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KNOWLEDGE IN GEORGE ELIOT'S *MIDDLEMARCH* AND GUSTAVE FLAUBERT'S *BOUVARD ET PÉCUCHET*

Lucy O'Meara
University of Kent, Canterbury, United Kingdom
leo@kent.ac.uk

This article will provide a reading of George Eliot's penultimate novel *Middlemarch* (1871–72) and Gustave Flaubert's posthumous novel *Bouvard et Pécuchet* (1881), evaluating how both novels respond to the problem of the erosion of belief in the progressive or illuminating power of knowledge in accumulation. Despite their radically differing forms, the works, both set in provincial communities a few decades prior to the dates of publication, display strikingly similar preoccupations regarding the question of the status of knowledge in the post-Enlightenment, post-*Encyclopédie* world.[1] These concerns are articulated to differing ends. In Flaubert, knowledge is presented as being unavoidably saturated with stupidity. No discourse is unaffected by this; thus the novel itself (*Bouvard et Pécuchet*), the novel as form more generally, and the novelist and readers are implicated in this critique. Though Eliot does not satirize knowledge as radically as Flaubert does, her work grapples fundamentally with the difficulties inherent to processes of knowing. She saw her novels as 'a set of experiments' providing an extensive, fleshed-out investigation of 'what our thought and emotion may be capable of'.[2] *Middlemarch* suggests that although our attempts to gain knowledge of any subject or person will always be irredeemably partial or sabotaged by practical difficulty, nonetheless those who are adept at spontaneously making connections between disparate fields of knowledge, and allying them to imaginative power, will prevail, even in a society — like that depicted in *Middlemarch* — whose political,

[1] There is ample critical discussion of the question of knowledge and its treatment in *Bouvard et Pécuchet*. See for example Charles Bernheimer, 'Linguistic Realism in Flaubert's *Bouvard et Pécuchet*', *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, 7 (1974), 143–58; Gisèle Séginger, 'Forme romanesque et savoir: *Bouvard et Pécuchet* et les sciences naturelles', *Revue Flaubert*, 4 (2004), <http://flaubert.univ-rouen.fr/revue/revue4/02seginger.pdf≥, and Geneviève Bollème's editorial material in Flaubert, *Le Second Volume de 'Bouvard et Pécuchet'*, ed. by Geneviève Bollème (Paris: Denoël, 1966). On *Middlemarch*'s representation of knowledge, progress, and science, see especially: George Levine, 'George Eliot's Hypothesis of Reality', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 35 (1980), 1–28; Diana Postlethwaite, *Making It Whole: A Victorian Circle and the Shape of Their World* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1984); Sally Shuttleworth, *George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Science: The Make-Believe of a Beginning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); Gillian Beer, *Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); and Avrom Fleishman, *George Eliot's Intellectual Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), in particular 'The Encyclopaedist: Transcending the Past in *Middlemarch*', pp. 161–89.

[2] George Eliot, *The George Eliot Letters*, 9 vols, ed. by Gordon S. Haight (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1954–78), VI (1956), Letter to Dr Joseph Frank Payne, 25 January 1876, pp. 216–17 (p. 216).

cultural, and philanthropic spheres are moribund.[3] *Bouvard et Pécuchet*'s depiction of revolutionary and republican nineteenth-century France also undermines the notion of progress. As this article will show, Flaubert and Eliot share a great deal of common ground in terms of their profound interrogation of knowledge as it is collated and received in contemporary (mid to late nineteenth century) European bourgeois society. First, however, it is necessary to outline the reasons why, despite these authors' shared concerns, they have so rarely been treated comparatively in academic criticism.

The critical tradition dividing Flaubert from Eliot

Over the course of the twentieth century, a certain critical consensus developed whereby Eliot and Flaubert are treated as almost antithetical figures. They are rarely read together by comparatists. There is only one English-language monograph (from 1974) treating the two authors together, and none in French.[4] The longstanding critical habit of not associating these authors is owed to wide disparities between them that go far beyond the differences imposed by two distinct national literary traditions. Eliot (1819–1880) and Flaubert (1821–1880), almost exact contemporaries, are separated most notably by their divergent attitudes towards the bourgeoisie (Flaubert's contemptuous, Eliot's sympathetic); by their technical approaches to the novel (particularly their use of narrative voice); and by public attitudes towards them during their lifetimes. Flaubert is put on trial, charged with 'outrage à la morale publique et religieuse ou aux bonnes mœurs' over the portrayal of adultery (and perceived slurs on the institution of marriage) in *Madame Bovary*, whereas Eliot is seen approvingly during her career as 'Victorian society's 'greatest "moral" novelist'.[5] There are, however, striking chronological and developmental parallels between the writers' respective careers. Their final works (*Bouvard et Pécuchet* and *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* (1879)) both use eccentric characters as vehicles for a critical engagement with contemporary intellectual and popular culture; the authors both first become famous in the late 1850s with novels portraying provincial life (*Madame Bovary* (1857) and *Adam Bede*

[3] Fleishman characterizes these spheres, as depicted in *Middlemarch*, as 'dead-hand' (*George Eliot's Intellectual Life*, pp. 182–83).

[4] Barbara Smalley, *George Eliot and Flaubert: Pioneers of the Modern Novel* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1974): this work tends to treat the authors separately, and sees both of them largely in terms of their status as essential precursors of Henry James's innovations in psychological fiction. A rare example of truly comparative criticism of Flaubert and Eliot is John Rignall's chapter '*Madame Bovary*, *Middlemarch* and the Dangers of Diffusion' in his *George Eliot, European Novelist* (London: Routledge, 2011), pp. 85–104. Lauren M. E. Goodlad's *The Victorian Geopolitical Aesthetic: Realism, Sovereignty, and Transnational Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015) contains a comparative chapter on *Madame Bovary* and Eliot's *Romola*; this chapter 'resists the binary of French "realism" and British "idealism" to connect Eliot's formal experiments to the comparable mid-century conditions that produced Flaubert's naturalism' (p. 164). A small number of critical works compare the representation of the disenchanted provincial wife in *Middlemarch* and *Madame Bovary*: see Jill Felicity Durey, *Realism and Narrative Modality: The Hero and Heroine in Eliot, Tolstoy and Flaubert* (Tübingen: Narr, 1993), and Elizabeth Jean Sabiston, *The Prison of Womanhood: Four Provincial Heroines in Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (London: Palgrave, 1997).

[5] Rosemary Ashton, Introduction to George Eliot, *Selected Critical Writings*, ed. by Rosemary Ashton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. vii–xxxi (p. viii).

(1859)); they both undertake huge amounts of research for novels portraying the distant past (*Salammbô* (1862) and *Romola* (1862–63)); and they both finally produce versions of the *Bildungsroman* in the last novels published during their lifetimes (*L'Éducation sentimentale* (1869) and *Daniel Deronda* (1876)).[6] Mary Orr has compellingly demonstrated that Flaubert's *La Tentation de Saint Antoine* (1874) is a '*vita* of the emergence of modern Republican France' which 'enlighten[s] bigger critical stories about French nineteenth-century history of beliefs in several disciplines — comparative religion, natural history, and science — through their literary remapping'.[7] The same assessment could be applied to *Middlemarch*. As many Eliot critics have shown, Eliot's vast reading, as mobilized in *Middlemarch* especially, nourishes an almost incomparably well informed fictional representation of British and European developments in post-theological philosophy, the science of the mind, and the natural sciences.[8] Avrom Fleishman has gone so far as to remark, rather territorially, 'That encyclopedic fiction [*Middlemarch*] did for the totality of an English society (not the one present at time of writing but a past one) what Balzac before and Zola afterward required a whole shelf of novels to do'.[9]

Twentieth-century views of Eliot, in part due to the dominance of F. R. Leavis in English literary criticism, tend to see Eliot as a distinctively British writer — not as a European one.[10] Such views dissuade comparative readings of Eliot alongside her continental counterparts and enclose her in an insularity that is profoundly at odds with the deeply European orientation of her work and her facility in many languages. Implicit in the views of Eliot that champion her Britishness and reduce her 'otherness' is the assumption that Victorian fiction represents a more wholesome moral universe than its continental counterparts.[11] In 1948, Leavis, praising Eliot (alongside Austen, Conrad, James and D.H. Lawrence) as an author especially talented in linking literature to morality, states that Flaubert is the antithesis of the great tradition of the English novel embodied by Eliot.[12] Coming from the opposite angle in 1962, Hugh Kenner, championing Flaubert's innovations, dismisses Eliot as representing (with Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, and D. H. Lawrence) 'a different fictional tradition altogether' to that of Flaubert; a tradition that only flourishes

[6] See Rignall, *George Eliot, European Novelist*, p. 85.

[7] Mary Orr, *Flaubert's 'Tentation': Remapping Nineteenth-Century French Histories of Religion and Science* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 20.

[8] See in particular K. M. Newton, *Modernizing George Eliot: The Writer as Artist, Intellectual, Proto-Modernist, Cultural Critic* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011); Fleishman, *George Eliot's Intellectual Life*; Beer, *Darwin's Plots*; and *George Eliot in Context*, ed. by Margaret Harris (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), in particular the chapters 'Religion' by Oliver Lovesey (pp. 238–47), 'The Science of the Mind' by Pauline Nestor (pp. 264–70), and 'Secularism' by Michael Rectenwald (pp. 271–78).

[9] Fleishman, *George Eliot's Intellectual Life*, p. 190.

[10] See for example F. George Steiner, 'A Preface to *Middlemarch*', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 9 (1954–55), 262–79. Rignall notes that at the end of the twentieth century, the European dimension of Eliot's work begins to be revalorized in criticism; see his Introduction to *George Eliot, European Novelist*, pp. 1–9 (p. 2).

[11] See K. M. Newton's rebuff to these views in 'The Otherness of George Eliot', *Textual Practice*, 28 (2014), 189–214.

[12] F. R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition: George Eliot, Henry James, Joseph Conrad* (London: Chatto, 1973), pp. 8–9.

> at the risk of one day losing its spell and seeming less packed with wisdom than with illusion, less pregnant with compassion than cankered with the sentimentalities of a time that supposed the unaided storyteller capable of commanding heavens to open.[13]

In this line of criticism, Eliot's use of omniscient narrators is presented as an old-fashioned tendency that goes hand in hand with her moralistic approach to character. As Juliette Atkinson remarks, 'The Victorian novel as a whole was put under intense scrutiny in the 1970s by feminist, Marxist, and postcolonial critics, but George Eliot was dealt with more harshly than most'.[14] Flaubert, by contrast, is seen, as Mario Vargas Llosa puts it, as the great '*liberator* both of his characters and of his reader' in doing away with such narrators:

> With Flaubert, novelists lost the innocence that had once allowed them, when they transformed themselves into narrators — or believed that they had done so — to tell their stories from the perspective of an intrusive first person who was never a part of the reality being described.[15]

The general late-twentieth-century critical consensus is that Flaubert is looking forward, whereas Eliot is looking backward. Where it became a critical commonplace that Flaubert's influence was decisive for experimental modernists such as Henry James, James Joyce, and Samuel Beckett, 'some critics committed to a modernist aesthetic saw Eliot's fiction as flawed at its root'.[16] The innovation of Flaubert's fiction inheres in the profoundly paradoxical relationship it maintains with the mimetic project of the nineteenth-century novel. Flaubert's prose demonstrates a belief that there is no externality or objectivity available to the writer (or to anyone). His novels question the Hegelian view that the mimetic text reflects a necessary relation between the intelligible world and the text, and that the choices and exclusions made by a transcendent knowing subject (author, narrator) are necessarily valid. Eliot, for her part, is more wedded to mimesis. However, recent critical work has done much to undo the reductive critical consensus on Eliot outlined above.[17] Although she does cleave to the use of a narrative voice whose wisdom is notionally external to the narrative world depicted (a narrative position eschewed, to disturbing effect, by Flaubert), Eliot increasingly problematizes this mode of narrating and interpreting. K. M. Newton has convincingly shown that critics frequently mistake Eliot's realism as providing a simple mimetic reflection of an empirical reality.[18] Rather, it involves complex interactions between objective

[13] Hugh Kenner, *Flaubert, Joyce and Beckett: The Stoic Comedians* (Boston, MA: Beacon, 1962), p. xix.

[14] Juliette Atkinson, 'Critical Responses: 1970–Present', in *George Eliot in Context*, ed. by Harris, pp. 83–91 (p. 83).

[15] Mario Vargas Llosa, 'Flaubert, Our Contemporary', trans. by John King, in *The Cambridge Companion to Flaubert*, ed. by Timothy Unwin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 220–24 (pp. 220–21); original emphasis.

[16] K. M. Newton, *George Eliot for the Twenty-First Century: Literature, Philosophy, Politics* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. 2.

[17] See for example Neil Hertz, *George Eliot's Pulse* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), and J. Hillis Miller, 'A Conclusion in Which Almost Nothing Is Concluded: *Middlemarch*'s "Finale"', in *'Middlemarch' in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. by Karen Chase (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 133–56.

[18] Newton, *George Eliot for the Twenty-First Century*, *passim*.

and subjective elements, with Eliot continually emphasizing the subjective ways in which fictional worlds are created on the basis of objective phenomena. Eliot's narrators' commentaries on their fictional creations are presented as limited. Though Eliot remains committed to the use of an external narrator in ways that Flaubert does not, any claim to narratorial omniscience is firmly denied. This is underlined again and again through the metaphors of partial knowledgeability used in *Middlemarch*, as I shall discuss below. Further, the arbitrary nature of prose fiction is frequently adverted to by Eliot's narrators, most famously perhaps in the opening lines (an epigraph) of *Daniel Deronda*:

> Men can do nothing without the make-believe of a beginning. Even science, the strict measurer, is obliged to start with a make-believe unit, and must fix on a point in the stars' unceasing journey when his sidereal clock shall pretend that time is at Nought.[19]

The oppositions between Flaubert and Eliot that were so common in twentieth-century criticism obscure the degree of common ground between them. In Eliot's case, her experimentalism was often downplayed. Conversely, an emphasis on Flaubert's experimentalism can conceal the necessary overlap that exists between his themes and those of the giants of French realism such as Balzac. Flaubert both maintains the realist novel form and performs a critical evaluation of it within that form; as Christopher Prendergast puts it, he 'inject[s] into the fictions a powerfully corrosive dissolvent of any attempt to read them according to representational or mimetic expectations'.[20] But in order for this ironic project to be effective, his fiction needs to retain a broadly verisimilar narrative structure. Flaubert may have disliked the label of realism, and complained to his correspondents about the tedium of the task of documenting middle-class life, but he still had to use its forms.[21] Flaubert's dissections of what the subtitle to *Madame Bovary* calls the 'mœurs de province' of mid-nineteenth-century France, and of the delusions and narrow-mindedness of his characters, have far more in common with the themes and settings of Eliot's fiction than tends to be noticed. *Middlemarch* is labelled by Eliot 'A Study of Provincial Life', in what Julian Barnes calls a 'cousinly' echo of Flaubert's subtitle.[22] Moreover, it is increasingly clear that Eliot, far from being comfortably confined within a conservative definition of Victorian realism, does much to subvert that very form.[23] Her work, notably *Middlemarch*, also

[19] George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, ed. by Terence Cave (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2003), p. 7.

[20] Christopher Prendergast, *The Order of Mimesis: Balzac, Stendhal, Nerval, Flaubert* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 182.

[21] See Leslie Hill, 'Flaubert and the Rhetoric of Stupidity', *Critical Inquiry*, 3 (1976), 333–44, especially pp. 338–39.

[22] Julian Barnes, 'Writer's Writer and Writer's Writer's Writer' (review of Lydia Davis's 2010 translation of *Madame Bovary*), *London Review of Books*, 32.22 (18 November 2010), pp. 7–11 (p. 7).

[23] See J. Hillis Miller, 'Narrative and History', *ELH*, 41 (1974), 455–73, and *Reading for Our Time: 'Adam Bede' and 'Middlemarch' Revisited* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012); and Goodlad, *The Victorian Geopolitical Aesthetic*: 'Victorianists have often praised her works precisely for diverging from realist conventions, which, by then, had become the target of poststructuralist critique' (p. 176).

anticipates the epistemological scepticism of postmodernism. As David Carroll notes, Eliot had a

> special awareness of the crisis of interpretation which the Victorians were experiencing. […] As an intellectual of formidable learning she was fully aware of the latest developments in a whole range of intellectual disciplines undergoing radical change. […] As a novelist she could deploy her fictions to domesticate these revolutionary ideas in the lives of ordinary people.[24]

'Science is penetrating everywhere'

Middlemarch and *Bouvard et Pécuchet* are both written after the middle of the nineteenth century at a point when 'literature' is increasingly understood to mean 'fiction'. During the same period, 'science' comes to be defined as meaning 'natural science'.[25] This is the case in both France and the UK, despite the difference between the institutionalization of disciplines in the two countries.[26] In 1874, Eliot's partner, the philosopher of science, G. H. Lewes, wrote, 'Science is penetrating everywhere, and slowly changing men's conception of the world and of man's destiny'.[27] In France, the 'Manuels-Roret' popular science manuals published by Nicolas Roret were being produced in large numbers from 1825 until the 1860s.[28] In both France and the UK during the period between the 1830s (when *Middlemarch* is set, and when the action of *Bouvard and Pécuchet* begins) and their composition (1860s–70s),[29] science, while not yet formalized as a subject of study at British universities, was becoming broadly popularized such that scientific discourse was of increasing currency within the popular imagination. 'Although science in the nineteenth century was developing quickly', Melissa Raines has pointed out, 'its language was still accessible to non-specialists.'[30] Both Eliot and Flaubert could assume that even quite recent technical developments were sufficiently in the public consciousness as to be within the intellectual grasp of the average novel-reader. For Eliot, who kept assiduously abreast of contemporary scientific developments, the way in which scientists handled the challenges

[24] David Carroll, *George Eliot and the Conflict of Interpretations: A Reading of the Novels* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 3.

[25] Gowan Dawson and Bernard Lightman suggest that it is the formation of the British Association for the Advancement of Science (now known as the British Science Association) in 1831 that crystallizes the emergence of a more restrictive understanding of 'science' as focusing on 'experimental method and the investigation of the natural world'; Gowan Dawson and Bernard Lightman, Introduction to *Victorian Science and Literature*, 8 vols (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2011–12), I: *Negotiating Boundaries*, ed. by Piers J. Hale and Jonathan Smith (2012), pp. vii–xix (p. ix).

[26] See John Christie and Sally Shuttleworth, 'Introduction: Between Literature and Science', in *Nature Transfigured: Science and Literature, 1700–1900*, ed. by John Christie and Sally Shuttleworth (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989), pp. 1–12 (p. 9).

[27] George Henry Lewes, *Problems of Life and Mind*, 2 vols (London: Trübner, 1874), I, 1.

[28] On the popularization of science in France in the nineteenth century, see Bernadette Bensaude-Vincent, 'Un public pour la science: l'essor de la vulgarisation au XIX^{e} siècle', *Réseaux*, 58 (1993), 47–66.

[29] The action of *Bouvard et Pécuchet* begins in 1838 and continues for some decades thereafter; the 1848 revolution is an important event in the narrative. The novel is written largely from 1872 onwards, though it was originally conceived in 1863 and the *Dictionnaire des idées reçues* had been started in 1850. *Middlemarch* is set from 1829 to 1832, and written from 1869 to 1871.

[30] Melissa Raines, 'Language', in *George Eliot in Context*, ed. by Harris, pp. 176–82 (p. 179).

of gathering knowledge provided a useful model for her own narratives; notably, she was interested in how scientists grappled with epistemological and imaginative questions, for example when speculating regarding the nature of molecules and atoms.[31] Where Eliot is deeply engaged with the challenging detail of current research, Flaubert, by contrast, is concerned with a more post hoc version of science: the one that finds its way into the general public consciousness and subsequently becomes commonplace.

In opting to set their events earlier than the time of narration (this is more the case in *Middlemarch* than in *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, whose action extends into at least the 1850s), both novels expose the historical contingency of science. Eliot also emphasizes that science is subjectively contingent: many metaphors used by the narrator of *Middlemarch* propose an analogy between the narrator's interpretive and creative activity and that of the scientist, in images that stress variability, partiality, and limitation:

> Even with a microscope directed on a water-drop we find ourselves making interpretations which turn out to be rather coarse; for whereas under a weak lens you may seem to see a creature exhibiting an active voracity into which other smaller creatures actively play as if they were so many animated tax-pennies, a stronger lens reveals to you certain tiniest hairlets which make vortices for these victims while the swallower waits passively at his receipt of custom.[32]

This narrative comment suggests both the fallibility and revisability of scientific interpretation, and of narration. Eliot's narrator is scientifically informed, and cognizant of the constraints of supposedly objective views. As the 'Finale' of the novel tells us, the narration has provided only 'the fragment of a life', and 'however typical' this is, it 'is not the sample of an even web' (*M*, p. 832).

The use of the microscope metaphor demonstrates Eliot's confidence in readers' familiarity with such scientific allusions. Flaubert's novel too can capitalize on a backdrop of cultural familiarity with science. The country squire, Mr Brooke, in *Middlemarch*, and the two heroes of *Bouvard et Pécuchet* (copy-clerks who can afford to leave their jobs when Bouvard receives an unexpected inheritance) are characters who take advantage of the widely available scientific material of their age in auto-didactic projects. They each have the financial means to do so, as well as an enthusiasm that is presented as endearingly naïve. In both novels, however, the characters are not much enlightened by their endeavours. Mr Brooke, on several occasions, tells other characters about his past studies: 'I went into science a great deal myself at one time; but I saw it would not do. It leads to everything; you can let nothing alone' (*M*, Chapter 2, p. 16). This first articulation of Mr Brooke's sense of the impossibility of learning, given the accumulation and the interrelatedness of knowledge, is similar to Flaubert's narrator's account of Bouvard and

[31] See Tina Young Choi, 'Physics Disarmed: Probabilistic Knowledge in the Works of James Clerk Maxwell and George Eliot', in *Fact and Fiction: Literary and Scientific Cultures in Germany and Britain*, ed. by Christine Lehleiter (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016), pp. 130–52.

[32] Eliot, *Middlemarch*, ed. by Rosemary Ashton (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994), pp. 59–60. Further references, providing chapter number and page reference, will appear in parentheses with the abbreviation *M*.

Pécuchet's realization that every venture they undertake in their assiduous pursuit of knowledge will end up failing. Karen Chase has remarked that the character of Mr Brooke illustrates a general theme in *Middlemarch* whereby 'We witness the transformation of that vocational conceit from an active pursuit to an act of memory: "I went into that at one time" replaces the actual engagement in politics, reform, literature, art, and so on'.[33] This description may remind us of Bouvard and Pécuchet's lack of purchase on any form of transformative activity.

Failed endeavours

Both novels present us with characters embarking on failed quests to master knowledge. *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, incomplete at Flaubert's death, was projected to have two halves. The first half follows, in ten chapters, Bouvard and Pécuchet's attempts to conquer many disparate domains of practical and theoretical knowledge, from agriculture to archaeology to politics, gymnastics, and theology. They are very diligent, working hard and systematically, but they always end up baffled by things not working out. Botany fails them because of differing theories of planting; religion is clearly confusing given recent developments in geology. Even creative writing is entirely bewildering. When trying to write a play, they consult, among other sources, the literary criticism of Boileau: '*Inventez des ressorts qui puissent m'attacher*, dit Boileau. Par quel moyen inventer des ressorts?'[34] They have no capacity for creation. Further, they have neither skill nor faith in the idea of using knowledge selectively. When studying history, they realize that an objective view of historical events is simply impossible:

> Ils n'avaient plus sur les hommes et les faits de cette époque, une seule idée d'aplomb. Pour la juger impartialement, il faudrait avoir lu toutes les histoires, tous les mémoires, tous les journaux et toutes les pièces manuscrites, car de la moindre omission une erreur peut dépendre qui en amènera d'autres à l'infini. Ils y renoncèrent. (*BP*, p. 188)

Their continually frustrated endeavours to understand topics completely give them a sense of the vastness of knowledge that leaves them both dispirited, but always willing to start again with another subject. Bouvard and Pécuchet try to be encyclopaedic completists, but they always have to 'give up' ('ils y renoncèrent') because the accumulation of knowledge, their lack of pragmatism in the face of it, and their inability to ask the right questions mean that they cannot discern a practicable way forward in any of the domains that they explore.[35] The following quotation applies to all their investigations: 'Ils se consultaient mutuellement, ouvraient un livre, passaient à un autre, puis ne savaient que résoudre devant la divergence des opinions' (*BP*, pp. 87–88).

[33] Karen Chase, Introduction to *'Middlemarch' in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. by Chase, pp. 3–14 (p. 6).

[34] Gustave Flaubert, *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, ed. by Claudine Gothot-Mersch (Paris: Gallimard, 2003), p. 215. Further references will appear in parentheses with the abbreviation *BP*.

[35] Considering the question of species in Chapter 3, they study Buffon and subsequently visit farmyards to ask the workers about whether they have seen interspecies crossbreeding in action. 'Jamais de la vie', respond the farmers: 'On trouvait même ces questions un peu drôles pour des messieurs de leur âge.' It is clear that Bouvard and Pécuchet 'ne compren[nent] rien à la question de l'espèce' (*BP*, pp. 140–41).

Eventually, they become irritable: 'La géologie est trop défectueuse!' they exclaim: 'À peine connaissons-nous quelques endroits de l'Europe. Quant au reste, avec le fond des Océans, on l'ignorera toujours' (*BP*, pp. 158–59). Systematic acquisition of knowledge seems to be doomed in advance. Method always eludes them, as they realize when trying to work out how best to approach the acquisition of knowledge regarding the circulation of blood:

> Le dilemme n'est point commode; si l'on part des faits, le plus simple exige des raisons trop compliquées, et en posant d'abord les principes, on commence par l'Absolu, la Foi.
> Que résoudre? combiner les deux enseignements, le rationnel et l'empirique; mais un double moyen vers un seul but est l'inverse de la méthode? Ah! tant pis! (*BP*, p. 383)

Throughout the ten chapters, the protagonists' quests for knowledge are narrated in a manner that piles fact upon fact without distinction. Thus the characters' failures of understanding are displayed, but also, the novel dizzyingly abolishes all sense of perspective and judgement. There is no objective position providing any sense of solidity or authority. Flaubert's flatness of description levels the differences between situations and opinions that are the usual features of narrated stories.[36] He isolates details in turn with no sense of discrimination given between one kind of fact (or feeling) and another. For Kenner, this is because Flaubert 'is busily reproducing in a fabulous narrative the inanity of the Encyclopaedia'.[37] All the knowledge that Bouvard and Pécuchet engage with is presented as a collection of disparate items with no sense of overarching development. The overall tenor of the novel is present in the evocation of the friends' collection of archaeological oddities: 'Ils avaient rencontré une foule de choses curieuses. Le goût des bibelots leur était venu' (*BP*, p. 165). In this novel, collated knowledge is inert as knick-knacks are: reproducible but unenlightening.

Having failed, in the last chapter of the novel's first half, in their project to educate two recalcitrant children, Bouvard and Pécuchet finally realize that the pursuit of knowledge is pointless. Instead, they must return to their original profession of copying: simply writing out again the sources they encounter. The novel then enacts the lack of faith in creative ability already demonstrated through the characters of the two clerks. The projected second half of the novel was to consist of this copying work, and was to be a great compendium of banality, featuring, amongst other things, the *Dictionnaire des idées reçues*, which was at the origin of Flaubert's conception of the novel.

The central assumption under attack in *Bouvard et Pécuchet* is the idea that 'the specialisation and accumulation of disaggregated *savoirs*' can be understood.[38] It cannot, Flaubert's novel suggests, because of humanity's deep, all-encompassing stupidity and propensity to copy without understanding. *Madame Bovary* had

[36] See Jacques Rancière, 'Puissances de l'infime', in *Flaubert, éthique et esthétique*, ed. by Anne Herschberg Pierrot (Vincennes: Presses universitaires de Vincennes, 2012), pp. 29–44 (pp. 29, 32).

[37] Kenner, *Flaubert, Joyce and Beckett*, p. 25.

[38] Larry Duffy, *Flaubert, Zola, and the Incorporation of Disciplinary Knowledge* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 119.

made these points clearly in its representation of Emma's reading of fiction: Emma is a copier who tries to live out the plots of the novels she reads. In *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, with its copy-clerk protagonists, Flaubert goes much further: rather than simply pointing to romantic fiction as a laughable model to emulate in life, the novel seeks entirely to embody the inanity of human understanding and the contradictory, bewildering quality of knowledge in accumulation. All 'knowledge', including that represented by this novel itself, is inescapably condemned to 'bêtise'.[39]

In *Middlemarch*, the Bouvard-and-Pécuchetian figure of Mr Brooke is only a minor character, and his droll remarks about science quoted above may initially seem peripheral to the novel's main themes. Their importance is underscored, however, by their reiteration later in the novel. Reminiscing about his long-ago amateur studies in science, Mr Brooke remarks,

> I thought I had a clue, but I saw it would carry me too far, and nothing might have come of it. You may go any length in that sort of thing, and nothing may come of it, you know. (*M*, Chapter 28, p. 276)

Just like Bouvard and Pécuchet, then, 'il y renonça'. By this stage of the novel, the reader has encountered the characters of the doctor Tertius Lydgate, and the scholar of religion and mythology Mr Casaubon. No amateurs they: the two men are in serious pursuit of major intellectual goals. Casaubon is famous as the figure of the scholar who can no longer see the wood for the trees, and who, despite decades of work on his project, will never bring it to fruition: 'lost among small closets and winding stairs, [… he] easily lost sight of any purpose which had prompted him to these labours' (*M*, Chapter 20, p. 197). Casaubon's scholarly ambition means that he can 'let nothing alone' (*M*, Chapter 3, p. 23), but his work and his mind are dead ends, lacking dynamism. His young wife Dorothea, who had originally been captivated by the apparent grandeur of Casaubon's intellectual project, comes to realize sadly that 'the large vistas and wide fresh air which she had dreamed of finding in her husband's mind were replaced by anterooms and winding passages which seemed to lead nowhither' (*M*, Chapter 20, p. 176). Casaubon, whose first word in the novel is 'No', when asked if he knows a certain poet, is described throughout in terms of negativity, darkness, and narrowness: he is 'a lifeless embalmment of knowledge' (*M*, Chapter 20, p. 196). Eliot's narrator insists on this despite the fact that his ambitious mythographic project, derided both by characters within the novel and by generations of critics of *Middlemarch*, is one of major intellectual importance during Eliot's time.[40] Casaubon's most serious error lies in his desire to take Christianity as a standard and to treat the world's

[39] See Prendergast's chapter on Flaubert in *The Order of Mimesis*, especially pp. 191–95.

[40] Colin Kidd, in *The World of Mr Casaubon: Britain's Wars of Mythography, 1700–1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), shows that in 'the period in which the novel is immediately set, […] mythography remained an urgent calling for Anglican scholars who wished to conserve Christian truth against the poisons of Enlightenment deism, scepticism and atheism' (p. 7).

mythologies as mere 'corruptions' of that (*M*, Chapter 3, p. 24). He portrays a Christian intellectual tradition in crisis.

The other major character whose life is dominated by intellectual ambition, this time of a more humanitarian kind, is the attractive and intelligent young doctor. Lydgate is led to a career in medicine by an epiphanic childhood experience of stumbling across the entry on 'Anatomy' in 'the volumes of an old Cyclopaedia which he had never disturbed' (*M*, Chapter 15, p. 143). Reading about the valves of the human heart, he is transfixed:

> the moment of vocation had come, and before he got down from his chair, the world was made new to him by a presentiment of endless processes filling the vast spaces planked out of his sight by that wordy ignorance which he had supposed to be knowledge. From that hour Lydgate felt the growth of an intellectual passion. (*M*, Chapter 15, p. 144)

However, this 'intellectual passion' is, it turns out, just like Casaubon's insofar as it involves a totalizing, reductive approach to knowledge. Lydgate seeks to unravel the 'homogeneous origin of all the tissues' (*M*, Chapter 45, p. 455), and '[longs to] help to define men's thought more accurately after the true order' (*M*, Chapter 15, p. 148). Though he has great promise, and is the subject of much narratorial sympathy, Lydgate suffers from similar problems to Casaubon's. He too has an overweening intellectual goal and does not recognize that knowledge is too disparate and vast to be reduced to one source or 'origin'. His goal will therefore be unachievable. Through his marriage to the venal and vindictive Rosamond Vincy, Lydgate demonstrates that he lacks the clear vision that he advocates ('that distinction of mind which belonged to his intellectual ardour, did not penetrate his feeling and judgment about […] women'; *M*, Chapter 15, p. 150). Becoming consumed by debt, marital discord, and social obligations, Lydgate's work goes nowhere, not least because 'He had no longer free energy enough for spontaneous research and speculative thinking' (*M*, Chapter 66, p. 668). His descent into mediocrity and unhappiness is one of the central dramas of the novel, and a fulfilment of Mr Brooke's apparently silly remarks about science. Though the doctor wishes to '[go] any length', 'nothing com[es] of it'. A 'grieving' Lydgate admits this towards the end of the novel: 'I had some ambition. I meant everything to be different with me. I thought I had more strength and mastery' (*M*, Chapter 76, p. 764).

The presentation of Bouvard and Pécuchet's quests for knowledge is more extreme than that of Lydgate's failed ambition or even of the deluded Casaubon's moribund project. In Eliot, the representation of character is decidedly realist. The narrator provides the reader with the means to discern Casaubon's folly and the loss of Lydgate's promise as the sad outcomes of intellectual zeal led astray by poor choices of project, weakness of character, or the compromises enforced by other people. In Flaubert, by contrast, Bouvard and Pécuchet's enthusiasm is impossible, larger than life (how could they even live long enough to undertake all these endeavours?), unreal — but also disturbing: the characters' inability to judge, and Flaubert's refusal to provide a narrative voice that gives any stable perspective,

implies an all-encompassing critique of knowledge that is far less forgiving than Eliot's, not least because Flaubert demonstrates that there is no possibility of being outside this critique: everything one might say is ultimately caught up in *bêtise*. As Flaubert puts it in an 1867 letter, 'Quelle forme faut-il prendre pour exprimer parfois son opinion sur les choses de ce monde, sans risquer de passer plus tard pour un imbécile? Cela est un rude problème'.[41]

Treatment of the natural world and of religion

The attitudes towards nature displayed in each novel are indicative of the overall approaches to knowledge in both texts. The natural world, and its accessibility to empirical observation, figures prominently in *Bouvard et Pécuchet* through the protagonists' study of botany, horticulture, and geology. In *Middlemarch*, it features through plot elements such as the vicar Camden Farebrother's entomological collection but also, and more thoroughly, in the narrator's use of metaphors such as that of the microscope lens trained on the water-drop, noted above. As Gillian Beer has shown, the novel as a whole is informed at every level by ideas of connectedness (often indicated through the use of the word 'web') that are heavily indebted to the study of nature in Darwinian theory.[42] Nature speaks through these metaphors. In *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, by contrast, nature is a cipher, unexplainable. Considering the marvels of starlight in their garden one night, the two friends wonder whether it is possible to understand the workings of the sun. Bouvard is suddenly struck by the idea that perhaps not everything can be elucidated through study:

> 'La science est faite, suivant les données fournies par un coin de l'étendue. Peut-être ne convient-elle pas à tout le reste qu'on ignore, qui est beaucoup plus grand, et qu'on ne peut découvrir.'
> Ils parlaient ainsi, debout sur le vigneau, à la lueur des astres — et leur discours étaient coupés par de longs silences. (*BP*, p. 138)

Here the narrative evokes the awe nature induces. But this wonder is not expansive or connecting. It leads to baffled silence, and is ultimately something about which, just like everything else they encounter, Bouvard and Pécuchet are unable to draw any conclusions: 'La majesté de la création leur causa un ébahissement, infini comme elle. Leur tête s'élargissait. Ils étaient fiers de réfléchir sur de si grands objets' (*BP*, p. 139).[43] In the logic of this narrative, even nature, though teeming with life and knowable things, cannot communicate. We are far removed from

[41] Flaubert, *Correspondance*, ed. by Jean Bruneau and Yvan Leclerc, 5 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1973–2007), III: *Janvier 1859 – décembre 1868* (1991), Letter to George Sand, 18 December 1867, pp. 711–12 (p. 711).

[42] Beer, 'George Eliot: *Middlemarch*', in *Darwin's Plots*, pp. 139–68, especially p. 167: 'The recurrent imagery of the web suggests simultaneously entanglement and creative order — and beyond them both, the web of human veins and tissues: human being.'

[43] This is what Gérard Genette would call a Flaubertian 'moment d'extase (au double sens de ravissement contemplatif et de suspension du mouvement narratif). […] L'une des marques de ces moments […] c'est justement l'arrêt de toute conversation, la suspension de toute parole humaine'; Gérard Genette, 'Les Silences de Flaubert', in *Figures* I (Paris: Seuil, 1966), pp. 223–43 (p. 235).

Eliot's narrator's description of the many aspects of life, even the tiny sample of it to be seen in the town of Middlemarch, as being interconnected amongst themselves — and even, ultimately, to the whole universe. In *Middlemarch*, knowable facts, social and natural, are dynamic, not only in terms of how they affect characters' behaviour and relationships ('For there is no creature whose inward being is so strong that it is not greatly determined by what lies outside it'; *M*, 'Finale', p. 838), but also in terms of how the narrator explicitly describes the effort of capturing them:

> 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. (*M*, Chapter 15, p. 141)

In *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, the inertness, or meaninglessness, of knowledge is also seen in relation to religion. When the friends study the mysteries of Christian faith, Pécuchet demonstrates himself capable of asking searching, intelligent questions concerning the nature of religion, and how it is possible for there to be several religions but only one God. These conundrums are always explained in one repressive phrase by the priest, Jeufroy: 'C'est un mystère!' 'Que signifie ce mot?', continues the narrative, evoking Pécuchet's scepticism:

> Défaut de savoir; très bien. Mais s'il désigne une chose dont le seul énoncé implique contradiction, c'est une sottise; — et Pécuchet ne quittait plus M. Jeufroy. Il le surprenait dans son jardin, l'attendait au confessionnal, le relançait dans la sacristie.
> Le prêtre imaginait des ruses pour le fuir. (*BP*, p. 349)

However, Bouvard, who has his own questions about hell and the confusing nature of the Holy Trinity, is more easily contented. His reaction to the priest is in keeping with the novel's general emphasis on denying the power of discernment: '"Adorons sans comprendre" dit le curé. "Soit!" dit Bouvard. Il avait peur de passer pour un impie, d'être mal vu au château' (*BP*, pp. 344–45). Thus the mysteries of faith are put on the same level as the desire for good social standing, and the attempt at understanding is shown to be futile.

As Larry Duffy puts it, 'Flaubert, conscious of ignorance as an essential component of the human condition, and sceptical of encyclopaedic projects to accumulate and catalogue knowledge, makes clear in his fictions […] that knowledge is pointless unless it is joined up coherently'.[44] But in *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, even the idea of coherence is shown to be unattainable. The novel's entire enterprise of recycling and reshuffling second-hand knowledge from existing books provides an alarmingly pessimistic view of the possibilities presented by the accumulation of knowledge. The central problem of the novel is not that its protagonists are undiscerning men. They are, to some degree, but this is beside the point. It is the pluralization and consequent contradiction of information within each branch of disciplinary

[44] Duffy, *Flaubert, Zola*, p. 229.

knowledge that is shown to be insurmountably problematic — regardless of how intelligent the novel's characters (or author) may be. The novel, with its dizzying lack of externality in the narrative voice, presents the human attempt to master domains of knowledge as doomed to failure and inanity. *Middlemarch*, on the other hand, emphasizes that knowledge is always partial, deformed, and perpetually subject to revision or contradiction. Aware that 'we have no master-key that will fit all cases', Eliot's work deals in 'that complex, fragmentary, doubt-provoking knowledge which we call truth'.[45] Where Eliot profoundly differs from Flaubert is in her confidence in the possibility of gaining useful knowledge through close study, and in her faith in the power of imagination. The two novelists' attitudes in this regard can perhaps be summed up by their divergent responses to Auguste Comte's positivism.

The philosophical context: Comte and Feuerbach

Comte's *Cours de philosophie positive* (1830–42) posited that human knowledge evolves over three historical stages: the theological, the metaphysical, and the modern 'scientific' stage, which Comte called the positive, in which the evidence of the senses is all-important. In his *Biographical History of Philosophy* (1845), Eliot's partner G. H. Lewes presented Comte's work as the culmination of contemporary philosophy in its progressive evolution away from metaphysical questions (for the discussion of which no sense evidence can be adduced) towards 'Positive Science' and 'certain knowledge'. For Comte, this included the sphere of human relationships; he was of the view that one could apply the methods of science to the study of society and morality. Eliot was careful that her novels not conform too closely to any given philosophical model, because she felt this would be to lapse 'from the picture to the diagram', thereby betraying her desire to write fiction that 'deals with life in its highest complexity'.[46] From a reading of *Middlemarch*, however, it is clear that Comte's views were significant for Eliot, who found Comte's consideration of the possibility of objective knowledge compelling.[47] In this, she is far removed from Flaubert, who viewed Comte as a deluded utopian. Upon reading the *Cours de philosophie positive* in 1850, Flaubert remarks in a letter: 'C'est assommant de bêtise'.[48] For Comte, knowledge allows verification. *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, with its piling up of contradictory views, contests this view. Indeed, it seems likely that Comte's basic assumption of knowledge as being progressively improved over time is one that Flaubert finds problematic. As Kate Rees has shown, Flaubert's

[45] Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), ed. by Gordon S. Haight (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), pp. 497, 456.

[46] *The George Eliot Letters*, ed. by Haight, IV (1955), p. 300.

[47] See Suzy Anger, 'George Eliot and Philosophy', in *The Cambridge Companion to George Eliot*, ed. by George Levine (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 76–97 (p. 78). For more on Victorian debates about positivism, see Fleishman, '"The Radical": Taking an Anti-political Stance in *Felix Holt*', in *George Eliot's Intellectual Life*, pp. 140–60.

[48] Flaubert, *Correspondance*, ed. by Bruneau and Leclerc, I: *Janvier 1830 – mai 1851* (1973), Letter to Louis Bouilhet, 4–10 September 1850, pp. 676–84 (p. 679).

work generally demonstrates an ambivalence (or, at times, opposition) towards contemporary narratives of progress and development; in this manner, his work anticipates Decadent assertions of decline.[49]

Where Flaubert demonstrates in *Bouvard et Pécuchet* a profound scepticism regarding the possibility of objective knowledge, Eliot shows a perhaps Comte-inspired confidence in observation, despite the limits of perspective and despite the fact that it is impossible for observers to liberate themselves from either the assumptions of their culture or their own partiality. Eliot takes these limitations very seriously, as is demonstrated by the often-discussed metaphor of the pier-glass in *Middlemarch*:

> An eminent philosopher among my friends, who can dignify even your ugly furniture by lifting it into the serene light of science, has shown me this pregnant little fact. 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. (*M*, Chapter 27, p. 264)

What we see — what even the omniscient narrator sees — has no order; what is seen changes according to our viewing position. Here we have an instance of Eliot's eroding of realist convention through the introduction of a knowing perspectivism. Omniscience has given way to speculation and productive doubt.

Eliot lives in the same world as Flaubert, and she shares his post-religious scepticism. Early in her writing career, she channels her religious de-conversion into a deep engagement with thinkers who challenge the Bible's literal truth and question theological authority. Among her early works are translations of works by the post-idealist German philosophers David Strauss and Ludwig Feuerbach, who query the divinity of Jesus and, more broadly, the theistic conception of God per se. Eliot also translated Spinoza's *Ethics*, which attempts to ground its study of morality in a non-theological discussion.[50] Feuerbach advocates a demythologized version of Christianity, praising the religious impulse as an expression of humanity's best qualities, but advising that the numinous aspect of religion be excised. Eliot's focus on the potential infinity to be found in any observation may be influenced by Feuerbach's emphasis on nature as a force whose measureless, unceasingly creative multiplicity is both unified and ungraspable. This is a force, Feuerbach argues, that can only be apprehended once we do away with the theistic conception of God that results in a spiritless and inert conception of nature.

[49] Kate Rees, *Flaubert: Transportation, Progression, Progress* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2010), and '"Une tortue avec des ailes": Progressing in Flaubert's *Bouvard et Pécuchet*', *French Studies*, 63 (2009), 271–82.

[50] Eliot translated Strauss's *Das Leben Jesu kritisch bearbeitet* [*The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*] (1835–36) in 1846, Feuerbach's *Das Wesen des Christentums* [*The Essence of Christianity*] (1841) in 1854, and Spinoza's *Ethics* (1677) in 1856.

However, in the contemporary world, as Feuerbach points out in 1830, we have not yet found our way to fully understanding this dynamic view of nature.[51] As a result, we are rudderless. In the 'Prelude' to *Middlemarch*, the narrator describes the central character of Dorothea as a 'later-born Theresa'. Unlike the original St Teresa of Ávila, who lived three centuries ago, this contemporary one, living in a period in which scientific and philosophical investigation are eroding previously assured certainties, is 'helped by no coherent social faith and order which could perform the function of knowledge for the ardently willing soul' (*M*, 'Prelude', p. 1). Mr Casaubon, a scholar of Christianity who is wedded to a pre-Feuerbachian conception of religion — a seventeenth- rather than a nineteenth-century approach[52] — cannot provide coherence or progression for Dorothea.

The possibility of a progressive future in 'Middlemarch': Will Ladislaw

It is partly because of her longing for 'a standing-ground from which all truth could be seen more truly' (*M*, Chapter 7, p. 64) that Dorothea makes the mistake of marrying Mr Casaubon, attracted by 'the wide embrace of [his] conception. Here was […] a living Bossuet, whose work would reconcile complete knowledge with devoted piety' (*M*, Chapter 3, p. 25). But Casaubon cannot provide this reconciliation or coherence because of the narrowness of his thinking. Even though he has chosen a field that is, as his spirited young relative Will Ladislaw points out, 'as changing as chemistry: new discoveries are constantly making new points of view' (*M*, Chapter 22, p. 222), he is not interested in keeping up with the evolving field of scholarship. He is also unable to join up the various parts of his work. Tellingly, when asked by Mr Brooke about how he classifies his research, Mr Casaubon answers, 'with rather a startled air of effort', 'in pigeon-holes partly' (*M*, Chapter 2, p. 19). We are reminded of this compartmentalization in an important scene set in Rome, where Will bumps into the Casaubons on their honeymoon. Will talks to the couple about

> the enjoyment he got out of the very miscellaneousness of Rome, which made the mind flexible with constant comparison, and saved you from seeing the world's ages as a set of box-like partitions without vital connection. Mr Casaubon's studies, Will observed, had always been of too broad a kind for that, and he had perhaps never felt any such sudden effect, but for himself he confessed that Rome had given him quite a new sense of history as a whole: the fragments stimulated his imagination and made him constructive. (*M*, Chapter 22, p. 212).

The juxtaposition of the phrase 'box-like partitions without vital connection' and 'Mr Casaubon's studies' makes it clear what the narrator and Will think of Mr Casaubon's inability to join things up. This is further underscored by the description of Will's own thought and reactions: he is dynamic, 'constructive', 'flexible' in his thinking. Though Mr Casaubon refers to him pejoratively as a 'sciolis[t]'

[51] Ludwig Andreas Feuerbach, *Thoughts on Death and Immortality from the Papers of a Thinker*, ed. and trans. by J. A. Massey (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), p. 66.

[52] As we shall see below, Casaubon is compared to Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet (1627–1704).

(somebody who has only superficial knowledge; *M*, Chapter 42, p. 421), Will is imaginative. Where Mr Casaubon has no sense of connectedness and relationality, being 'lost among small closets', Will is profoundly inquisitive. Mr Brooke says of Will, 'He and I are alike, you know: he likes to go into everything' (*M*, Chapter 39, p. 388). However, unlike Mr Brooke, Will is not an affable figure of fun, but an emblem of possibility and progression. As Sally Shuttleworth puts it,

> Will's creative energy uncovers the vital organic life of history. Like George Eliot in her construction of *Middlemarch*, he reveals through constant comparison the vital interdependence of apparently fragmented parts, offering release from the labyrinth through the language of historical understanding.[53]

Dorothea, who yearns for a man who can 'illuminate principle with the widest knowledge' (*M*, Chapter 2, p. 22), will be happy with Will. 'You have so many talents', she tells him:

> I have heard […] how well you speak in public, […] and how clearly you can explain things. And you care that justice should be done to every one. […] When we were in Rome, I thought you only cared for poetry and art, and the things that adorn life for us who are well off. But now I know you think about the rest of the world. (*M*, Chapter 54, p. 542)

In addition to compassion and pragmatism, Will has 'openness' and is 'so quick and pliable, so likely to understand everything' (*M*, Chapter 21, p. 210). His ability to be stimulated by the 'stupendous fragmentariness' of Rome indicates that he is a man of his time: his lithe imagination is capable of coping with the atomization of knowledge and with the partiality of interpretation. Despite these immense obstacles, he will be able to forge ahead, making connections, enlightening others ('how clearly you can explain things'), and succeeding in public life. In *Middlemarch*, connection and coherence are always possible for those who are imaginative enough to want them. This is never the case in *Bouvard et Pécuchet*.

Conclusion

Both these novels present the same human problems: how to cope with the proliferation of knowledge after the age of the Enlightenment encyclopaedias and during a period of wide popularization of science across Europe, and how to navigate this proliferation along with the demands of one's social life and profession. It is by observing the novels' differing approaches to the ideas of coherence and connection that the divergence between the two authors' attitudes to these problems become clear. This can be seen most clearly in the novels' treatments of the role of the imagination. Imagination is of central importance in *Middlemarch*, and is presented by Eliot as the essential counterpart to objective knowledge, including within the sphere of scientific study. In her final completed work, *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, Eliot states that 'fine imagination is always based on a keen vision, a keen consciousness of what *is*, and carries the store of definite knowledge

[53] Shuttleworth, *George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Science*, p. 165.

as material for the construction of its inward visions'.[54] It is Lydgate's belief in the power of imagination that demonstrates his potential as a scientist: he thinks of

> the imagination that reveals subtle actions inaccessible by any sort of lens, but tracked in that outer darkness through long pathways of necessary sequence by the inward light which is […] capable of bathing even the ethereal atoms in its ideally illuminated space. (*M*, Chapter 16, pp. 164–65)

Though Lydgate's promise comes to nothing, in the phase of the novel where he still retains his eager idealism, it is made clear that Lydgate shares his author's view that imagination is central to scientific endeavour — because the scientist must have the ability to see beyond conventional perceptions and conjure a new way of seeing phenomena. As Shuttleworth observes, both novelist and scientist have a 'shared need for imaginative construction. […] The scientist does not merely record; he actively constructs a schema within which his observations are placed. [This is] an act of "make-believe", or heuristic construction'.[55] Despite Eliot's evident epistemic modesty — as seen in her narrators' comments about the limits of what can be known — *Middlemarch* champions creative thought alongside empirical observation.

In both these respects Eliot is doubtless influenced by contemporary science's increasing emphasis on the necessity for imagination (for example, in speculating about the world of molecules).[56] Herein lies the crucial difference between the two novels. In *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, imagination does not feature, for its characters are uncreative: 'Par quel moyen inventer des ressorts?' It is because Bouvard and Pécuchet cannot invent that returning to their profession of copying is the best and happiest outcome for them. The logic of the novel makes it clear that it is evidence of their growing discernment that they realize that this is the most practicable occupation for them when faced by the contradictory morass of knowledge they have tried unsuccessfully to navigate in the novel's first ten chapters. There is no other solution but to give up: 'ils y renoncèrent'. For Flaubert, knowledge is only ever extant (hence the citational nature of his work and of *Bouvard et Pécuchet* in particular). Flaubert's novelistic universe is a world of off-the-peg knowledge: the characters are only ever engaging with what is already present in the world (as fashionable discourse, as romantic ideal, as popularized scientific knowledge…) and seeking to emulate it. In *Middlemarch*, by contrast, latent knowledge and speculation can supplement the defects of extant material: imagination and creativity will disclose connections despite the inevitable fragmentariness and partialness of all knowledge.

The novels also display differing orientations in relation to human values more generally. Eliot's novel presents a pessimistic view of social relationships and a

[54] Eliot, *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, ed. by Nancy Henry (London: Pickering, 1994), p. 109; original emphasis.

[55] 'Make-believe' is a quotation from the aforementioned epigraph to *Daniel Deronda*; Shuttleworth, *George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Science*, p. 1.

[56] See Young Choi, 'Physics Disarmed'.

model of knowledge that (like Will's) can only be superficial if it is to be practicable (unlike Casaubon's and Lydgate's more profound, but fruitless, endeavours). But ultimately it presents a positive vision of human possibility within the constraints of social life. The conclusion of *Middlemarch* focuses on Dorothea's beneficial 'diffusive' effect on 'those around her' and links this to 'the growing good of the world', which is 'partly dependent on unhistoric acts' (*M*, 'Finale', p. 838). There is a commitment to progression here ('growing good'). The novel demonstrates the overcoming, for Dorothea at least, of anxiety, and the achievement of purpose and satisfaction. Sympathy (embodied by Dorothea, whose 'vivid sympathetic experience return[s] to her […] as power'; *M*, Chapter 80, p. 788) and imagination are endorsed as vital social values. Flaubert's novel, by contrast, though it ends satisfactorily for the two protagonists, presents no vision of the possibility of overcoming alienation. Flaubert's notes for the unwritten Chapter 11 of the novel describe the protagonists classifying, with increasing difficulty, the information they find in huge piles of old papers they have bought by weight. Finally, Chapter 12, the conclusion, was to show them discovering, in these old papers, a letter from the local doctor to the prefect describing their activities over the course of the novel so far. The prefect had wondered whether Bouvard and Pécuchet were 'des fous dangereux'. The doctor explains that they are harmless. What to do with this letter, the friends ask themselves. The response is as follows:

> — Pas de réflexion! copions! Il faut que la page s'emplisse, que 'le monument' se complète. — Égalité de tout, du bien et du mal, du Beau et du laid, de l'insignifiant et du caractéristique. Il n'y a de vrai que les phénomènes. —
> Finir sur la vue des deux bonshommes penchés sur leur pupitre, et copiant. (*BP*, p. 443)

Explicitly, then, as seen in this levelling conclusion, the novel refuses to endorse any value. The protagonists have agency and contentment in their pointless task. The novel turns entirely inward, as its protagonists do, and there is no project of social deciphering or articulation of any value ('égalité de tout, du bien et du mal'). Eschewing even the glory conferred by tragedy, the portrait of human pretentions to knowledge which the novel provides emphasizes the absurdity of existence.

Though *Middlemarch* and *Bouvard et Pécuchet* are both infused with a radical, anti-systematic philosophy, and though both present a picture of the failures of knowledge, Eliot's novel, cleaving in some respects to an idealist spirit, wishes still to articulate the values that can be found in human activity; Flaubert's cannot. Flaubert's dizzying ironies underline the conventional nature of a narrative tradition that he seeks to overturn; his pessimism anticipates the inward-turned nihilism of the literature of subsequent decades. Yet Flaubert's gaze is turned firmly towards the past: knowledge exists only as ready-mades, and the narrative is bounded by the certainty that all human endeavour is merely imitative. Eliot, by contrast, provides an invigorating sense of productive doubt (informed by the speculative nature of contemporary science) and of the possibility of creative changes in the ways we think about the limits of knowledge.

Abstract
This article considers late-nineteenth-century questioning of the progressive power of accumulated knowledge by examining two novels: Gustave Flaubert's final, incomplete novel, *Bouvard et Pécuchet* (1881), and George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871–72). Few scholars have analysed Eliot and Flaubert comparatively. Indeed, there is a habit in criticism of regarding them these exact contemporaries as almost antithetical authors. The comparative analysis provided by this study shows that the authors share similar and complex preoccupations regarding the nature of accumulated knowledge and its efficacy. The article examines Bouvard and Pécuchet's attempts to master various domains of knowledge and their contented relapse into copying alongside the failed scholarly and scientific endeavours of Eliot's characters Brooke, Casaubon, and Lydgate. Eliot's character Will Ladislaw, with his superficial approach to knowledge, is seen as the emblem of a progressive future. This study underlines the common ground between Flaubert and Eliot in their focus on the topic of accumulated knowledge whilst also examining the divergence in their responses to this theme, a divergence marked perhaps most significantly at the level of narrative voice.

Résumé
Cet article analyse la remise en cause, à la fin du dix-neuvième siècle, de la croyance que les connaissances cumulées soient toujours progressives. L'article examine deux romans: l'ultime roman inachevé de Gustave Flaubert, *Bouvard et Pécuchet* (1881), et *Middlemarch* (1871–72) de George Eliot. De rares critiques littéraires se sont penchés sur une analyse comparative de ces deux auteurs. En fait, très souvent Eliot et Flaubert, exacts contemporains, sont traités dans la critique en tant qu'auteurs antithétiques. L'analyse comparative fournie dans cette étude montre qu'ils partagent des préoccupations complexes et similaires quant à la nature des connaissances cumulées et leur efficacité. L'article examine les tentatives de maîtrise de domaines divers de connaissance menées par Bouvard et Pécuchet et leur ultime recours heureux au copiage, ainsi que les efforts savants et scientifiques des personnages d'Eliot: Brooke, Casaubon et Lydgate. C'est Will Ladislaw qui paraît, dans *Middlemarch*, comme l'emblème d'un avenir progressif, en raison de son approche superficielle à la connaissance. Cette étude souligne les points de convergence entre Flaubert et Eliot, visibles dans leur discussion du thème des connaissances cumulées, tout en examinant l'écart entre leur traitement de ce thème, écart qui se montre de manière significative au niveau de la voix narrative.