

ductions) is actually to follow the inference that Lear's "train" is an extension of Lear himself, the monarch who in act 1 is a veritable emblem of disorder and misrule. Indeed it is true that Lear does imagine his knights to be of "exact regard," of "choice and rarest parts, / That all particulars of duty know" (1.4.264–65). But Lear's vision of himself and his kingly retinue is—although not a "lie"—nonetheless a characteristic (and tragic) self-deception.

I agree with Grimes that Lear in the end does recognize Cordelia's truth. But for me, the tragic problem is that he recognizes only the truth of her filial love for him, not also the divided duty of the daughter/wife's connubial love and duty toward her husband. Cordelia's own description of her return to England in terms of "O dear father, / It is thy business that I go about; / Therefore great France / My mourning and importun'd tears hath pitied" (4.4.23–26) speaks strongly to me of an archetype—the daughter's psychological inability to sever primary allegiance from her father unless and until he has willingly granted her leave to do so. And whatever France may or may not think of his mourning wife's return to her father's side, Shakespeare's play leaves us with the structure of an endogamous movement back to the father. While the reunion is undeniably beautiful in the context of this painful play, in terms of the family issues so prominently in focus throughout *King Lear*, the movement is nonetheless an infertile one. So is the final tableau of the dead family. Perhaps the last time an audience was allowed the comfort of feeling confident about any fertile regeneration of either family or kingdom was during the eighteenth century, when it could watch Nahum Tate's revision of the play, which resolved all the disturbing ambiguities not only by saving Cordelia and marrying her to Edgar but by making it clear that Edgar will definitely accept the monarchy. In addition to the textual uncertainty over who actually speaks the last lines of Shakespeare's *Lear* (Edgar in F1, Albany in Q1 and Q2), we are left with a last scene showing us Albany in line 320 offering to divide the kingdom once again, Kent in line 322 bluntly refusing the offer and choosing to follow Lear into death, and (presumably) Edgar then concluding the play with lines that neither reject nor accept the offered crown but instead speak only to a general sense of a diminished future.

Yet do I as a reader see a "total disaster"—has nothing come of nothing? For me, nothing has indeed come of nothing for the characters on stage. But this "promis'd end" is, as Edgar says, the "image of that horror." While the play may be *about* its

characters, it is finally *for* its audience. Within the concluding images of circularity and roundness on stage—images that reflect the cipher of "nothing" for those who lie dead within that sterile void—there is also a latent but powerful image of pregnancy, the image of "conceiving" announced in the play's very first pun during the Gloucester-Kent opening exchange. From the pain of submitting ourselves to a drama that John Keats defined as the "struggle betwixt damnation and impassioned clay," we are offered the possibility of a redemptive conception. And it is one that we must create *ex nihilo*. *King Lear* gives us no dramatized rebirth. But as it violates us, it leaves us with a particular ripeness, a conception that is modeled for us in Edgar's statement: "by the art of known and feeling sorrows, / I am pregnant to good pity" (4.6.222–23).

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The Language of Art

To the Editor:

Joseph Wiesenfarth's thoughtful discussion "*Middlemarch: The Language of Art*" (*PMLA* 97 [1982]:363–77) is not valid insofar as Wiesenfarth supposes Dorothea Brooke "unlike Ruskin in the compassion she has for labor that seems wasted" (367). For what Ruskin considered his central life's work—*Unto This Last* (1860)—specifically addresses misspent, wasted, and otherwise exploited labor, while the greater portion of his teaching elsewhere (including "The Nature of the Gothic") shows compassion for the worker, for whom he also designed *Fors Clavigera*.

The resemblance between Dorothea and Ruskin exists, in fact, more in their social compassion than in art-related similarities, and her response to the emeralds expresses a politico-economic rather than an "aesthetic" (364) discernment: "Yet what miserable men find such things and work at them and sell them!" (ch. 1). For this social assessment, there are numerous likenesses in Ruskin, including his judgment that "the cutting of precious stones" is slavery and the wearer a "slave-driver" (*Works* 10:198).

This view of a miserable labor producing gew-gaws for an idle class is but one indication that Dorothea has a Ruskinian morality long before she meets Ladislaw, whose "artistic" characterization Wiesenfarth has symbolized into an undeserved respect. In Dorothea's conversations with Will, he does not so much teach her as he prompts her to bring forward what she already knows; it is she who

teaches him, as Wiesenfarth appears to acknowledge when he says that Dorothea's relation with Will turns Will "from a third-rate artist into a first-rate public man" (371). While this perspective seems true, Wiesenfarth's insistence that Dorothea has to learn from Will "a language of art" without which she will remain "cut off from the deeper truths of nature and history and culture" (365) is untenable. Insofar as Wiesenfarth presumes to rely on Ruskin, he has seriously misconstrued *Modern Painters*.

For though Ruskin does call art "language" in the passage Wiesenfarth cites, Wiesenfarth deletes Ruskin's crucial qualification that this language is "by itself nothing" (*Works* 8:87). Ruskin's "language" consists, in fact, of "all those excellencies peculiar to the painter as such" and is therefore a technical power and not Ladislavian nomenclature. That Wiesenfarth intends only the latter is apparent when he says, "Knowledge of the language of painting . . . leads artist and critic to the true, the beautiful, and the good . . ." (365). Yet the only "language" artists can properly have (according to Ruskin) is right management of their instruments, and even this is subordinate to content: "It is not by the mode of representing and saying, but by what is represented and said that the respective greatness either of painter or the writer is to be finally determined" (*Works* 8:88).

Dorothea's rejection of the "language of art" Ladislav represents comes during a main encounter in which she describes her "belief" that "by desiring what is perfectly good, even when we don't quite know what it is and cannot do what we would, we are part of the divine power against evil—widening the skirts of light and making the struggle with darkness narrower." When Will replies, "That is a beautiful mysticism," Dorothea passionately interrupts, "Please not to call it by any name. . . . You will say it is Persian or something else geographical. It is my life. I have found it out, and cannot part with it" (ch. 39).

One final note. There is a doubt whether essayists have critical (as distinct from sentimental) right to call Casaubon's a "happy death" (365), for even though that misdirected scholar is a kind of miserable laborer and the convenient object of scorn in the *Middlemarch* triangle, he is more typically scholastic than not, which may account for the ridicule he seems to draw unwittingly from critics of his own persuasion. And though Wiesenfarth calls Casaubon's work "futile" (367), Casaubon's subject matter—*The Key to All Mythologies*—has in this era been readdressed, unmolested, by Northrop Frye: "It has long been the dream of students of occultism, mythology, and comparative religion

that some day a key to a universal language of symbolism will be discovered" (*The English Romantic Poets and Essayists*, ed. C. W. Houtchens and L. H. Houtchens [New York: MLA, 1957], 21).

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Mr. Wiesenfarth replies:

Anyone who has read my article on *Middlemarch* knows that it does not say what David-Everett Blythe says it says. Just as every statement that Ruskin makes in *Modern Painters* exists within a context, every statement that I make in my essay exists within a context too. I find no warrant in Ruskin for limiting the interpretation of the language of art to the management of instruments. Any reader of this controversy need only consult *Modern Painters*, where Ruskin speaks of the "technicalities, difficulties, and particular ends" of "painting, or art generally" as a "noble and expressive language" (*Works* 3:87). What I omit from my quotation is much less telling than what Blythe omits from his. Furthermore, it is demonstrable from George Eliot's review of Ruskin's Edinburgh lectures and from Ladislav's use of the "language of art" in *Middlemarch* that Eliot did not think of the phrase as limited in meaning to Blythe's reading of it. And that George Eliot's interpretation of Ruskin is central to the argument of my essay is self-evident. For that reason I used only those works of Ruskin that I could prove Eliot read to develop the argument of my essay. They are listed in note 3. I do not allude to *Unto This Last* or *Fors Clavigera*—both of which would have been useful to me—because there is no evidence that Eliot read them.

That *Unto This Last* shows Ruskin sympathetic to artisans in the way that Dorothea is to "miserable men" working in the gem trade is irrelevant to the context in which I write that "Dorothea is unlike Ruskin in the compassion she has for labor that seems wasted" (367). I am talking specifically here about a certain kind of "high-art" painting. Ruskin's scorn for artists who create and propagate it is illustrated by the quotation from him that I give immediately preceding the comparison: "To Ruskin, 'high-art' of the Overbeck kind is nonsense and the product of unrestrained vanity: 'the modern German and Raphaellesque schools lose all honour and nobleness in barber-like admiration of handsome faces, and have, in fact, no real faith except in straight noses and curled hair' (*Works* 5:57)" (367). I cite another instance of his scorn