

3. Arthur Symons, "The Decadent Movement in Literature," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 87 (June 1893): 858.
4. Paul Bourget, *Essais de Psychologie Contemporaine* (Paris: Lemerre, 1883), 25.
5. Susan Sontag, "Notes on Camp," *Partisan Review* 31, no. 4 (1964): 515–30, 517.
6. Sontag, "Notes," 516.
7. Symons, "The Decadent Movement," 859.
8. Max Beerbohm, "A Letter to the Editor," *The Yellow Book* 2 (July 1894): 284.
9. Sontag, "Notes," 522.
10. This image appeared in Beardsley's design for the title page of the 1894 Bodley Head edition of *Salome*. See Oscar Wilde, *Salome* (London: Elkin Mathews & John Lane, 1894).
11. R. Murray Gilchrist, "The Crimson Weaver," *The Yellow Book* 6 (July 1895): 270.
12. Sontag, "Notes," 523.



## Democracy

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WE have plenty of reasons to think about democracy just now. In ways that would have seemed frankly unimaginable a year or two ago, reference is being routinely made to the authoritarian and maybe inexorable decay of democratic norms in the otherwise staid opinion pages of *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and even *USA Today*. Just a month ago, E. J. Dionne (neither an alarmist nor a revolutionary) wrote about our Trumpian moment, "Democracies sometimes collapse suddenly. More typically, they waste away."<sup>1</sup> Maybe more worrisome is the fact that so many ordinary people seem already to have given up, seem, regardless of party affiliation, to have taken up a casually, if corrosively, skeptical attitude to elections that are the institutional basis of any democracy. If one group appears to believe that elections are "rigged" (fraudulent votes, stolen elections, hacked machines), the other seems to think most other voters are too bigoted, ill-informed, or stupid to

weigh in on important political questions. Both beliefs call the very act of voting into question, a fact that threatens to undermine institutional norms that make representative democracy possible.

Rather, then, than think about democracy in the large and sometimes fuzzy terms of an ethical ideal as opposed to a political norm, I want to look back to the Victorian period and to the Victorian novel in order to consider what we might take as democracy's procedural or logical minimum: the individual vote. Representative democracy depends on formal assumptions about votes and voting that were on the minds of some eminent Victorians as they considered electoral reform in 1832, 1867, 1872, 1884, and 1885. As Victorians argued about the more and less gradual expansion of the electorate, the nature of political representation, the costs and benefits of the secret ballot, and so on, they confronted essential questions about individual votes and whole elections as forms capable of representing preferences. Democracy, then and now, relies on a formal account both of the representational status of the single vote as an index of the individual's social preference and of the way individual votes are taken in aggregate to produce second-order representations of the preference of a group. More than that, and as electoral theorists (from the Marquis de Condorcet and Lewis Carroll to Joseph Schumpeter and Kenneth Arrow) have long argued, every effort to design a logically coherent electoral system must confront certain necessary limits. I want to argue that Victorians not only had to work through some of the limits and paradoxes immanent to democratic procedure but also used literary form as a way, if not to think through, at least to highlight those limits and those paradoxes.

Take *Middlemarch*: although George Eliot's novel is in some obvious sense about voting, the 1832 Reform Act, and its partial expansion of the franchise, it doesn't attend to the details of voting and elections in the same way that some other Victorian novels do. That is, although we follow Will Ladislaw as he works to return Mr. Brooke to Parliament as a reform candidate for the town of Middlemarch, Brooke's spectacularly tongue-tied failure on the hustings brings his campaign to an early end and pushes the details, the processes, the actual act of voting into the novel's background. Seen in these terms, it would make more sense to look at several of Trollope's novels, or to *Our Mutual Friend*, or even to Eliot's other novel of 1832, *Felix Holt, the Radical*, in order to understand how Victorian voting actually worked.

That said, although it hasn't the national consequence of a Reform Act, one fully represented election does appear in the novel. In the early

days of Lydgate's association with the banker Bulstrode, he is called upon to cast a vote for the new chaplain of the infirmary he oversees with Bulstrode, Brooke, and other Middlemarch notables. The choice is between Lydgate's new friend, Mr. Farebrother, and Bulstrode's man, Mr. Tyke. Although he leans initially towards Tyke despite his regard for Farebrother, Lydgate hesitates, finding the decision less difficult than personally galling: "But whichever way Lydgate began to incline, there was something to make him wince; and being a proud man, he was a little exasperated at being obliged to wince."<sup>2</sup> The issue is less about the relative merits of the two candidates, about whom Lydgate still knows little, than about how other people will interpret his vote. In the end, he votes for Tyke out of neither conviction nor convenience, but rather out of a kind of game-theoretical spite.

Coming last into the room, Lydgate has thus to cast the tie-breaking vote. Before he does, the phlegmatic Wrench chides him:

"The thing is settled now," said Mr. Wrench, rising. "We all know how Mr. Lydgate will vote."

"You seem to speak with some peculiar meaning, sir," said Lydgate, rather defiantly, and keeping his pencil suspended.

"I merely mean that you are expected to vote with Mr. Bulstrode. Do you regard that meaning as offensive?"

"It may be offensive to others. But I shall not desist from voting with him on that account."

Lydgate immediately wrote down "Tyke."<sup>3</sup>

Denying the good Farebrother a much-needed income, Lydgate's vote continues to make him wince: "The affair of the chaplaincy remained a sore point in his memory as a case in which this petty medium of Middlemarch had been too strong for him. How could a man be satisfied with a decision between such alternatives and under such circumstances? No more than he could be satisfied with his hat, which he has chosen from among such shapes as the resources of the age offer him, wearing it at best with a resignation which is chiefly supported by comparison."<sup>4</sup>

What happens here? Eliot's quick sartorial take feels weak insofar as it attributes Lydgate's consternation to the historically limited nature of any and every choice. Because we must choose between only the options that time and circumstance provide, no choice can be really objective or free; and Lydgate, whose chief fault is his inflated sense of independence from social and material constraint (what Eliot calls his "spots of commonness"), would chafe at the idea of choice as wholly conditioned by historical contingency. This sketchy analysis, however consonant with the novel's larger sense of the limits of historical agency, doesn't really

account for what's odd about Lydgate's vote. He doesn't vote for Tyke simply because he has to vote for *someone*; he votes for him because he wants, in a moment of pique, to show Wrench and the others that he doesn't care what they think. He votes against his inclination but not necessarily his interest in order assert his agency.

Lydgate's wince-inducing vote is thus an example of problems essential to the political representation of social preference. What *part* of Lydgate—his public preference, his personal interest, his claim to autonomy, his *amour propre*—is in fact represented by his vote? Given Lydgate's divided and avowedly irrational sense of what's at stake, which *person* votes when Lydgate votes for Tyke over Farebrother? Lydgate's problem is thus a nice instance of what Elaine Hadley takes as essential to debates that led up to Britain's adoption of the secret ballot in 1872: "the persistence of personation as a topic of debate, and therefore its persistence as a 'problem' for liberalism, suggests that the ballot unsuccessfully addresses a social alterity that once was and could be again the perilous or promising place of politics: as if the liberal citizen must always register in the possibility of personation his own representational inadequacy."<sup>5</sup> That is, in and around 1872, while Eliot was finishing *Middlemarch*, it was not clear that it was possible to represent oneself as a single and rational person in the form of a single vote. Arguing against the secret ballot in 1861, John Stuart Mill wrote that, "Though the community, as a whole, can have (as the terms imply) no other interest than its collective interest, any or every individual in it may. A man's interest consists of whatever he takes an interest *in*. Every body has as many different interests as he has feelings; likings or dislikings, either of a selfish or of a better kind."<sup>6</sup>

Eliot's sense of the internally divided nature of Lydgate's vote thus anticipates the economist Joseph Schumpeter's skeptical account of "the classical theory of democracy" in *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* (1942): "we still remain under the practical necessity of attributing to the will of the individual an independence and a rational quality that are altogether unrealistic. If we are to argue that the will of the citizens per se is a political factor entitled to respect, it must first exist. That is to say, it must be something more than an indeterminate bundle of vague impulses loosely playing about given slogans and mistaken impressions."<sup>7</sup> In order for the individual vote to count and to be counted as a representation of a discrete social preference, we have to imagine the person as a bearer of individual and autonomous preferences; and, because his preference is an incoherent and ironic mix of public feeling, private interest, and personal pique, Lydgate cannot cast his vote as a

single representation of an already available and single preference: he had not an opinion but rather “a vexed sense that he must make up his mind.”<sup>8</sup>

For Schumpeter and other electoral theorists, the ambiguity of the vote as form of representation leads to other, more systemic problems stemming from what we might call the bad transitivity of the individual vote. That is, when elections take several votes in aggregate as a representation of a group’s will, they assume individual votes as roughly equivalent to one another. In order to say that 5 beats 4 (that 5 is somehow more *significant* than 4), we must assign each of those votes an equal value. How, though, do we assign a stable quantitative value to the shifting quality of Lydgate’s acknowledged perplexity? In electoral theory, these questions are often asked in terms of voter intensity and voter ignorance: should elections take the intensity of a voter’s feelings into consideration? If 5 voting against a proposal don’t much care, and 4 voting for a proposal care passionately, should we say still that the 5 matter more? Is the vote of someone who knows nothing about a given issue equivalent to the vote of someone who knows everything? This core problem—democratic elections must assume a transitive relation between votes that votes cannot themselves formally support—is at the base of a number of discrete technical paradoxes that can undermine elections: Condorcet’s Paradox, the Winner-Turns-Loser Paradox, the No-Show Paradox, the Multiple-Districts Paradox, and so on.<sup>9</sup>

Given time, we could look to other examples to see where some Victorian writers used literary representation as a way to highlight and to think through some of these paradoxes. We could look at how Dickens and Trollope embed formal concerns about voter aggregation not only in the elections they occasionally represent but also in different theories of character that rely on the relation between major and minor, the one and the many as relative modes of preferential intensity. We could look, too, to William Morris’s brief account of voting in *News from Nowhere* to see where his democratic socialist’s skepticism turns not only on the affective limits of any given vote but also on an imagined and anachronistic point of contact between a novelistic present, a utopian future, and an imaginary and epic past. Or we could look to Lewis Carroll’s effort aesthetically to encode and to transcend the precise terms of Condorcet’s Paradox (an issue with which he grappled explicitly in his electoral theory) in the Dodo’s Caucus Race in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*.<sup>10</sup> The point, though, is not to resign either the Victorians or ourselves to a corrosive skepticism about elections and democracy. It is

rather to see that these logical limits and paradoxes, troubling as they are, are not an excuse to give up but are rather the very reason to value, to defend, and continuously to improve some of the democratic institutions and norms we already possess. To see, as some Victorian novels help us to see, that elections and democracy are *specifically* and *technically* imperfect is, I think, to acknowledge an opportunity and a responsibility to make them better. And if that's not a Victorian feeling, I don't know what is.

## NOTES

1. E. J. Dionne Jr., "Trump Is Faithfully Following the Autocrat's Playbook," *The Washington Post*, November 1, 2017.
2. George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000), 115.
3. Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 119.
4. Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 119.
5. Elaine Hadley, *Living Liberalism: Practical Citizenship in Mid-Victorian Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 227–28.
6. John Stuart Mill, *Considerations on Representative Government* (Charleston: Bibliobazaar, 2007), 147 (emphasis original).
7. Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008), 253.
8. Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 114.
9. See for example Christopher H. Achen and Larry M. Bartels, *Democracy for Realists: Why Elections Do Not Produce Responsive Government* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016); Kenneth Arrow, *Social Choice and Individual Values* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963); Robert A. Dahl, *A Preface to Democratic Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006); Peter C. Fishburn, "Paradoxes of Voting," *The American Political Science Review*, 68, No. 2 (1974): 537–546; Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (London: Verso, 2005); George G. Szpiro, *Numbers Rule: The Vexing Mathematics of Democracy, from Plato to the Present* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).
10. See Kent Puckett, "Caucus-Racing," *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 47, no. 1 (2014): 11–23.

