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VICTORIAN COSMOPOLITANISM, INTERRUPTED

By Bruce Robbins

READERS OF *MIDDLEMARCH* (1871–1872) WILL remember the moment when Brooke's bid to win a seat in Parliament abruptly ends, in the middle of the Reform Bill campaign and in the middle of a speech. He tells the crowd how happy he is to be there. He tells the crowd he is a "close neighbor" of theirs. Then he says the following:

> "I've always gone a good deal into public questions – machinery, now, and machine-breaking – you're many of you concerned with machinery, and I've been going into that lately. It won't do, you know, breaking machines: everything must go on – trade, manufactures, commerce, interchange of staples – that kind of thing – since Adam Smith that must go on. We must look all over the globe: – 'Observation with extensive view,' must look everywhere, 'from China to Peru,' as somebody says – Johnson, I think, 'The Rambler,' you know. That's what I have done up to a certain point – not as far as Peru; but I've not always stayed at home – I saw it wouldn't do. I've been in the Levant, where some of your Middlemarch goods go – and then, again, in the Baltic. The Baltic, now." (Eliot, *Middlemarch* 349; Book 5, ch. 51)

It's when he passes from the Levant to the Baltic that Brooke is interrupted by a laugh-creating echo from the crowd, an echo which, "by the time it said, 'The Baltic, now'" (350; Book 5, ch. 51), has become fatal.

I ask you to think of this moment as a portrait of the Victorian cosmopolitan, interrupted. Brooke is, of course, punished by the crowd first of all because of his signature inability to keep to the point, any point. The crowd wants to hear about his support for the Reform Bill – not about Peru or China or the Baltic – and rightly so. (Note that here, for once, Eliot would seem to think that the crowd, however unruly, is on the side of mental discipline and coherence.) On the other hand, Brooke has been presented from the first chapter as "a man who had traveled in his younger years, and was held in this part of the country to have contracted a rambling habit of mind" (2; Book 1, ch. 1). If you think of the rambling mind as a product or stylistic expression of his physical ramblings (a connection accentuated by the mistaken allusion to Johnson's *Rambler*), it's not just his incoherence that is repudiated, but his cosmopolitanism.[1]

If so, however, then the interruption becomes a bit harder to interpret. After all, there is nothing self-evidently incorrect about the idea that knowledge of the countries where the

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goods produced in Middlemarch are sold is relevant to the town's welfare and ought to be of interest to its inhabitants. Brooke is right to insist on the significance of distant places for his constituents-to-be, even if the Middlemarchers themselves don't see the connection. This is, recall, a novel of *provincial* life. Provinciality is one of its problems. From this angle, Brooke's incoherence could be presented with a little ingenuity as less a portrait of the cosmopolitan as such than a portrait of the cosmopolitan as seen with impatience by a localist or provincial. Of course any mention of Peru or the Baltic or the Levant will look tactless and incoherent if your standards of tact and coherence are determined exclusively by local spaces and provincial loyalties. But should they be? In this sense, maybe the crowd is making a mistake in interrupting him after all.

Here the opportunity beckons for a hypothetical neo-New Historicist essay that would fill in some information about each of the countries mentioned, even if two of them, China and Peru, seem to be there largely because Johnson had famously linked them in verse. In such an essay (which is not the one you are reading), there would almost certainly be things to say about the causal links between the Middlemarch economy and the countries Brooke never gets to talk about. Even a couple of hours of cursory digging turns up some promising hints both in the lead-up to the Reform Bill and in the years when Eliot was writing *Middlemarch*. China: In the early 1830s, the East India Company's massive smuggling of opium into China, which would soon lead to the First Opium War, was gearing up in a big way. In 1829, the first opium clipper was built, speeding up the trade considerably by beating the monsoon winds; in 1830, permission was granted to grow poppies in India, enormously expanding production, and the Chinese authorities sent a letter of protest to Queen Victoria; in 1832, the opium trading house of Jardine Matheson and Company was registered, which made huge profits from the trade and remains "one of the foremost trading multinationals in South-east Asia" (Booth 114). (See below for Eliot's disapproval of the opium trade.) The Baltic: in 1857 the abolition of the "Sound Tolls" that had discouraged shipping from entering the Baltic led to the rapid development of Copenhagen and no doubt to consequences for British trade as well, for example in Russian timber and precious stones. (One thinks of *Middlemarch's* jewels and furniture.) By 1879, ships carried as much tonnage through the Baltic as through the western Mediterranean. Peru: Peruvian mines, which are mentioned as a site of investment in Dickens's *Dombey and Son* (1846–1848), were at issue when Britain backed Chile against Peru in a war over nitrates. The middle of the nineteenth century saw a paradigmatic investment curve, rising with the sudden importance of guano for fertilizer (a determining element in international food prices) and then falling dramatically with the exhaustion of Peru's reserves.[2] In the 1860s and 1870s, foreign investment was much on Eliot's mind. She was doing a fair amount of investing abroad, and she was worrying about the security of her returns.

Even these very provisional findings are enough, I think, to suggest that Brooke had a case, whether or not he himself was capable of making it. This case gives greater interest both to Eliot's smack-down of cosmopolitanism on the hustings, assuming this episode can be so described, and to the issue of how valuable such Victorian cosmopolitanism remains for readers today. The old wisdom on the subject would suggest that the great century of cosmopolitanism is the eighteenth, while the nineteenth century on the contrary sees an exponential growth in nationalism and racism. To read Charlotte Sussman on the fate of anti-slavery consumer boycotts (which argued that to add sugar to your tea was to spill the blood of slaves) after emancipation in 1833 is to be convinced that this narrative cannot be rejected out of hand: "After 1838, appeals to a universal sensibility – mutual emotions discovered

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in sympathy and tears across vast distances – began to disappear from British conceptions of cultural difference, to be replaced by a more essentialist and 'scientific' understanding of 'race' . . . by the mid-nineteenth century, these views had given way to a more pessimistic, deterministic belief in the ineradicable savagery of inferior nations" (193). Once slavery was gone, there were few if any boycotts, though the coercive exploitation and physical abuse of colonial labor had not disappeared. Imperialism encouraged a "deterministic belief" in "ineradicable savagery." The hypothesis that I very provisionally suggest here is that there nevertheless existed a nineteenth-century cosmopolitanism that can be disengaged from imperialism, if not completely, and that might have led to a different sort of British knowledge of the non-European world, even if George Eliot herself had mixed feelings about it.

Brooke declares himself a follower of Adam Smith, a free trader. Smith has much to answer for, but he was, of course, opposed to colonialism. The impulse to legitimate colonialism can by no means be equated with the impulse to legitimate the so-called free market, questionable as its results have been. The space between the two may turn out to be crucial for Victorian cosmopolitanism.

Where does Eliot herself stand on cosmopolitanism? She does not seem fazed by the laughter she unleashes at Brooke's expense. Will Ladislaw's dream, remembered in the wake of the disastrous election speech, has been that "now public life was going to be wider and more *national*" (351; Book 5, ch. 51; my italics). The dream was never that public life would be *inter*national, though Ladislaw's own perspective, of course, is. No one seems to be imagining that there will be room in this vision for China or Peru. Like the Middlemarch crowd, Eliot herself gives priority to domestic reform at the expense of the rest of the world, and in "The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!" (1879) she anchors her qualms about cosmopolitanism to the same two euphonious nations: "The time is not come for a cosmopolitan to be highly virtuous . . . I am not bound to feel for a Chinaman as I feel for my fellow-countryman: I am bound not to demoralize him with opium, not to compel him to my will by destroying or plundering the fruits of his labor, on the alleged ground that he is not cosmopolitan enough, and not to insult him for his want of my tailoring and religion when he appears as a peaceable visitor on the London pavement" (*Miscellaneous* 405). Here Eliot, or her narrator, is speaking as a cosmopolitan. But that is not the main point: "Affection, intelligence, duty radiate from a center, and nature has decided that for us English folk that center can be neither China nor Peru" (*Miscellaneous* 405). It's as if she were channeling Brooke in his self-correcting, self-restraining mode: "It is easy to go too far, you know. You must not let your ideas run away with you" (Eliot, *Middlemarch* 508; Book 8 ch. 72).

Anti-cosmopolitanism lies close to the beating heart of *Middlemarch*. Why else does Mary Garth express an ultimate preference for Fred Vincy over the Reverend Fayerbrother, who is clearly the better man? It's a choice of local loyalties, however irrational – the choice of not having to choose, which is to say a refusal of comparison or the weighing and measuring of merit by standards that are threateningly universal. What else is the novel's single most famous passage about than a reluctant restraining of imaginative sympathy even though ethics would seem to require precisely that one's sympathies be universal and unrestrained? I refer, of course, to the sublime vision of the squirrel's beating heart, the growing grass, the roar on the other side of silence. Trying to take in the world's neglected subjectivities is both morally obligatory for Eliot and, she seems to suggest, emotionally or imaginatively unlivable – like making space in one's feelings for the Baltic and the Levant, China, and Peru.

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To say this, however, is to say that Eliot is, in fact, on both sides of the paradox. Let me try to add a few words to press on the other side of the scale. Why did Disraeli attack the Liberals as cosmopolitans in his Crystal Palace speech of June 1872, while Eliot was writing *Middlemarch*? He might have been inventing a convenient straw man, but it appears he was not. Not only were some Liberals indeed willing to jettison the empire as too expensive, they were willing to ask inconvenient ethical questions about it. John Bright, whose speeches on India from the late 1850s Eliot was reading in the late 1860s while preparing for *Middlemarch*, was interested in India's potential to grow cotton as an alternate source to the slave-holding American south (Henry 104). That is, he was still thinking morally, if imperfectly, about the conditions of labor that produced English commodities – much as Dorothea does when she considers the labor that produced the inherited jewels she is inspecting in the novel's first scene.[3]

Bright favored investment in public works projects in India, including transportation, while he also complained that there had been no progress there. Whose fault was that? Consider: "I hope that no future historian will have to say that the arms of England in India were irresistible, and that an ancient empire fell before their victorious progress, – yet that finally India was avenged, because the power of her conqueror was broken by the intolerable burdens and evils which she cast upon her victim, and that this wrong was accomplished by a waste of human life and waste of wealth which England, with all her power, was unable to bear" (Henry 105). Bright is clearly worried about the expense. He never says England was wrong to conquer India. But he does say, and quite clearly, that the English are mistreating the Indians, and that this fact may determine the eventual judgment of history upon the British Empire as a whole.

George Eliot was one of those who did invest in Indian public works, including transportation. In this she was representative of the large numbers of middle-class Englishmen who, thanks to new financial instruments, were for the first time able to participate in overseas investment in the 1850s and 1860s. In a sense this was indirect participation in colonialism itself. In 1860, while finishing her "sugar" story, "Brother Jacob" (1864), and receiving the first profits from *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), Eliot was investing a lot of money (two thousand pounds) in "East Indies" railway stock. She was reassured that her return of 5% was "guaranteed." What this meant was that if the Indian railway didn't make enough profit to pay the 5%, the money would be raised by Indian taxes. In other words, the money would be taken forcibly from the Indians. In fact that's exactly what happened. By 1869, something like 15 million pounds had been paid to investors under the guarantee system. In an 1879 letter, Eliot acknowledged that this logic was not foreign to her when she wrote that the disastrous failure of the Second Afghan War would be "a black day of Indian finance, which means alas a great deal of hardship to poor Hindus" (Henry 78). Nancy Henry, from whom I take all this information, uses it to argue very usefully that Eliot derived her concept of realism in part from her skepticism about unscrupulous accounts of empire intended to encourage investment.

At the same time, information about overseas places enters into the picture in a potentially different way than it would in the case of, say, missionary work or imperial conquest. To invest in a place, what do you need to know? That it will turn a profit. If that's the goal, then the degrading stereotypes of the native that we associate with nineteenth-century imperialism may be counter-productive. Yes, there is the myth of the lazy native. But that myth does not fill the field; it would be shocking if it did, for the motive of encouraging investment was a strong incentive to brighten the picture and even to pay attention to various sorts of

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abuses. The Indian railway in which Eliot invested was built in 1853 by the cousin of the publisher John Chapman, for whom Eliot edited the *Westminster Review*. Also called John Chapman, he published "Our Colonial Empire" (1852) in the *Westminster Review*, on Eliot's watch, and in it "rejected Britain's right to rule" (Chapman 100). "We are not lords of India in any other than a present practical sense. We do not and cannot rule it by force. We cannot colonize it nor ought we" (Chapman 101). This was of course not the dominant view, but it's obviously one direction in which thinking about investment in India could lead. The piece, which was republished by *Westminster Review* in 1870, sixteen years after the author's death, would have to count as a sample of Victorian cosmopolitanism. Chapman and Bright have none of Brooke's spectacular incoherence, but they deepen the portrait of Brooke on the hustings, hinting at the existence of a vision on the other side of the interruption and the novel's geo-political silence.

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NOTES

1. The original lines are from Johnson's "Vanity of Human Wishes" (1749): "Let Observation, with extensive view, / Survey mankind from China to Peru" (ll. 1–2).
2. According to Poovey's *The Financial System in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (2003), one moral seems to be, as far as Peru is concerned, that the bottom dropped out of the market when it was discovered that there was a bottom to the guano deposits.
3. We see Dorothea in the act of inquiring into the ethical status of a domestic commodity that has a foreign source. She decides to keep a ring and bracelet made of emeralds and diamonds. They are beautiful. "Yet what miserable men find such things, and work at them, and sell them!" (Eliot, *Middlemarch* 6; Book 1, ch 1). What knowledge lies behind this exclamation? Emeralds were largely mined in Colombia and Africa, though some came (perhaps through the Baltic) from Russia and Austria. The largest source of diamonds had been India, but in the nineteenth century excited attention had turned to Brazil. And then in 1866, the discovery of diamonds in South Africa led to a diamond rush. Amethysts, which Dorothea does not choose, could also be found in Russia and Austria though Brazil and Uruguay and Mexico were more prominent sources. The exhaustion of the German deposits of agate in the nineteenth century had led to mining in Brazil, hence to the discovery of amethyst deposits there.

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