realist 'black and whites' he encountered during his time working at Goupil's in London (*Van Gogh and Britain*, ed. by Jacobi, pp. 47–51). A wealth of scholarship has traced how Van Gogh's work was influenced by the wood engravings published in the *Graphic* and elsewhere, and subsequently amassed as part of his private collection. The figures, settings, and sharp-angled forms of Frank Holl, Gustave Doré, and Luke Fildes resonate with so many of his works, as the recent Tate exhibition demonstrates. In *The Public Soup Kitchen* (1883) and *The Dustman* (1882), for example, the thick streaks of graphite are like amplified strokes of an engraver's burin, loosening and blurring the original bite of the black and whites. The social subject matter — matter shared of course with Van Gogh's other great Victorian literary love, Dickens — remains; but Van Gogh's technique strains towards something larger and more numinous; something with the effect of simplicity but reaching towards a world in colour.

In his groundbreaking work on Van Gogh's English influences, Ronald Pickvance claims Van Gogh tended to keep Eliot and Dickens separate in his letters, concluding that this 'suggests that Vincent *kept* their worlds apart, or *saw* them as worlds apart'.[8] The grounds of that distinction, I would argue, lie in the very different modes of realism aligned with each author. Dickens's realism — contested and mediated as it always is by melodrama and Gothic traces — has strong affinities with the aesthetic of the black and whites underlined by Van Gogh's clustering of them together in his letters.[9] For Van Gogh, art in black and white sits alongside the realist novels of Hugo, Zola, and Dickens; works which he characterizes as 'figure painter books' (Letter 345 (21 May 1883)). This kind of monochromatic social realism conveys character as a matter of a few sharp-cut lines which nevertheless produce a portable figure capable of replication and remediation across artistic forms for generations to come. The memory of Little Dorrit and Daniel Doyce, for example, recur in a variety of Van Gogh's figure paintings, just as Frank Holl's engraving of a woman holding a baby in

[8] Pickvance, p. 20, emphases in original. He continues, 'or simply that he read them at different periods and thus avoided any possible overlap'.
[9] See, for instance, Letter 305 (26/27 January 1883): 'I often felt low in England for various reasons but *those*, the Black and White and Dickens, are things that make up for it all', emphasis in original.

'Gone' from the *Graphic* is reworked in numerous graphite drawings from 1882 and 1883.[10]

What Van Gogh associated with Eliot's realism, by contrast, is an aesthetic form in which character and landscape were inextricably entangled and indexed through colour. As Catherine Gallagher points out, Eliot is the nineteenth-century novelist 'most skeptical about categorical thought', including the portable replication of character 'types' ('Eliot: Immanent Victorian', pp. 63, 64). Eliot's essay 'The Natural History of German Life' (1856), written just as she was about to venture into her first experiments in fiction, contains her critique of Dickens's practice of 'figure painting' and portable character:

> While he can copy Mrs Plornish's colloquial style with the delicate accuracy of a sun-picture [...], he scarcely ever passes from the humorous and the external to the emotional and tragic, without becoming as transcendent in his unreality as he was a moment before in his artistic truthfulness.[11]

Dickens's works, Eliot argued, did not reflect the intertwined growth of character from 'harsh social relations'. In 'The Natural History of German Life' Eliot demands a new form of art that can depict life as weariness, pain, and labour, in which a body is shaped by, and shapes through, daily movement, a rural world of cottage, village, field. And the artist's task is not just to depict it, but to irradiate that existence through art such that it demands viewers stop and look and develop fibres of feeling towards its subjects: 'We want to be taught to feel, not for the heroic artisan or the sentimental peasant, but for the peasant in all his coarse apathy, and the artisan in all his suspicious selfishness' ('Natural History', p. 111). When Van Gogh turns to Eliot to illuminate his work he refers to landscapes and interiors of labour, rather than figure painting. What Van Gogh's paintings draw from the narrative techniques of Eliot's provincial realism, I suggest, is a depiction of environment seen from and infused by the perspective of the regular inhabitants who shape it through work; a world in which colour is a statement of a defiant claim to full subjectivity.

Eliot's writing, from the very outset of *Scenes of Clerical Life* (1857) and *Adam Bede*, exacted heavy demands on her contemporary readership by insisting on the centrality of the mediocre, the middling, the ugly, and rebarbatively unsympathetic to her art — and indeed all art. In her first published work of fiction, 'The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos

[10] On the 'portability' of Dickens's characters, see Juliet John, *Dickens and Mass Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).
[11] George Eliot, 'The Natural History of German Life', in *Selected Essays, Poems and Other Writings*, ed. by A. S. Byatt (London: Penguin, 1990), pp. 107–39 (p. 111).

Barton', the narrator confesses that the protagonist is 'in no respect an ideal or exceptional character':

> And perhaps I am doing a bold thing to bespeak your sympathy on behalf of a man who was so very far from remarkable, — a man whose virtues were not heroic, and who had no undetected crime within his breast; who had not the slightest mystery hanging about him, but was palpably and unmistakably commonplace; [...] 'An utterly uninteresting character!' I think I hear a lady reader exclaim — Mrs. Farthingale, for example, who prefers the ideal in fiction; to whom tragedy means ermine tippets, adultery, and murder; and comedy, the adventures of some personage who is quite a 'character'.
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> But, my dear madam, it is so very large a majority of your fellow-countrymen that are of this insignificant stamp. [...] Nay, is there not a pathos in their very insignificance — in our comparison of their dim and narrow existence with the glorious possibilities of that human nature which they share?[12]

From the very first of George Eliot's fictions, the narrator's identity takes shape as forceful insistence: you shall look at dullness and be drawn into a story centred on a character 'superlatively middling, the quintessential extract of mediocrity' ('Amos Barton', p. 40). Eliot's works shape apparently dull middleness as an aesthetic category, if not *the* aesthetic category, at the heart of modern realism. Reviewers at the time were struck by the bold move this represented for a first-time author. In 1860 the *Quarterly Review* complained, 'she knowingly forces *dis*agreeable people on us, and insists that we shall be interested in their story by the skill with which it is told.'[13] For that reviewer her realism consisted of 'photographing the minutest details of dullness' without even the dramatic intensity of the French novelists whose 'morbidity of tone' she adopts (p. 484).

Photography was not a visual analogy Eliot used when reflecting on her own work, however. Dickens, in her view, might veer from the monochrome delicacy of 'sun-pictures' to the gouged black lines of melodramatic character. But Eliot, of course, laid claim to the legacy of another sort of visual realism: the genre paintings of the Dutch golden age. In a famous aside in Chapter 17 of *Adam Bede*, the narrator turns to Dutch painting of the 1600s for the 'rare, precious quality of truth' she argues is the ethical imperative of art as 'the faithful representing of commonplace

[12] George Eliot, 'The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton', in *Scenes of Clerical Life*, ed. by Thomas A. Noble (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 3–64 (pp. 36–37 (Chap. 5)).
[13] 'Eliot's Novels', *Quarterly Review*, October 1860, pp. 469–99 (p. 476), emphasis in original.

things'.[14] The passage is an extended ekphrasis upon paintings by Gerard Dou, Teniers, and others that Eliot had seen on her recent visits to Munich and Vienna with George Henry Lewes.[15] Although, as Ruth Bernard Yeazell points out, Dutch painting, in Eliot's rendition, becomes a series of generic types ('that village wedding'; 'those old women scraping carrots'); Dou's *The Spinner's Prayer* (*c*. 1645) is evoked with particular and identifiable specificity (*Fig. 2*):[16]

Fig. 2: Gerard Dou, *The Spinner's Prayer*, *c*. 1645, oak, 27.5 × 28.5 cm, Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen — Alte Pinakothek Munich. CC-BY-SA 4.0.

[14] George Eliot, *Adam Bede* (London: Penguin, 1994), p. 176.
[15] Hugh Witemeyer, *George Eliot and the Visual Arts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), pp. 107–09; Ruth Bernard Yeazell, *Art of the Everyday: Dutch Painting and the Realist Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), pp. 96–98.
[16] Yeazell, p. 96. Witemeyer and Yeazell note the allusion here also to Dou's *Old Woman at a Window, Watering Flowers* (1660/65) which Eliot may have seen in Vienna on this trip. For Eliot's responses to the paintings, see *The Journals of George Eliot*, ed. by Margaret Harris and Judith Johnston (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 315; and *The George Eliot Letters*, ed. by Gordon S. Haight, 9 vols (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954–78), II: *1852–1858* (1954), 455. See also, Leonee Ormond, 'Mines of Misinformation: George Eliot and Old Master Paintings: Berlin, Munich, Vienna and Dresden, 1854–5 and 1858', *George Eliot Review Online* <https://georgeeliotreview.org/items/show/562> [accessed 15 December 2019].

> I turn, without shrinking, from cloud-borne angels, from prophets, sibyls, and heroic warriors, to an old women bending over her flower-pot, or eating her solitary dinner, while the noonday light, softened perhaps, by a screen of leaves, falls on her mob-cap, and just touches the rim of her spinning-wheel, and her stone jug, and all those cheap common things which are the precious necessaries of life to her. (*Adam Bede*, p. 176)

In Eliot's prose the narrator's gaze turns away from impossible divinities and sweeps on a strong diagonal downwards, following the angle of the sunlight as it comes through the window, to touch cap, spinning wheel, and then to the fallen jug and tumble of detritus on the cottage floor. The prose restages the compositional arrangement of Dou's painting and foregrounds the work of the light itself in the transubstantiation of the everyday into the sacred; 'cheap common things' are precious because necessary to the subject of the painting and illuminated by art. To return to Eliot's argument in 'Amos Barton', the 'dim and narrow' existence enjoyed by those with 'complexions more or less muddy' still partakes in the shared glory of the possibilities of human nature, irradiated by its light (p. 37). In *Adam Bede* the narrator argues not only for 'faithful representation' of commonplace things, but for artists who 'see beauty' in them 'and delight in showing how kindly the light of heaven falls on them' (p. 177).

Eliot's emphasis on the redemptive work of light in Dutch paintings represents an important revision of her attitude to genre painting. As a young woman in her twenties, the young Mary Ann Evans supported her father's work in the busy agricultural world of North Warwickshire. School long-finished, and running the household after her mother's death and elder sister's marriage, she compared her provincial existence to the immensely popular genre paintings of David Wilkie (1785–1841):

> Mine is too often a world such as Wilkie can so well paint, a *walled-in* world, furnished with all the details which he remembers so accurately, and the least interesting part thereof is often what I suppose must be designated the intelligent; but I deny that it even has a comparative claim to the appellation.[17]

Caught within the walls of provincial life, Mary Ann Evans plays on the use of frame and perspective in Wilkie's paintings and asks what it is to find yourself identified as a generic object when you know you are an individual subject. What is it like to live within a genre painting? The letter plays on the limits of individuation and subjectivity in Wilkie's work. His widely reproduced genre paintings, such as *The Blind Fiddler* (1806) or *Distraining*

[17] *Eliot Letters*, ed. by Haight, I: *1836–1851* (1954), 71 (27 October 1840), emphasis in original.

for Rent (1815) present groups of labouring and yeoman character types, captured in a moment of narrative scene-painting and distanced from the perspective of the viewer, lit and arranged as if on a stage set. Each character type occupies a legible role in the drama determined by age or dress or impairment or physiognomy while the joyous clutter of everyday items on every surface seems to offer richer scope for ambiguity and diverse meaning-making than the people themselves.

To live walled up within such a generic provincial life was — to the young Mary Ann Evans — equivalent to the erasure of colour and tone in existence. The images she held enshrined in her soul, she confided, were contaminated by a 'baleful touch' during this period, equivalent to 'a uniformity in the rays of light — it turns all objects to a pale lead colour' (*Eliot Letters*, I, 71). Although conscious of the socio-economic difference between her place as one of the rural middling sort and Thomas Carlyle's subjects, she drew an analogy between her grayscale provincial life and the aesthetic evisceration of Glasgow workers identified in *Chartism* (1839). She recalls Carlyle's 'picture' that 'to the artisans of Glasgow the world is not one of blue skies and a green carpet, but a world of copperas-fumes, low cellars, hard wages, "striking", and gin'.[18] Even Eliot's earliest reflections on art forms and subjectivity contain this radical demand: an insistence that a picture of the commonplace world is entitled to full colour; a recognition of the shared glory of the human potential for aesthetic experience.[19] Eliot's much later encounter with Dutch genre paintings of the golden age seems to have been crucial in her fashioning a realism of everyday life that could encompass colour, tone, and meditative inwardness amid the matter of working life. Dou, in particular, offered a radically different model of genre painting for Eliot as she composed *Adam Bede*: the transfiguration

[18] *Eliot Letters*, ed. by Haight, I, 71. The passage in Carlyle reads: 'Be it with reason or with unreason, too surely they do in verity find the time all out of joint; this world for them no home, but a dingy prison-house, of reckless unthrift, rebellion, rancour, indignation against themselves and against all men. Is it a green flowery world, with azure everlasting sky stretched over it, the work and government of a God; or a murky-simmering Tophet, of copperas-fumes, cotton-fuz, gin-riot, wrath and toil, created by a Demon, governed by a Demon?' (Thomas Carlyle, *Chartism* (London: Fraser, 1840), p. 35). Although Van Gogh frequently referred to the influence of Carlyle's work upon his thought, there is no evidence in the letters that he read *Chartism*, despite the significance of colour as politics here.

[19] Hugh Witemeyer provides an important corrective in relation to Eliot's use of colour, countering Peter Conrad's view that 'George Eliot cultivates a uniform greyness of tone, a concentration on the middling qualities of characters with their spots of commonness, and presents this as the whole truth about them' (Peter Conrad, *The Victorian Treasure-House* (London: Collins, 1973), p. 105). Witemeyer responds: 'This generalization reflects an inattention to both the human and the pictorial dimensions of George Eliot's art. Neither in her genre scenes nor, as we are about to see, in her landscapes did she cultivate a uniform grayness of tone' (p. 125).

of the everyday through the suspension of narrative and the ambiguity of expression and meaning.

In Van Gogh's *The Potato Eaters* (1885), colour, perspective, and the depiction of subjectivity within the genre painting tradition produce a parallel commentary to *Adam Bede* (*Fig. 3*). Colour — the colouration of everyday life — for Van Gogh, as well as Eliot, has sociopolitical content. Van Gogh worried over the direction of visual realism as he painted it, seeing a certain 'narrow-mindedness' and hesitancy in drawing in colour among his contemporaries. There was '*something*' other he was trying to reach in that painting, he wrote to his brother Theo, some other than 'realism in the sense of *literal* truth [...] *precise* drawing and *local* colour'. Unlike Van Gogh's contemporaries, the genre painters of the Dutch golden age — especially Gerard Dou, he thought — offered the precedent of 'the painting of darkness that is still colour' (Letter 495 (21 April 1885), emphases in original). Van Gogh overpainted the strokes of yellow ochre, red ochre, white, and vermillion that originally made up the knotty flesh of his figures to achieve the overall tone of 'something like a really dusty potato, unpeeled of course' (Letter 499 (2 May 1885)). But that seeming uniformity of surface tone — darkness, dustiness, an entanglement of subjects within the environment in which they labour — dissipates as the gaze is drawn to the faces of the couple on the left of the composition. The vermillion strokes in the woman's grey-white bonnet run down to the pink reflections of the lamplight in her eye as she gazes, lips parted in a mix of eroticism and anxiety, at her partner. Every feature of his profile, from full, jutting lips to receding forehead, would suggest, according to the nineteenth-century physiognomies

Fig. 3: Vincent Van Gogh, *The Potato Eaters*, 1885, oil on canvas, 82 × 114 cm. Credit: Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation).

Van Gogh knew so well, a generic 'type' of peasant, depicted merely as a labouring body. Yet his abstracted, liquid gaze is an argument for an inner life that is owed representation and individuation — that '*something*' different, I would argue, that Van Gogh found in the colours of Eliot's realism in *Adam Bede*, in particular.

Dull, dim, 'brown', dusty, work-worn, weather-beaten, dingy, 'and yet' — Chapter 17 of *Adam Bede* argues — rural workers are still subjects of erotic desire and abstracted reverie, 'kissed in secret' and filled with 'loving admiration'. There are echoes in the composition of *The Potato Eaters* of the love plot of *Adam Bede*, in which the white-capped Methodist preacher and factory worker, Dinah Morris, comes to a blushing consciousness of her desire for the carpenter Adam, while he is oblivious, infatuated by her cousin Hetty Sorrel. Dinah's eyes at the opening of the novel are described as 'shedding love, [rather] than making observations; they had the liquid look which tells that the mind is full of what it has to give out, rather than impressed by external objects' (p. 33 (Chap. 2)). Her unspoken desire for Adam, expressed across the book through flush, blush, 'deep rose', and glowing cheeks, denotes a movement from type to subjectivity through the changeable tints of flesh. Rereading *Adam Bede* through Van Gogh's *Potato Eaters* is a salutary reminder of the radicalism of such full-colour realism. Margaret Homans argues, in an influential essay on Dinah's blush, that to be a desiring subject in Eliot's work is 'the hallmark of bourgeois individualism'. 'The Natural History of German Life', Homans argues, is evidence that to Eliot 'the peasantry contains no individuals, only types; individualism is the hallmark of the middle class'.[20] But in their reworking of the tradition of genre paintings in their art forms, Van Gogh and Eliot break open the confining depiction of 'peasant' character type, leaning in to the composition to disclose the intimate, individuated rippling of colour and desire under what looks like a common dull surface. To be an individuated desiring female subject in an aesthetic context that so clearly evokes the peasant group portraits of Teniers — whether in the form of Van Gogh's painting, or at the harvest suppers of the Poysers' farm — is not to become a 'bourgeois individual': it is a radical democratic reframing of aesthetic tradition in which the depiction of peasant life could never encompass the erotic inwardness of conscious, unspoken desire.

An avenue with trees: the journey of life in perspective

In 1876 Van Gogh transcribed a poem by Eliot into a letter to Theo. Eliot had published the poem, which she titled 'Two Lovers', in her collection *The*

[20] Margaret Homans, 'Dinah's Blush, Maggie's Arm: Class, Gender, and Sexuality in George Eliot's Early Novels', *Victorian Studies*, 36 (1993), 155–78 (p. 167).

Legend of Jubal and Other Poems a couple of years earlier.[21] The poem tracks the long life course of a couple in six sparse stanzas, from rural courtship, marriage, to parenthood, and then alone again in old age:

> The red light shone upon the floor
> And made the space between them wide
> They drew their chairs up side by side
> Their pale cheeks joined, and said '*once more*'
> O, memories!
> O past that is! (Letter 99, (25 November 1876), emphasis in original)

Van Gogh retitled the poem in his letter, calling it 'The Journey of Life'. The new title is a telling indication of the interlacing of Van Gogh's and Eliot's aesthetics of perspective and pilgrimage. For both Eliot and Van Gogh, tracing the shaping force of the past within the present moment and trying to discern what Eliot termed 'the idea of a future life' were abiding concerns, visible in the subject matter and forms of their works.[22] Finding the vanishing point of futurity in their respective media was intertwined with the ever-present influence of their early religious beliefs. Settling where the eye should focus was, for both artists, a struggle that encompassed the limitations of form and an ethical question of finding a destination for agnostic pilgrims. Van Gogh's movement towards a distorted play on perspective in the Arles paintings — so visible in the yellow bedroom — is an important reminder of the vitality of Eliot's own experiments with subjectivism within the apparently disciplined frame of nineteenth-century realism. Throughout Eliot's works we can see moments in which the ethical imperative to acknowledge the entanglement of humanity with all life, here and now, is staged through a rejection of the distanced perspectival view and providential plotting one might associate with omniscient realism.

A long avenue of trees — a composition evoked so often by Eliot and Van Gogh across multiple sites — is never just an avenue of trees for either of these artists. The avenue of limes at Lowick Manor, for example, becomes the correlative of Dorothea's sense of mission and futurity at three important moments in *Middlemarch* (1871–72). First, she admires them as part of a broad landscape from the bow window of her new boudoir as she appreciates what she thinks the scope of her married life will be.[23] Later, on her return from a life-shrivelling honeymoon with Mr Casaubon in Rome,

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[21] George Eliot, 'Two Lovers', in *The Legend of Jubal and Other Poems* (London: Blackwood, 1874), pp. 232–34. The poem is dated 1866 but the title page does not ascribe it to an earlier publication in a periodical, unlike other poems in the collection.
[22] Debora Silverman, '*Pilgrim's Progress* and Vincent Van Gogh's Métier', in *Van Gogh in England*, ed. by Bailey, pp. 94–115.
[23] George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, ed. by W. J. Harvey (London: Penguin, 1987), p. 101 (Chap. 3).

'she saw the long avenue of limes lifting their trunks from a white earth, and spreading white branches against a dun and motionless sky. The distant flat shrank into uniform whiteness and a low-hanging uniformity of cloud' (p. 306 (Chap. 28)). Finally, in her great moment of renunciation, Dorothea opens her curtains at dawn after a sleepless night of misery

> towards the bit of road [...] outside the entrance gates. On the road there was a man with a bundle on his back and a woman carrying her baby; in the field she could see figures moving — perhaps the shepherd with his dog. Far off in the bending sky was the pearly light; and she felt the largeness of the world. (p. 846 (Chap. 80))

In each case the view denotes an ethical position — a statement on character — by fixing the perspective of Dorothea as viewer. The late acknowledgement of her entanglement in 'that involuntary, palpitating life' of nature (p. 846) — an acknowledgement of her sexual desire for the seemingly tainted Ladislaw — is realized through a shift in Dorothea's perspective. Her earlier misery about Casaubon and the disappearance of her sense of spiritual or intellectual mission is drawn down to the vanishing point of the snowy lime avenue. But Dorothea's resurrection to embodiment occurs through a sudden and almost surreal alteration in point of view. It is as if she swoops out of the window, past the avenue, and lands, earthbound, to see the scene of daily labour just outside the gate under that almost sentient pearly, bending sky. A secular redemption — an acknowledgement of a second chance at life — in this scene occurs in the vision of an entangled and foreshortened present close to the eye, rather than a distant vanishing point.

An avenue of trees in perspectival recession was a motif that endured throughout Van Gogh's career.[24] For Debora Silverman this is one indication of how Van Gogh's work is structured by a 'visual theology', evident in his first sermon, delivered at the Wesleyan Chapel in Richmond (1876) and enduring into his compositions even in the later years after his loss of conventional faith.[25] Van Gogh alluded to George Boughton's picture *Godspeed! Pilgrims Setting Out for Canterbury* (1874) in that first sermon and told his listeners how, in that painting, 'the pilgrim goes on sorrowful yet always rejoicing — sorrowful because it is so far off and the road so long. Hopeful as he looks up to the eternal city far away, resplendent in the evening glow.' Salvation, for the young Van Gogh, lies in the apprehension

[24] *Van Gogh and Britain*, ed. by Jacobi, p. 28. See, for example, *Road in Etten* (1881), *Alley Bordered by Trees* (1884), and *Les Alyscamps, Arles* (1888).
[25] Silverman, '*Pilgrim's Progress*', p. 102. George Eliot had written much of *Scenes of Clerical Life* and *Adam Bede* while living in the same Thameside suburb of Richmond twenty years earlier.

of deep perspective, and fixing the eye on the journey ahead.[26] Silverman draws on the explicitly theological source of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, to explore the shaping influences behind Van Gogh's interest in perspective and the journey of life.

But it was another, modern and secular, story, I would argue, that remained a continual point of reference for Van Gogh's construction of landscape and 'the journey of life' into the 1880s: Hetty Sorrel's sorrowful journeys in *Adam Bede*. In his letters to Theo, Van Gogh returns again and again to the significance of 'the girl in Adam Bede' and the landscape in which she appears, later pressing the book onto his friend van Rappard in the 1880s for similar reasons.[27] Heavily pregnant and clinging to a life she is desperate to end, Hetty's departure from Stoniton is described by Eliot in terms that are the direct inverse of Van Gogh's early evangelical prospect of salvation at dusk:

> The next morning she rose early, and taking only some milk and bread for her breakfast, set out to walk on the road towards Ashby, under a leaden-coloured sky, with a narrowing streak of yellow, like a departing hope, on the edge of the horizon. (p. 355 (Chap. 36))

Although the streak of light is *like* hope we are instructed that, after all, it is just a streak of light and ever narrowing and a whole day lies ahead. Hetty herself, we are told, tries to fix her eye on what is ahead: not that far eternal city the young Van Gogh exhorted his listeners to strive towards, but the accessible middle distance: 'always fixing on some tree or gate or projecting bush at the most distant visible point in the road as a goal, and feeling a faint joy when she had reached it' (p. 355). Hetty's attempts to look to futurity, meanwhile, are utterly crushed by the realization of actual physical distance and the burden of pregnancy.[28] When Hetty comes 'to the fourth milestone, the first she had happened to notice among the long grass by the roadside' (p. 355), her desperate pilgrimage is defeated by the infrastructure of the stagecoach and toll road network, designed for high-speed travel. Salvation, in *Adam Bede*, is never in the distant prospect of a future life. It comes, in the end for Hetty, in her intimate clasp of Dinah and Adam in the condemned cell at the end of the novel. She learns to feel

[26] The recent Tate exhibition featured Van Gogh's tree-lined avenues alongside George Boughton's painting *Godspeed! Pilgrims Setting Out for Canterbury* and Christina Rossetti's poem 'Up-Hill', the sources Van Gogh alludes to in his sermon (Letter 96 (3 November 1876)). This intertextual reference was foregrounded in the 2019 Tate exhibition: see *Van Gogh and Britain*, ed. by Jacobi, pp. 30–35.

[27] Letters 30 (6 March 1875), 44 (4 September 1875), 332 (*c.* 21 March 1883).

[28] For more on the significance of Hetty's walking, see Charlotte Mathieson, *Mobility in the Victorian Novel: Placing the Nation* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2015), pp. 19–56.

the consequences of her 'dreadful past' through its reflection in the face of others and their pitying love, rather than the distant perspective of the eternal city.

In the 1870s Van Gogh turned to the work of landscape painter Georges Michel (1763–1843) to visualize the scene of Hetty's departure:

> That landscape — in which a dull yellow sandy road leads over the hill to the village, with mud or whitewashed huts with green, moss-covered roofs and here and there a blackthorn, on either side brown heather and bunt and a grey sky, with a narrow white strip above the horizon — is by Michel. Except that the atmosphere is purer and nobler than in Michel. (Letter 30 (6 March 1875))

Although Van Gogh's word painting here is a brilliant evocation of Michel's work such as *The Storm* (1830) or *Landscape with Cottages* (after 1830) (*Fig. 4*), the yellow sandy road across moorland, past whitewashed huts have very little to do with Eliot's description of lush Loamshire in *Adam Bede*. In terms of composition, too, it is worth noting that in Michel's works the human figures are tiny marks on the road; the road itself a ribbon across a landscape seen from a high remove as if the artist were soaring somewhere

Fig. 4: Georges Michel, *Landscape with Cottages*, after 1830, oil on canvas, 78.5 × 99.2 cm, Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum. Art UK. Photo credit: Glasgow Museums.

above pedestrian life. Van Gogh, here in the 1870s — before he commits himself to painting — is drawn to 'the girl in Adam Bede', but evokes a landscape tradition in which she might be just a couple of brushstrokes against the moorland.

By the mid-1880s, when Van Gogh painted the works that have a clear correlation to Hetty's journey in *Adam Bede*, the composition was very different. In *Avenue of Poplars in Autumn* (1884) and *Autumn Landscape at Dusk* (1885) the figure of a single woman walking away from a homestead and away from the light is central to the composition (*Fig. 5*). The road itself, in both cases, spreads to the width of the canvas in the foreground, landing the viewer firmly on a level with the pedestrian. The trees in *Autumn Landscape at Dusk* lean in to frame the woman as she leaves the huddled roofs of the farm behind her. Indebted as Van Gogh undoubtedly was to the divine perspectives of Meindert Hobbema, his own experiments with such prospects in modernity emphasized the individuation and entanglement of all living things in view.[29] One needs, Van Gogh wrote to Theo, to draw 'a pollard willow as though it were a living being, which it actually is' and then 'the surroundings follow more or less naturally, if only one has focussed all one's attention on that one tree and hasn't rested until there was some life in it'.[30] Van Gogh's landscapes here strive to grant the same aesthetic individuation to arboreal life as to that of rural workers, breaking through archetype and aesthetic convention through a new form of attentiveness.

In *Adam Bede* that sense of arboreal life pressing and intertwining with human existence is a constant in the novel. The depiction of Hetty's 'Journey in Despair' is one in which the trees 'leaned towards each other' at the opening of the long lane to the woods, signalling to her a path to a pool in which to drown her sorrows; a world in which the prickly walls of gorse in a field shelter offer her the best comfort of the drive to survive and to endure that unites all life.[31] The material details of everydayness — a simple bush, or gate, bread and milk, gorse prickles, even Hetty's own arms, kissed by her, rediscovering a 'passionate love of life' after avoiding

[29] Van Gogh wrote of his admiration for Hobbema's *The Avenue at Middelharnis* (1689), which he saw at the National Gallery in London, where it still remains. The painting was included in 'Van Gogh and Britain' at Tate Britain, 2019.

[30] Letter 175 (12–15 October 1881). Pollock and Orton quote Derain praising Van Gogh's métier of entanglement and the analogy of his figure painting with arboreal life: 'their existence is solely conditioned by their environment' (p. 80). See, for example, *Path in the Garden of the Asylum* (1889).

[31] *Adam Bede*, p. 367 (Chap. 37). For more on Spinoza and entanglement in *Adam Bede*, see Ruth Livesey, 'Arboreal Thinking: George Eliot and the Matter of Life in *Adam Bede*', in *Anticipatory Materialisms in Literature and Philosophy, 1790–1930*, ed. by Jo Carruthers, Nour Dakkak, and Rebecca Spence (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2019), pp. 131–51.

Fig. 5: Vincent Van Gogh, *Avenue of Poplars in Autumn*, 1884, oil on canvas on panel, 99 × 65.7 cm. Credit: Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (purchased with support from the Vincent van Gogh Foundation and the Rembrandt Association).

jumping to her death — are made in and of themselves luminous as they become the objects that produce hope and despair. The seemingly humdrum here is the matter of life or death. *Adam Bede* is, as its epigraph on the title page from Wordsworth's *The Excursion* (1814) emphasizes, a novel concerned with 'nature's unambitious underwood | And flowers that prosper in the shade'. But Eliot's debt to Spinoza is evident in the novel's interest in the immanent significance of the matter of all life encountered in the

narrative, rather than more familiar Romantic aesthetics of transcendence. There is a strong sense in the novel, as I have argued elsewhere ('Arboreal Thinking'), that if we paused to listen we could hear a parallel life of beech, willow, coppice, thorn, which might offer something ethically superior to the shallow roots of humanism.

Looking to the trees as life itself, rather than as a means to convey a context for the human journey, is something which both Eliot and Van Gogh do to explore a world of immanent rather than transcendent value. Away from the arboreal life of *Adam Bede* — the story, after all, of a carpenter, a love affair in the woods, a baby buried in a coppice — Eliot's works play on the fine line between simile (Hetty is like a shallow rooted plant) and asserting the unity of common life, whether human or vegetal. 'Mr Gilfil's Love-Story' — another work of Eliot's much admired by Van Gogh — concludes that 'it is with men as with trees':

> If you lop off their finest branches, into which they were pouring their young life-juice, the wounds will be healed over with some rough boss, some odd excrescence; and what might have been a grand tree expanding into liberal shade, is but a whimsical misshapen trunk. Many an irritating fault, many an unlovely oddity, has come of a hard sorrow, which has crushed and maimed the nature just when it was expanding into plenteous beauty; and the trivial erring life which we visit with our harsh blame, may be but as the unsteady motion of a man whose best limb is withered. And so the dear old Vicar, though he had something of the knotted whimsical character of the poor lopped oak, had yet been sketched out by nature as a noble tree.[32]

The simile of the lopped or pollard tree, which recurs several times in *Scenes of Clerical Life*, invites us to see the traces of narrative temporality in the object as it stands before us: Eliot's attentive realism presents the synchronic picture of an object or person and asks readers to understand each line of the thing presented as the outcome of diachronic experience. Close depiction of anything — old man, tree, a jug, some shoes — should tell of the multitude of touches, falls, cuts, that have made it what it is. Reversing the direction of Eliot's simile, Van Gogh wrote 'in all of nature, in trees for instance, I see expression and a soul, as it were. A row of pollard willows sometimes resembles a procession of orphan men.'[33] In *Woman Peeling Potatoes* (1881), the procession of stunted old pollard trees outside the window ends with the old woman indoors, her gnarled fingers and bumpy nose

[32] George Eliot, 'Mr Gilfil's Love-Story', in *Scenes of Clerical Life*, ed. by Noble, pp. 65–166 (p. 166).

[33] Letter 292 (10 December 1882). The original reads '*weesmannen*', also translated as elderly/almshouse men.

echoing the rough trunks of the trees, while the chalk lines of her cap mirror the radiating twiggy fingers of the new branches. Landscape, interior, figure, are entangled in a composition that nods to Eliot's writing on Dutch art in its immanent secularism as well as the work of Gerard Dou himself.

Van Gogh's later *Pollard Willows at Sunset* (1888) turns sideways on to the avenue of trees that might form a conventional perspective (*Fig. 6*).[34] Its composition questions the traditions of which objects are considered worthy of the gaze, placing the knotted, misshaped willows, scarred by human labour, at its centre. There is a clear debt to Van Gogh's interest in Japanese art in the flattened perspective, the high horizon, the careful awkwardness of the three trees. But the close affinity between the stalky straws of the sun's rays and the marsh grasses of the foreground is a radical move away from the futurity of perspective in his early avenues. Writing of the slightly later drawing 'Old Vineyard with Peasant Woman' (1890), Griselda Pollock and Fred Orton observe that the 'rhythm of lines'

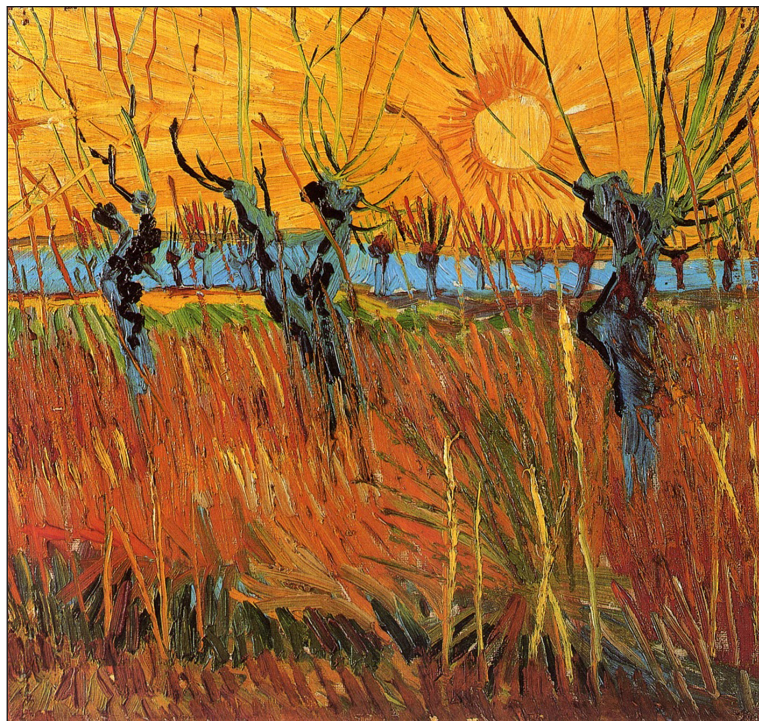

Fig. 6: Vincent Van Gogh, *Pollard Willows at Sunset*, 1888, oil on canvas mounted on cardboard, 31.6 × 34.3 cm, Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo. Wikimedia Commons.

[34] See also the earlier *Landscape with Pollard Willows* (1884) for this idea of the human mirroring the life of trees.

> draw all forms of life and objects into an indivisible unity; they construct an interrelated totality through flowing lines that convey movement and substance, growth and most importantly, claim this figure as part of and continuous with this totality. (p. 75)

No longer asking viewers to affix their eyes on the distant horizon — to think of life as progress — Van Gogh's immanent landscape requires a valuation of the dull everyday objects of a shared, entangled existence and to accept our part in their formation. Van Gogh's beloved *Felix Holt* is particularly important in this development of a challenge to perspective. Van Gogh returned repeatedly in his letters to Felix's assertion that 'I'm proof against that word failure. I've seen behind it' (p. 556 (Chap. 45)). His life story is that of the man who rejects a future as a 'doctor on horseback', while his love, Esther, turns her back on the view from the country house terrace for a life of small things seen on foot: the perspective of the burdened pedestrian. *Felix Holt* quite deliberately unpicks the swift, elevated view from the passing mail coach that it opens with, chapter by chapter, to imagine a worked landscape from the point of view of its eponymous hero, striding on foot away from upward social mobility and towards a life of labour.

Van Gogh's appropriation of *Felix Holt* invites us to reconsider what the aesthetic form of seeing behind the word 'failure' might be; what happens when you look away, deliberately, from life as progress? Felix rejects the rising trajectory of leaving the provincial town of Treby for a professional life in the city; his radicalism, such as it is, is one of scale and perspective, turning away from national party politics for attention to 'care for very small things, such as never will be known beyond a few workshops and garrets' (p. 557). The attention must be drawn, Felix argues, to the experiential life of the workers — muddy boots, floorboards, mugs of beer — and to care for that life in order to revalue the social order. We have already seen how Van Gogh imagined *Bedroom in Arles* as a recreation of *Felix Holt*: a statement of the entitlement of everyday working life to full colour realism. The deliberately flattened and foreshortened perspective of that composition goes further in its insistent claim that each small simple object in the interior is appreciated independently, and yet creates an impression of a whole way of life.[35] Writing to Theo about the first version of the painting, Van Gogh noted that 'the shadows and cast shadows are removed; it's coloured in flat, plain tints like Japanese prints' (Letter 705 (16 October 1888)). The shadowless forms of chair, table, jug, bed, each

[35] John L. Ward, 'A Reexamination of Van Gogh's Pictorial Space', *Art Bulletin*, 58 (1976), 593–604. See also Pollock and Orton on how the compositional challenges of the bedroom invite the active participation of viewer in reconstructing the life-world it evokes (p. 59).

bounded by a thick outline, float untethered from the splaying lines of the floorboards. They express, John Ward suggests, the urge to 'represent space and yet make all of the forms hold the picture surface' (p. 603). This spatial immediacy of the everyday objects in the painting is a democratic aesthetic. Seeing behind the word 'failure', Van Gogh grants attention and value to the flat surface of the now as it tells of itself, rather than lining objects up as waymarkers towards a distant aspiration.

Felix Holt is, of course, a novel, and thus takes a form in which temporality and sequence, foreground and background, is unavoidable. Although, as we have seen, Eliot's realism encompasses experiment with scale and point of view that unsettles conventional understandings of omniscient realism: in her early novels there is always a background and a foreground. Exceptional individuals, such as Felix Holt (or Adam Bede or Dinah Morris) are granted detailed attention. Dredge, Brindle, Gills, Old Sleck — the miners and stonecutters of Sproxton — are voices in a crowd marked 'labourers'. But if Eliot's realism consistently fails to democratize subjectivity beyond the skilled artisan, it does challenge the forms of plot that wind the realist novel so tightly to the era of high capitalism. Felix Holt ends up moving to a new town, out of communication with the world, never having much of an effect; Dorothea Brooke ends up misunderstood with nearly invisible 'incalculably diffusive' influence (*Middlemarch*, p. 896 (Finale)); Daniel Deronda leaves — but to where? Eliot's fiction makes the plot of sort-of-failure central to the modern novel; a counter-narrative to the progressive plots of nineteenth-century self-help and improvement. That manipulation of expectation and disappointment — that staging of uncertain destinations — we see again and again in her novels redirects attention from the end destination to the entangled life of the middle. If Eliot, as Van Gogh suggests, enables an art form that can see behind the word 'failure', then that form might be a type of realism as synchronic totality: a form of realism resistant to, but imperilled by, the diachronic pressure of narrative in which, at the end, characters rise or fall.

In a signally important moment in *Felix Holt*, which seems echoed in Van Gogh's late paintings of the paths and woods of the asylum at St Remy, Felix wanders off with his love, Esther, into a plantation of young birches, and they sit amid the moss and the leaves and the felled old trunks.[36] We are saved from betraying our initial ideals, Felix argues, 'by making our future present to ourselves' (p. 365 (Chap. 27)). This power of 'good strong terrible vision' — of evading the temporal nature of human

[36] There may be a case to be made for seeing Van Gogh's paintings *Path in the Garden of the Asylum* (1889) and *The Stone Bench in the Asylum* (1889) in conversation with this realization in *Felix Holt*.

development — represents hope of preserving one's 'best self'.[37] The novel restates this rejection of a recessive temporal perspective at its close. The epigraph to the Epilogue reads, in a direct mirroring of Eliot's poem 'Two Lovers', 'Our finest hope is finest memory;|And those who love in age think youth is happy,|Because it has a life to fill with love' (p. 604). Although we might think of Eliot's realism in relation to ideas of descent, heredity, and the touch of a distant past upon the present, such moments offer us a very different idea of order and sequence. Eliot's 'journey of life' offers a flattened plane of temporal perspective in which past and future must be seen as immanent in the now: 'O past that is!', the lyric speaker observes in Eliot's 'Two Lovers'. Appropriated by Van Gogh as 'The Journey of Life', Eliot's works offer a means to explore the coexistence of past, present, and future through the strong envisioning of a synchronic everyday that resists the diachronic pressure of narrative. The past is not a blank space behind us and neither is the future a luminous dot on the horizon; life is a coexistent plane that must be realized in its totality on page and on canvas.[38]

Eliot was supremely conscious of working with art forms inherently dependent on temporality and development. She was writing at the end of nearly a century of debate readdressing the concept of *ut pictura poesis* in the wake of Lessing's *Laocoön*, a work, Hugh Witemeyer argues, that helped Eliot accept 'if not rejoice' in the 'temporal nature of her medium' (p. 43). Nevertheless, her works play on the tensions between the synchronic significance of a picture and the diachronic force of narrative, striving to find something that is both. The poem transcribed by Van Gogh serves as a good example of this in that 'Two Lovers' combines synchronic scenes with diachronic serial development across its six self-contained stanzas, each capturing a moment in the journey of life. The final verse then recapitulates longitudinal time in an immanent present through colour and spatial arrangement. The 'red light [...] upon the floor' has an active role in forcing open the perspective of the cottage interior such that a narrow span of boards is made a wide space; the dragging of wooden chairs to cross it and unite 'pale cheeks', a testament to the enduring power of love to overcome time itself. This technique of moving between narrative temporality and visual immanence is one ever-present within Eliot's work. Again and again her works move from a static scene-painting into action. From the opening evocation of Shepperton Church in 'Amos Barton' to the dissolving pastoral views that frame chapter openings in *Adam Bede*, to the playful critical appreciation — 'Was she beautiful or not beautiful?' — that opens *Daniel*

[37] *Felix Holt*, p. 366. Gallagher's reading of this passage in relation to Matthew Arnold's work has had a significant influence on readings of the novel as anti-radical. See Gallagher, 'The Failure of Realism: *Felix Holt*'.

[38] On Eliot's flattened ontological plane, see S. Pearl Brilmyer, '"The Natural History of My Inward Self": Sensing Character in George Eliot's *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*', *PMLA*, 129 (2014), 35–51 (p. 36).

Deronda (1876), the evocation of a painting that then loosens into life and movement is a constant of Eliot's style.

What can this movement between the pictorial and the narrative, synchronic and diachronic, in Eliot's work offer to an understanding of realism in its broadest terms? How might this, and a richer understanding of her influence on Van Gogh, break a rather stale critical confinement of her work as an exemplar of conservative bourgeois form? In 2013 both Frederic Jameson and Franco Moretti used Eliot's *Middlemarch* to return to the Marxist critical traditions of novel analysis.[39] Moretti restates in new terms the argument that nineteenth-century realism is invested in creating bourgeois ideals of everyday existence. Eliot's *Middlemarch*, he contends, with usual provocation, is a 'collection of fillers' in which background has conquered foreground, providing the kind of narrative regularity compatible with bourgeois life (Moretti, pp. 79–81). Taking a different path, Jameson nominates Eliot as the 'central exhibit' in his discussion of how realism is structured by a dialectic of temporality: an opposition between synchronic 'affect' and diachronic récit (pp. 222, 10). Jameson draws attention to how the 'scenic present' in realist fiction — and above all in Eliot's works — 'abhors the other temporalities which constitute the force of the récit or tale in the first place' (p. 11). In simpler terms, immanent moments of scene-painting in her novels resist and threaten to overpower the time-bound requirements of plot progression.

Van Gogh's readings of Eliot give us two ways of seeing her work that is lost to Moretti and Jameson. First, his letters and his reuse of her work reflect a nineteenth-century practice of extracting and copying of key scenes in a novel as a kind of adaptive criticism. The novel, in this light, is less a claim to aesthetic totality than a document ripe with moments destined for selective rereading. These lengthy moments, as we can see in Van Gogh's letters and in nineteenth-century reviews and anthologies, were nearly always those of Jameson's affective 'scenic present': word paintings of scenes of heightened emotion set in a particular location. What Moretti terms 'filler' is nothing less than the commitment of the nineteenth-century novel to sacred feeling in the secular everyday. And while these nineteenth-century reading practices do not contradict Jameson's argument about the dialectic form of *Middlemarch*, the habit of extracting and consuming the scenic present of novels and just about remembering the plot (or not) rids that dynamic of anxiety. Realism is presented to and remembered by nineteenth-century readers as subjective feeling, not objective plot.

The final thing Van Gogh's reading of Eliot reminds us of, though, is that her early work embodied an explicitly radical aesthetic project that

[39] Jameson is refreshingly explicit about the 'wobbly' nature of realism as a critical category: 'so that at length we find we are thinking, not about realism, but about its emergence; not about the thing itself, but about its dissolution' (p. 1).

inspired many of the forms of experimental modernism. Van Gogh did read *Middlemarch* in 1883, but it was not this great novel — in which 'Eliot analyses like Balzac or Zola, but English situations and with an English feeling' — that inspired him (Letter 316 (15 February 1883)). Perhaps our standard literary critical genealogies have led us astray in seeing Eliot's shaping force on modernism through Henry James's ambivalent, underacknowledged debt to her late fiction. It is Eliot's earlier fictions, by contrast, that Van Gogh assimilated; novels that dared to depict the matter of life never before given full aesthetic representation in literature: skilled labourers, tenant farmers, village schoolteachers, lower-middle-class clerics; 'tiresome people [...], tradespeople and other small folk', the *Quarterly Review* termed it ('Eliot's Novels', p. 484). In the critical conventions of literary history, Eliot's subject matter in the early novels is just the petty bourgeois prequel to the interminable forms of the high bourgeois novel, riven by its own contradictions. But seeing Eliot's radiant realism afresh, through Van Gogh, reminds us of the intermedial forms of her work. Eliot takes and unmakes the conventions of art history to blast open conventions of colour and perspective in the painting of everyday life and asks, what colour is a stoneware jug, an old letter, a collection of linen, to those who have loved and laboured for it? What is it like to *be* the pretty dairymaid, the fine labouring man, the lone figure on a hillside, bent under his burden at sunset, and what do you see in a single moment that tells of your 'journey of life'?