
George Eliot's Web: Music and Social Unity in *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda*

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In George Eliot's writing, music transcends the role of a mere source of pleasure or mode of self-expression, functioning as an access to human thought and interaction, and eventually becoming a model for a social structure. Eliot creates a vision in which the politician is a conductor of individual members of society, just as a musical conductor directs the individual members of an orchestra. Preceding her finished concept, however, she first presents music as the tool of choice for stirring an individual to the knowledge of his role in the larger framework of a community. Eliot suggests that the universal appeal of music—to both those educated and those uneducated in music or in general—makes it an ideal model of communication to large groups of people. Though the political implications are not prominent in her earlier works, one can trace the constant importance of music to Eliot as she presents and processes her concept of music, moving from a single person's life to the life of society as a whole.

In *The Mill on the Floss*, Eliot explores the inspiration and improvement music offers, suggesting that its emotional impact has educational merits that purely rational experience may not provide. The emotionally persuasive element of music may be positive when used for inciting individuals to strive for a better reality. For example, when trying to convince Maggie of the value of music, Phillip Wakem tells her, "Certain strains of music affect me so strangely—I can never hear them without their changing my whole attitude of mind for a time, and if the effect would last I might be capable of heroisms."¹ Music widens Phillip's view of the world, inspiring him to new thoughts and providing temporary courage. For a figure like Phillip, such a strong statement reveals music's potent ability to raise the thoughts of the individual. Furthermore, Eliot presents music as a possible means of satiating destructive personal desires. Maggie tells her cousin, "I think I should have no other mortal wants, if I could always have plenty of music. It seems to infuse strength into my limbs and ideas into my brain. Life seems to go on without effort, when I am filled with music."² In addition to being an inspiring and motivating force, music figures as a life source, giving a higher focus that displaces destructive impulses and allows the individual to rise above a complete obligation to desire. Later, Eliot uses this characteristic of music to cause the individual to consider his or her community, and by extension the rest of mankind, as a higher focus. Eliot suggests in later novels that the concept of society as a unified whole could affect the individual in the same way that music does, giving a new meaning, purpose, and importance to actions.

In *The Mill on the Floss*, Eliot also begins to touch on music as a force that unifies groups of people. While she uses music primarily to explore and describe Maggie Tulliver's psychological and emotional conflicts, Eliot also slips in passages where the reader catches a glimpse of the larger vision that is to come in later novels. For example, she describes a duet between two lovers by stating,

Surely the only courtship unshaken by doubts and fears must be that in which the lovers can sing together. The sense of mutual fitness that springs from the two deep notes fulfilling expectation just at the right moment between the notes of the silvery soprano, from the perfect accord of descending thirds and fifths, from the preconcerted loving chase of a fugue, is likely enough to supersede any immediate demand for less impassioned forms of agreement. The contralto will not care to catechise the bass; the tenor will foresee no embarrassing dearth of remark in evenings spent with the lovely soprano. In the provinces, too, where music was so scarce in that remote time, how could the musical people avoid falling in love with each other? Even political principle must have been in danger of relaxation under such circumstances; and a violin faithful to rotten boroughs must have been tempted to fraternise in a demoralising way with a reforming violoncello.³

Though the passage opens with two lovers, it progresses to describe a utopian setting where the act of playing music brings an otherwise discordant group into perfect harmony. The shared aesthetic experience of the performance dwarfs individual differences. Even if uttered in jest or in passing, the comment that “political principle must have been in danger of relaxation under such circumstances” shows Eliot's consideration of music's capacity to surpass other concerns, even to the point of influencing or overriding tensions or conflicts.

This view of music as intertwined with political power grows in importance in Eliot's novels, becoming a central theme in two of her later novels, *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda*. In these two works, Eliot expands music's role, such that it begins to act as a unifying and educating force within a community and, by extension, within society. Illustrating society as a web of interactions, she introduces music as a means of both building and changing this web. She depicts the musician—a sensitive and morally aware individual—as the person with the ability to incite political and social change. In *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda*, music thus becomes a key instrument of social cohesion.

The Web

To comprehend the musician's role in Eliot's idealized community, one must first understand her vision of a coherent, interdependent society. Her vision plays out in the image of humanity as a web of interconnections, where the overall stability is dependent on the cumulative effects of individual relationships and actions.

In *Middlemarch*, Eliot's self-conscious presentation of the web hints at a slight uncertainty or nervousness regarding the reader's comprehension and reaction. The measured, cautious detailing of her reasoning indicates that she feels the need to walk the reader through her thought processes to ensure a full understanding of her proposition.

As Eliot builds her social theory, she carefully separates herself from historians who attempt to give an overarching view and summary of history. In a mock apologetic tone, she states, “I at least have so much to do in unraveling certain human lots, and seeing how they were woven and interwoven, that all the light I can command must be concentrated on this particular web, and not dispersed over that tempting range of relevancies called the universe.”⁴ She implies that the larger picture of life is contained accurately in the smaller selection, and that to look too widely at the world somehow spreads one's analysis too thin over a

“tempting range of relevancies.” Eliot reinforces the need for close inspection of a certain portion of the web by arguing, “In watching effects, if only of an electric battery, it is often necessary to change our pace and examine a particular mixture or group at some distance from the point where the movement we are interested in was set up.”⁵ Standing outside of a community gives a sense of perspective that very few of the characters within the community achieve. Because of this, Eliot can see potential where many of the characters cannot, allowing her to present her theory of society and test her prescription for change.

Eliot also carefully sets her particular stories against backgrounds of unrest, as if to reinforce the need for change. In *Middlemarch*, rampant social unrest involving the farming classes causes even political novices like Mr. Brooke to write treatises on “machine-breaking and rick-burning.”⁶ The novel’s intense engagement with social and political reform combines with the self-conscious offering of a new idea of society, allowing Eliot gently to call attention to the painfully conflicted current arrangement while suggesting a radical restructuring.

Within this small focus, however, Eliot also covers the larger picture by implying that the change of the structure must stem from smaller, individual parts, extending to change society as a whole. Eliot clarifies that her portraits only lay out simple examples of her proposed organization. She strongly cautions against over generalizing, warning that “the fragment of a life, however typical, is not the sample of an even web.”⁷ By emphasizing that the story she relates is merely one in a myriad of tales of human experience, Eliot requires the reader to look only within the particular framework she has set forth. This situation is not to be seen as all-encompassing, and these characters are not meant to sum up all of humankind. Instead, Eliot wishes to present a certain way of looking at life, where an individual contextualizes and looks beyond his or her own fate to see, understand, and share in the plights, joys, and experiences of others, through the interconnection of a new, ideal community.

By the time Eliot addresses music in *Daniel Deronda*, her tone contains no uncertainty or hesitancy concerning the political possibilities of the image of society as a cohesive web. Towards the end of the novel, Eliot provides her final, completed vision of a society or nation as an organic whole. Mordecai Cohen states,

I believe in a growth, a passage, and a new unfolding of life whereof the seed is more perfect, more charged with the elements that are pregnant with diviner form. The life of a people grows, it is knit together and yet expanded, in joy and sorrow, in thought and action; it absorbs the thought of other nations into its own forms, and gives back the thought as new wealth to the world; it is a power and an organ in the great body of the actions.⁸

In effect, Mordecai is able to stand outside of the body of his people—much as the narrator in *Middlemarch* does—in order to better visualize the growth and interaction of the group. He can see that not only is the nation a unified “organ” composed of people, but also that this individual organ works in exchange and in agreement with the other nations surrounding it, creating a micro- and macro-scale version of the same web. This understanding of personal and international interaction is essential to Mordecai’s effectiveness as a hopeful political and national leader. Further explaining the significance of this type of body, Mordecai explains: “Now, in complete unity a part possesses the whole as the whole possesses every part: and in this way human life is tending toward the image of the Supreme Unity: for as our life becomes more spiritual by capacity of thought, and joy therein, possession tends to become more universal.”⁹ The awareness of the part is vital to the whole’s ability to function correctly. This idea recalls the excerpt from *The Mill on the Floss* quoted earlier, where individual differences are set aside for the sake of the musical performance. Like the experience of being a part of a musical whole, the individual’s realization that he is part of a larger body causes him to align his interests with those of the community.

Art and the Artist in Society

As she establishes the web in *Middlemarch*, Eliot also painstakingly lays out her concept of the artist's importance to society, selecting the musician as the only artist able to communicate effectively with the larger public. Voicing her objections to graphic art as a means of communication, she provides the groundwork for her later construction of music as an avenue of change. Before citing music as a method of education and a model for inciting radical social transformation, she first establishes the reason that music surpasses other types of art as an efficient tool.

Eliot characterizes visual art as esoteric and exclusive by nature. True appreciation of graphic art seems to require some sort of education. For example, Dorothea Brooke—an otherwise observant and sensitive individual—can find no meaning or significance in the art that her uncle collects. This inability to understand these works of art stems from the fact that “she ha[s] never been taught how she could bring them into any sort of relevance with her life.”¹⁰ Furthermore, Dorothea is aware that art excludes much of mankind, and this knowledge spoils any shred of gratification she might receive from visual art. She tells Will, “I should like to make life beautiful—I mean everybody's life. And then all this immense expense of art, that seems somehow to lie outside life and to make it not better for the world, pains one. It spoils my enjoyment of anything when I am made to think that most people are shut out from it.”¹¹ Eliot makes it clear that the intellectual element of art relegates it to specific audiences, making it an unsatisfactory method for social change.

A secondary objection to art as a universal tool lies in its modification and restriction of reality. In *Middlemarch*, both Eliot, as the narrative voice, and Will Ladislaw express irritation at the attempt to “capture” real life in a static frame. When Naumann wants to paint a portrait of Dorothea, Will criticizes the artist's egoism by expressing exasperation at his friend's shallow belief that “painting her was the chief outcome of her existence—the divinity passing into higher completeness and all but exhausted in the act of covering your bit of canvas.” He argues for the inferiority of painting, proclaiming that such attempts at art “perturb and dull conceptions instead of raising them,”¹² and later tells Dorothea that he should not like to get into the artist's “way of looking at the world entirely from the studio point of view.”¹³ Eliot wishes to avoid the self-absorbed and elitist attitudes that could accompany the production, collection, and observation of graphic art. She does not object to this type of art in general, but firmly expresses her opinion that it is not a medium fit for communication with the general public.

Though Eliot discredits graphic art as a social tool, the artistic nature is not set aside. Instead, Eliot uses the critique of graphic art to open a discourse on the nature of the artist and the communication intrinsic in the creation of art. In a discussion following Dorothea's voiced frustration with static art, Will Ladislaw tells her,

To be a poet is to have a soul so quick to discern, that no shade of quality escapes it, and so quick to feel, that discernment is but a hand playing with finely ordered variety on the chords of emotion—a soul in which knowledge passes instantaneously into feeling and feeling flashes back as a new organ of knowledge.¹⁴

Here, the artist must have “discernment”—something beyond the skill of mere observation—if the art is to evoke understanding and compassion in the viewer. Because not everyone can understand the dialogue ongoing between the painter and his painting, graphic art may not be reciprocal for every viewer. Such art is not necessarily bad, but, when approached by the unlearned citizen, it will remain silent and not affect that individual. In this case, the physical product of the “soul in which knowledge passes instantaneously into feeling and feeling flashes back as a new organ of knowledge” may not be enough to communicate knowledge of the world to every individual.

In this passage, the musical imagery is extremely important. An individual's mind—the part where the “discernment” occurs—is only the tool by which the emotions are played upon like a musical instrument. The emitted “knowledge,” like music, is a result of the combination of intellectual and emotional intuition. While graphic art is deliberate in the approach and creation, music is a fluid and flexible outpouring of the combined powers of intellect and emotion. This abstract nature separates music dramatically from graphic art and makes it more adaptable for communication.

Having presented her reservations regarding graphic art's usefulness in inciting change, Eliot begins to build a case for music's potential for such a role. Eliot presents a metaphoric poem in the head note of Chapter 31 of *Middlemarch* that could be a model of how a musician functions:

How will you know the pitch of that great bell
Too large for you to stir? Let but a flute
Play 'neath the fine-mixed metal: listen close
Till the right note flows forth, a silvery rill:
Then shall the huge bell tremble—then the mass
With myriad waves concurrent shall respond
In low soft unison.¹⁵

This heading precedes a chapter in which Rosamond Vincy's interaction with Tertius Lydgate causes both gossip and concern. In seemingly trivial social interactions, *Middlemarch* is extremely in touch with its interior workings, but Eliot desires a higher calling for this close-knit aspect of the community. Prior to this scene, Eliot already has begun to present the artist as the one able to incite change. Now, the musical metaphor makes clear the possibility for the spread of information and understanding. If the musician were the flute in this poem, the metaphor would draw a direct parallel between his performance and the movement of a larger body—namely, the community in which he lives—creating a more meaningful reverberation than that produced by gossip. Just as the flute sets the whole bell vibrating, the musician, when put in a place of prominence in a finely-tuned environment, would send shivers and waves of his own inspiration and thought through the people that surround him. As one who already transmits ideas through an abstract medium, the musician is well prepared to understand effective methods of communication. Furthermore, Eliot believes that the musician innately has a higher awareness than the average individual of the needs and emotions of others, making him an anchoring point within the completed web. Rather than simply focusing on his own perceptions or desires, he has the ability to view everything around him in sympathetic and musical terms, lending him a second sight that Eliot wishes to harness for social benefit.

Daniel Deronda's experience in the Jewish temple exemplifies Eliot's belief in music's power to awaken the individual's mind to his participation in a larger scheme. Though he does not understand a large portion of the liturgy, the intimacy and depth of the moment transcend language and cultural barriers, bringing Deronda into unity with those around him:

The most powerful movement of feeling with a liturgy is the prayer which seeks for nothing special, but is a yearning to escape from the limitations of our own weakness and an invocation of all Good to enter and abide with us; or else a self-oblivious lifting up of gladness, a *Gloria in excelsis* that such Good exists; both the yearning and the exultation gathering their utmost force from the sense of communion in a form which has expressed them both, for long generations of struggling fellow-men.

He is stuck tremendously by

the chant of the Chazan's or Reader's grand wide-ranging voice with its passage from monotony to sudden cries, the outburst of sweet boys' voices from the little quire, the

devotional swaying of men's bodies backwards and forwards, the very commonness of the building and shabbiness of the scene where a national faith, which had penetrated the thinking of half the world, and moulded the splendid forms of that world's religion, was finding a remote, obscure echo—all were blent for him as one expression of a binding history, tragic and yet glorious....The whole scene was a coherent strain.¹⁶

Again, a musical experience calls to mind a higher unity and heightens the individual's perception of being part of "a national faith," "one expression," and "a coherent strain." Rather than depicting individuals isolated in their own lives and difficulties, the entire tableau blends into one mysterious, aching cry, unifying past and present with the future, merging pain and hope, age and youth. The unification of a people through a religion and a liturgy, across ages and in spite of trials, embodies what Eliot desires to create for the modern world. Through this type of emotional power, she urges the reader to envision this same dream.

The Musician as a Performer

Though the ultimate vision Eliot holds is a political and social one, she first lays out the musician's role in society, presenting him as an influential individual with the potential to change the social order for good. In the figure of Herr Klesmer in *Daniel Deronda*, Eliot explores the effectiveness of the musician in society.

Eliot portrays Klesmer as a complete, strong character, making it clear that, if given the power, he would use his authority for great good. She describes him as

one whom nature seemed to have first made generously and then to have added music as a dominant power using all the abundant rest...finding expression for itself not only in the highest finish of execution, but in that fervour of creative work and theoretic belief which pierces the whole future of a life with the light of congruous, devoted purpose.¹⁷

The music he writes and performs is an extension of the rest of his firmly formed character. Furthermore, he is intensely aware of his role as a musician and all that it implies. In response to a flippant remark about that role, he angrily asserts,

No man has too much talent to be a musician. Most men have too little. A creative artist is no more a mere musician than a great statesman is a mere politician. We are not ingenious puppets, sir, who live in a box and look out on the world only when it is gaping for amusement. We help to rule the nations and make the age as much as any other public men. We count ourselves on level benches with legislators. And a man who speaks effectively through music is compelled to something more difficult than parliamentary eloquence.¹⁸

Klesmer lists himself as one who surpasses "parliamentary eloquence" with his music, but his power in society is not far-reaching. With all the characteristics of a leader and a realization of the power of music in the world at large, why is Klesmer not a socially powerful person? Why does he possess the vision of a leader but not the ability to begin change on a large scale?

Klesmer's isolation and moderate ostracism from society render him ineffective in any capacity except that of a "mere musician." The people around him are fascinated by him, but also slightly discomforted by his presence, leaving Klesmer as a minor and rather ineffectual member of the "web" in which he performs. Those around him seem to consider him some sort of drawing room spectacle, and his musicality and intensity, more than his foreignness, push him farther towards the outskirts. For example, his introduction into the novel presents him as "a felicitous combination of the German,

the Slave, and the Semite, with grand features, brown hair floating in artistic fashion, and brown eyes in spectacles. His English had little foreignness except its fluidity.”¹⁹ Though he seems distinctively an outsider, in this description, there is no hint of a complete separation. It is not until he appears in a non-performance capacity that his otherness becomes an issue. When he attends an archery tournament, the narrator relates that, not having “that ordinary stamp of the well-bred Englishman,”²⁰ Klesmer stands out as merely ridiculous, rather than influential or important. Because of his foreignness and oddity, the general public seems to want to relegate Klesmer to a safe and contained section of their public lives, almost as though confining him to a stage appearance. Noting society’s discomfort with this type of figure, Eliot comments, “One sees why it is often better for greatness to be dead, and to have got rid of the outward man.”²¹ She implies that the composer, outside of his production of music and ideas, can pose an awkward figure in society, causing a large degree of anxiety.

Klesmer’s uncomfortable position has two implications. First, though he has the vision to be a leader, he will never achieve any type of leadership unless he somehow becomes integrated into the society in order to earn the trust and confidence of those around him. Second, as an outsider, he may require some sort of intermediary or translator to bridge the communication gap that exists in a less than ideal society. Though music requires less education in observation than graphic art, at one point Klesmer’s performance is above and beyond the comprehension of some of the attendees. Clintock, a young man enamored of Gwendolen, remarks that Klesmer’s “tip-top playing...is like a jar of leeches, where you can never tell either beginnings or endings.”²² However, the previous paragraph states Klesmer has given a performance of deep meaning, pouring out from an “imperious magic in his fingers that seemed to send a nerve-thrill through ivory key and wooden hammer, and compel the strings to make a quivering lingering speech for him.”²³ Klesmer has the necessary skill and passion to move his audience, but Clintock does not have an understanding of the music. The society is not yet comparable to the “fine-mixed metal” in the poem from *Middlemarch*, and is therefore less influenced by the musician’s gift. Because of this break in the continuity in the web of communication, Eliot creates another rank in her hierarchy of musical characters, suggesting that the two levels of the learned and the unlearned may not be adequate for the dispersal of knowledge.

The Intermediary

Because music must act on the individual before affecting the entire social body, misunderstandings necessitate other intermediary individuals for the construction and proper functioning of the social web. These characters, though not musical geniuses in their own right, play a crucial role in a less than ideal setting for the spread of the musician/politician’s influence.

Their importance lies in their ability to recognize and relate to the emotions of others and to contextualize events in order to see beyond their own situations. They make up a crucial part of the web of society, since it is through them that others become aware of the interdependence of mankind.

Through Will Ladislaw’s descriptions of Dorothea in *Middlemarch*, Eliot highlights the important characteristics that an artistic or sensitive person must have. Will frequently refers to Dorothea as an Aeolian harp, musing at one point, “It would be a unique delight to wait and watch for the melodious fragments in which her heart and soul came forth so directly and ingenuously. The Aeolian harp again came into his mind.”²⁴ When Will compares Dorothea to a musical instrument, it is on the basis of her simple idealism and her ability to inspire others to better action. Furthermore, her personal observations of life inform her character, providing a view of the way things should be. For Dorothea, knowledge and feeling are inextricably linked. This quality suits her to be an artist of a different kind, where she finds her artistic achievement in nurturing and shaping others.

Showing that musicality is not the main concern in her narratives, Eliot creates Dorothea with almost no interest in music. Instead, Dorothea *becomes* music, emitting it in a figurative sense. As Will tells her, “You are a poem—and that is to be the best part of a poet—what makes up the poet’s consciousness in his best moods.”²⁵ Though not a creator of art or an inciter of action, she is the product and producer of this kind of creation. Her soul resonates like a musical note or a work of poetry, spreading and breaking into the consciousness of others, widening and broadening their perceptions, much like a great musician’s works. Though Will describes her as a poem, Dorothea also seems to have many of the characteristics of the poet as well. When Will proclaims what it means to be a poet,²⁶ the traits he lists could easily describe Dorothea’s sensitivity to others. Though she does not produce works of art or literature or music, she builds up and educates those around her, especially later in the novel. Dorothea’s ability may not be of much visible consequence to the large picture of society, but she holds the seeds of the creative artist in her soul.

The magnitude of Dorothea’s influence stems from her gift of looking beyond her own wants and seeing the needs of others. Contemplating the possible impact of her own actions should she choose to put others first, Dorothea wonders, “What should I do—how should I act now, this very day if I could clutch my own pain, and compel it to silence?”²⁷ Her ability to sacrifice her own concerns rises from the propensity to view herself as a miniscule part of a huge whole: “she felt the largeness of the world and the manifold waking of men to labour and endurance. She was a part of that involuntary, palpitating life, and could neither look out on it from her luxurious shelter as a mere spectator, nor hide her eyes in selfish complaining.”²⁸ Her repeated sacrifice of her own wishes in order to aid others resonates in Lydgate’s mind: “That voice of deep-souled womanhood had remained within him as the enkindling conceptions of dead and sceptered genius had remained within him (is there not a genius for feeling nobly which also reigns over human spirits and their conclusions?): the tones were a music from which he was falling away.”²⁹ Her compassion, even in the midst of a frustrating restriction, inspires admiration in Lydgate. Though never achieving political influence or any sort of public power, Dorothea finds her way of affecting the surrounding world by encouraging those in trouble and acting as an example of true charity and care. As the narrator later states, “The presence of a noble nature, generous in its wishes, ardent in its charity, changes the lights for us: we begin to see things again in their larger, quieter masses, and to believe that we too can be seen and judged in the wholeness of our character.”³⁰ This characteristic makes Dorothea an ideal individual, capable of leading others to see their role in the larger community.

Along with Dorothea, Daniel Deronda is an intermediary, albeit only temporarily, in the musical structure. Eliot portrays him as a man extremely sensitive to the emotions and experiences of others, but with very little grounding or sense of where he fits into society. Eliot wishes the reader to see Deronda’s depth, but also to recognize that his need for fellowship with the rest of mankind is integral to his own development.

Eliot begins to paint a portrait of Deronda’s emotional susceptibility and the causes for this tenderness. Much of his sensitivity stems from his own pain and injury. Eliot assures the reader that, in Deronda, “inexorable sorrow takes the form of fellowship and makes the imagination tender,”³¹ giving him a “stamp of rarity in a subdued fervour of sympathy, an activity of imagination on behalf of others...continually seen in acts of considerateness that struck his companions as moral eccentricity.”³² The knowledge of his own pain enables him to sympathize with those around him, even to the point, in certain situations, of effacing his own importance or desire.

This sensitivity of feeling is first linked directly to music when Deronda pauses to admire the scenery surrounding him as he rows down the river. The darkening sky and its effects “disposed him to linger as if they had been an unfinished strain of music.”³³ The beauty of the scenery draws Deronda in, but he does not simply remain in admiration. He instead is “forgetting everything else in a half-speculative, half-involuntary identification of himself with the objects he [is] looking at, thinking how far it might be possible habitually to shift his centre till his own personality would be no less outside him than the

landscape.”³⁴ His contemplation of beauty almost instantly becomes intertwined with his desire to merge with life around him, no longer feeling separate or isolated.

Deronda's ability to identify with the pain of others, compounded by this desire to efface himself in the place of confrontation with the world, leaves him in a place of relative immobility. He has the tools that Eliot requires of a leader in her society—compassion, an innate sense of the kinship of men, trustworthiness, the ability to move and inspire others—but his uncertainty robs him of the ability to lead others. Eliot stages this indecision for the reader:

His early-wakened sensibility and reflectiveness had developed into a many-sided sympathy, which threatened to hinder any persistent course of action...His imagination had so wrought itself to the habit of seeing things as they probably appeared to others, that a strong partisanship, unless it were against an immediate oppression, had become an insincerity for him. His plenteous, flexible sympathy had ended by falling into one current with that reflective analysis which tends to neutralize sympathy.³⁵

Deronda is powerless to make the move from personal compassion to social and political action. Simultaneously, however, he is aware of the impotence of an over-sympathetic nature, and wishes to find some cause to which he can fully give his sympathy. Deronda intensely desires “to have the sort of apprenticeship to life which would not shape him too definitely, and rob him of the choice that might come from a free growth.”³⁶ He longs for a decisive influence in his life, but, just as strongly, he longs for a path that will not narrow his conception of the world. The daunting challenge of finding such an influence causes him to hang back in the safety of his own comfort, leaving him swayed too much by the mindsets of others. Only when he finds his particular relation to the web of the world can he relinquish his passive, Aeolian harp position, and move into the role of a dynamic, shaping force.

The Education of the Insensitive Individual

Eliot presents a few characters who, in contrast to Aeolian harp-like individuals who risk self-subordination in facing their surrounding world, have little or no sense of either the far-reaching effects of their actions or the emotions of others. The vanity of characters like Rosamond Vincy, Gwendolen Harleth, and, to some extent, Will Ladislaw, causes them to act only on their own behalf, and thus can be damaging to others. All three of these characters have to undergo some sort of transformation if they are to be useful in the web of society.

The troublesome actions of these three individuals stem from their sense of self-importance and superiority. In *Middlemarch*, Eliot provides a metaphor that shows the problem with such personalities. She observes,

Your pier-glass or extensive surface of polished steel made to be rubbed by a housemaid, will be minutely and multitudinously scratched in all directions; but place now against it a lighted candle as a centre of illumination, and lo! The scratches will seem to arrange themselves in a fine series of concentric circles round that little sun. It is demonstrable that the scratches are going everywhere impartially, and it is only your candle which produces the flattering illusion of a concentric arrangement, its light falling with an exclusive optical selection. These things are a parable. The scratches are events, and the candle is the egoism of any person now absent.³⁷

Self-absorption excludes any understanding of the fates and emotions of others, destroying any sense of context in a situation. For both Rosamond and Gwendolen, selfishness like this is harmful to

personal relationships, but for Will, as a potential leader, it is detrimental and damaging on a much more widespread, public level. This type of insensitivity hinders the function of the web, leaving gaps where an individual does not conceive any interdependence between himself and others.

Gwendolen and Rosamond require an outside educating force to bring them to the realization that they are not the center of the world. Each woman experiences a moment when, in an instant, “all her sensibility [is] turned into a bewildering novelty of pain; she [feels] a new terrified recoil under a lash never experienced before. What another nature felt in opposition to her own [is] being burnt and bitten into her consciousness.”³⁸ This entirely new experience of being aware of how another person feels is shocking. Her utter imperceptibility splinters in a new identification with the pain of another. Suddenly, she sees what an impact her movements can have on others. Rosamond’s education comes through direct conflict with a more knowledgeable, sensitive individual, while Gwendolen has to experience personal tragedy before understanding the trials of others. In both events, the tenacity of their vanity and sense of superiority necessitates some sort of confrontation to prevent them from crossing boundaries and exceeding their own rights as individuals in society.

Because Will is a public and political figure, his case requires a more careful consideration. He emerges in *Middlemarch* as a seeking, restless artist that, as of yet, seems to have no place in the world. Will requires some sort of framework within which to set his life. He firmly believes that “Genius...is necessarily intolerant of fetters: on the one hand it must have the utmost play for its spontaneity; on the other, it may confidently await those messages from the universe which summon it to its peculiar work,”³⁹ but this intolerance of “fetters” gives Will only a hazy vision of his purpose. The narrator comments, “The superadded circumstance which would evolve the genius had not yet come; the universe had not yet beckoned,”⁴⁰ thus depicting Will as floating outside of the web of society, waiting for a link to the rest of the world.

It is Dorothea’s influence that begins to bring Will towards recognition of the uselessness of his “genius” without some application to life. Dorothea’s visit to Rome coincides with Will’s rising dissatisfaction with art and the “vague purpose of what he calls culture.”⁴¹ Though Will states, “painting and Plastik are poor stuff after all. They perturb and dull conceptions instead of raising them,”⁴² Dorothea takes the sentiment one step further and characterizes European art as a “vast wreck of ambitious ideals, sensuous and spiritual, mixed confusedly with the signs of breathing forgetfulness and degradation.”⁴³ Will’s opinion is an aesthetic critique of a medium, while Dorothea’s criticizes the artist as a figure, indicting him with the crimes of egoism and selfishness. Interestingly, this comment could apply to Will, who is caught up in a self-serving desire to explore his own genius and avoid any sort of commitment or responsibility. Eliot and Dorothea both question the value of genius that is not put to work at a higher level than the satisfaction or fame of the individual.

Though Dorothea’s appearance in Rome cements Will’s decision to resign his pursuit of the artist’s life and return to England, he remains inconclusive as to his role and ignorant of the importance of considering the consequences of his actions. His bravado and moderate arrogance cause a varied reception in *Middlemarch*. Mr. Brooke finds him charming and intelligent, but many people are unsettled by his free and careless manner. Mrs. Cadwallader, the Rector’s wife, remarks, “Oh, he’s a dangerous young sprig, that Mr Ladislaw...with his opera songs and his ready tongue. A sort of Byronic hero—an amorous conspirator, it strikes me.”⁴⁴ Will enjoys this notoriety and the public’s shock at his oddities, feeling that they set him apart as somehow above the mundane life of the average *Middlemarch* resident. The narrative states that “Will was not one of those whose wit ‘keeps the roadway’: he had his bypaths where there were little joys of his own choosing, such as gentlemen cantering on the highroad might have thought rather idiotic.”⁴⁵ Will indulges in his own fancies and pursues interests in his own manner.

Certain encounters bring Will close to realizing the implications of his actions, yet he does not learn

from them or look beyond his own intentions and desires until it is too late to prevent the damage. For all his social understanding and his theory of interconnectedness, he has not yet realized that, as a figure on whom others rely, he must act purposefully and carefully. When Dorothea enters the Lydgates' home, only to find Will and Rosamond in an intimate conversation, she receives a blow, feeling herself duped. In this moment, Will finally realizes that his own desires do not justify every action. He cries out, "I had one certainty—that she believed in me. Whatever people had said or done about me, she believed in me.—That's gone! She'll never again think me anything but a paltry pretence."⁴⁶ Though their relationship mends, this breach drives home the fact that his actions have the potential for great harm. Will has to learn this lesson, essential to both his personal relationships and his public figure, before he is suited to move into a romantic relationship or a position of political authority.

Having learned to consider the possible consequences of his actions, Will moves into prominence in the political sphere, achieving a power that Dorothea never reaches. He becomes "an ardent public man, working well in those times when reforms were begun with a young hopefulness of immediate good which has been much checked in our days, and getting at last returned to Parliament."⁴⁷ Will at last finds his place in the greater world, able to influence the surrounding society. In a position of power, he can begin to spread the vision of interrelation and compassion exemplified by Dorothea.

The Prophetic/Political Musician

As one who has moved beyond the role of a performer/composer to become integrated and influential in society, the prophetic or political musician stands high above his peers. Though the harp-like disperser of knowledge is crucial to the web of society, it is the "mover" that sets the web vibrating, sending ripples outward and causing change on a mass scale. These are the "men of ardent zeal and far-reaching hope" that Mordecai says are "the creators and feeders of the world—moulding and feeding the more passive life which without them would dwindle and shrivel into the narrow tenacity of insects, unshaken by thoughts beyond the reaches of their antennae."⁴⁸ The vision of these men—men like Mordecai Cohen, and eventually Daniel Deronda—ideally opens the mind of the common man to a cause beyond his own and pushes the movement of society onward towards a greater goal and a hopeful dream.

As one who successfully incites a new movement towards change for his people, Mordecai Cohen, in *Daniel Deronda*, is Eliot's most impressive and effective musical figure. In his first encounter with Mordecai, "the thought glance[s] through Deronda that precisely such a physiognomy as [Mordecai's] might have possibly been seen in a prophet of the Exile, or in some New Hebrew poet of the mediaeval time."⁴⁹ Immediately, Deronda identifies him as a prophetic visionary, linking him with literature and art in an oppressive surrounding. From the start, Mordecai stands out as an exceptional individual with a powerful potential to move his fellow man and possibly his nation. Later in the novel, Eliot includes an epigraph to Chapter 63 that clearly refers to a character like Mordecai's. The translation reads,

Despite his hostility to art, Moses was none the less himself a great artist and possessed the true spirit of an artist. But this artistic spirit, in him as in his Egyptian fellow-countrymen, was directed towards the colossal and the indestructible. Yet he did not, like the Egyptians, create works of art out of brick and granite; rather, he built human pyramids, he chiseled human obelisks, he took a poor tribe of shepherds and created from it a people that would equally defy the centuries...he created Israel.⁵⁰

This passage directly aligns Mordecai with the figure of Moses. Though the novel never mentions Mordecai playing or having any interest in music, he nevertheless has a strong connection to it, just as Moses is linked to art. For each of these prophetic figures, the artistry lies not in small works of typical

art, but in huge orchestrations of humans that result in a new shaping of that nation and, by extension, the world. The key to this type of shaping is the ability to take raw matter—for Moses, the Israelites, and for Mordecai, Daniel Deronda and the scattered Jewish nation—and transform it into a cohesive, unified whole that follows one vision and has a shared understanding of its intimate interrelation.

In this role of prophetic visionary and political dreamer, Mordecai shares no scrap of uncertainty with Deronda. In a scene remarkably similar to Deronda's contemplation during an evening row, Mordecai takes in the sights of the river, until all the scenes and sounds have "entered his mood and blent themselves indistinguishably with his thinking, as a fine symphony to which we can hardly be said to listen makes a medium that bears up our spiritual wings."⁵¹ Whereas Deronda took in a scene and found only the desire to dissolve into his environment and find release from his interiority, Mordecai processes his surroundings internally, relating them to his thoughts and maintaining his own grounding. His setting moves him in the way that a symphony moves an individual, aligning his process of internalization with the composition of a musical work. The taking in and recapitulation of one's surroundings in this way hearkens back to Will's concept of "a soul in which knowledge passes instantaneously into feeling and feeling flashes back as a new organ of knowledge."⁵² Mordecai's "organ of knowledge" allows him to project a vision of a unified Israel, and he is not content merely to stand by: "[T]he fuller nature desires to be an agent, to create, and not merely to look on: strong love hungers to bless, and not merely to behold blessing."⁵³ Mordecai knows that his purpose lies in pushing this new creation towards its inception, even if the final result of the vision will be accomplished through another.

When Mordecai expresses his vision of a people—"knit together and yet expanded, in joy and sorrow, in thought and action"⁵⁴—he does not neglect the individual. Through Mordecai's voice, Eliot illustrates the importance of the individual's awareness of the community to which he belongs:

What is the citizenship of him who walks among a people he has not hearty kindred and fellowship with, and has lost the sense of brotherhood with his own race? It is a charter of selfish ambition and rivalry in low greed. He is an alien in spirit, whatever he may be in for; he sucks the blood of mankind, he is not a man. Sharing in no love, sharing in no subjection of the soul, he mocks all.⁵⁵

Clearly, the unconnected individual is dangerous; without loyalty or a concern for a larger body, Mordecai suggests, a person may find no reason to submit to any sort of authority. Kinship with one's fellow countrymen is essential to creating a sense of obligation and service to one's country, nation, or race. Integration into a larger body is required for an individual to find a focus in life other than his own "selfish ambition."

In giving Deronda a "sense of brotherhood with his own race," Mordecai has provided the framework and grounding that Deronda so intensely required, training him for leadership and completing his role as musician and educator. Deronda tells Mordecai, "It is you who have given shape to what, I believe, was an inherited yearning."⁵⁶ In acknowledging Mordecai's influence in helping him find his vocation, he tells an anecdote of his life:

Suppose the stolen offspring of some mountain tribe brought up in a city of the plain, or one with an inherited genius for painting, and born blind—the ancestral life would lie within them as a dim longing for unknown objects and sensations, and the spell-bound habit of their inherited frames would be like a cunningly-wrought musical instrument, never played on, but quivering throughout in uneasy mysterious moanings of its intricate structure that, under the right touch, gives music. Something like that, I think, has been my experience. Since I began to read and know, I have always longed for some ideal task,

in which I might feel myself the heat and brain of a multitude—some social captainship, which would come to me as a duty, and not be striven for as a personal prize.⁵⁷

This passage marks an integral point in Deronda's educational journey. The view of him as a harp figure—poised in a painfully ineffective position, “quivering throughout in uneasy mysterious moanings”—evolves into a view of him as an instrument that “gives music,” allowing him to find “some social captainship.” Rather than focusing on his personal life, he recognizes that he is a mere piece in a larger puzzle with a set “duty” to perform. This realization allows him to move from a passive, receptive role in which he feels helpless to a role of agency. Through the same process by which he has been “educated,” he can awaken a feeling of citizenship and kinship in those around him, beginning to build and shape the web of society.

Conclusion

In *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda*, Eliot creates ranks and roles within her envisioned musically structured society. Explicitly introducing the concept of society as a web in *Middlemarch*, she goes on in the later novel to purposefully develop the artistic figure, presenting her full-fledged theory of the musician and society. By intertwining social influence and musical ability, Eliot raises music to a higher level than simply a tool for entertainment or a pleasure separate from life. Hoping to broaden conceptions and unite consciousnesses in an unprecedented way, she shows that music, with its ability to unite people in shared emotion, has the potential to transform both the personal and the political arenas.

Notes

1. George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss* (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 2003), 317.
2. *Ibid.*, 401.
3. *Ibid.*, 382.
4. George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 1994), 141.
5. *Ibid.*, 399.
6. *Ibid.*, 26.
7. *Ibid.*, 832.
8. George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda* (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 1995), 526.
9. *Ibid.*, 734.
10. *Ibid.*, 74.
11. *Ibid.*, 219.
12. *Ibid.*, 191.
13. *Ibid.*, 206.
14. *Ibid.*, 223.
15. *Middlemarch*, 293.
16. *Daniel Deronda*, 367-368.
17. *Ibid.*, 240.
18. *Ibid.*, 242.
19. *Ibid.*, 47.
20. *Ibid.*, 102.
21. *Ibid.*, 103.

22. Ibid., 50.
23. Ibid., 49-50.
24. *Middlemarch*, 209.
25. Ibid., 223.
26. Ibid., 223.
27. Ibid., 788.
28. Ibid., 788.
29. Ibid., 593.
30. Ibid., 762.
31. Ibid., 175.
32. Ibid., 178.
33. Ibid., 189.
34. Ibid., 189.
35. Ibid., 364.
36. Ibid., 180.
37. Ibid., 264.
38. Ibid., 779.
39. Ibid., 83.
40. Ibid., 83.
41. Ibid., 81.
42. Ibid., 191.
43. Ibid., 193.
44. Ibid., 380.
45. Ibid., 468.
46. Ibid., 778.
47. Ibid., 836.
48. Ibid., 685.
49. Ibid., 386.
50. Ibid., 846.
51. Ibid., 474.
52. Ibid., 223.
53. *Daniel Deronda*, 475.
54. Ibid., 526.
55. Ibid., 528.
56. Ibid., 750.
57. Ibid., 750.