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Appearance and Reality In Middlemarch

WE MAY DESCRIBE the brilliance of *Middlemarch* in many ways. However one chooses to name and isolate its parts, no criticism can hope to explain its greatness. Like all masterful works of art, it eludes and survives its commentators, remaining detached and pacific, beyond the temporizing of critical styles. Yet, oddly enough, in literary criticism one may perform an act of love through explanation—a very un-Laurentian sentiment. We are otherwise left with nothing but silence, which, though devout in itself, does not always satisfy curiosity. What, then, is the Weltanschauung of so rich, so capacious a work of art as *Middlemarch*? We have no trouble identifying the subject. If nothing else, George Eliot's expansive canvas is an historical study of private lives and communal forces in the early Victorian Midlands of the 1830s. We see the manners and morals of numerous characters, major and minor, in an era of social transition and political change; the very assumptions, interests, and values of a society are put at an aesthetic distance for the reader's educated enjoyment. As Mary McCarthy has said, "In a single book, *Middlemarch,* George Eliot 'covers' English life and institutions, as found at their median point—a middling provincial town."

And what then? Where is unity beyond the median point of society?

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In this essay on *Middlemarch*—its themes, its characters and its world—I shall demonstrate how we may read a great novel from a wide angle of perception, one that is germane to all novels. I shall give a brief "reading" of the book by showing how appearance and reality pervade the social and psychological "realism" of a novel written in the Cervantic tradition. For in spite of what the standard histories of the novel say, Cervantes is George Eliot's master, as he is the master of practically all writers of prose fiction concerned with ordinary men and women rather than with romantic or epic heroes. This does not mean that ordinary men and women do not have an epic urge for a "life beyond self." They do. And in this conflict between the romance of desire and the strictures of prosaic reality the novelist discovers perennially fertile land.

In a justly famous essay, "Manners, Morals and the Novels," Lionel Trilling has observed that the novel since Cervantes has investigated the nature of what is real and false in the social world. The novel reveals the stability of society and yet criticizes its values as false and artificial. "Appearance and reality," however jaded, however vague that term has since become, is native to realistic prose fiction (the novel as opposed to the idealized romance), and it is still, I believe, the best phrase to describe the major concern of our classical novelists utilizing the classic Cervantic themes.

All literature, of course, imitates reality and is somehow concerned with truth and error. But the novel does it in a certain way—in chronological time, at a particular place, with average men and women of contemporary life, in the pages of a book rather than on a three-dimensional stage. In the largest sense, dramatic objectivity—the perception of other realities and the discernment of the many levels of individual character—is the ultimate wisdom we may take from our favorite novelists. And each great world of fiction invites us to a new perception of experience and a new scrutiny of reality. Many novelists, like D. H. Lawrence, have felt an almost priestly duty to reawaken the reader's senses to the world about him, to enlarge his sympathies towards others and thus to attain fulfillment within himself. Others are less vocal.

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Though no other literary genre has belonged so exclusively to the people or has defended the people's rights so vigorously, I do not mean that the classical novelist is always a propaganda merchant for democratic judgments and democratic feelings. The novelist does not merely expose false or conventional beliefs of individuals and societies. He is interested in more than what is wrong with Mrs. Grundy's reality. To add to Trilling's insight, we must hastily say that he goes beyond bourgeois reality and puts, as it were, all realities into perspective, "no man being anything whatsoever except by reflection." The large dreams by which Don Quixote, young Werther, Prince Andrew Bolkonsky, or Stephen Dedalus live are none the less impervious to psychological criticism for being imaginative, fervent, and idealistic. And so with Tertius Lydgate and Dorothea Brooke. It is not merely Edward Casaubon, Rosamond Vincy, and Bulstrode who are the self-deceivers. George Eliot is obviously more fond of Dorothea than Rosamond, but her "Study of Provincial Life," the novel's sub-title, invites us to examine the appearances and realities of all the characters in the complex Middlemarch community—the spiritually aspiring St. Theresas as well as the socially aspiring daughters of small-town mayors. In her own voice, as well as in her dialogue and description, she asks us to plunge within ourselves and to perform the critical act of self-detachment.

Whatever attitude the classical novelist expresses in presenting character—whether the sly, autumnal detachment of Cervantes, the "regulated hatred" of Jane Austen, the euphoric humor of Dickens, the subdued, prophetic fatalism of Tolstoy, the mordant objectivity of Flaubert, or the magisterial silence of Joyce—he seeks always to dramatize the private lives of his characters as they relate to the wider public life. As a skeptical psychologist with a journalistic penchant for fact, he cannot help seeing to what extent we are all victims of *Bovarysme*. Sensing this deeply, George Eliot throughout her fiction instinctively counsels the reader to understand and sympathize, to look beneath the appearances to a deeper reality within. She felt the urge so strongly that there is an incipient longing—an impatience with life as it exists at the mercy of chronological time—to express this more noble "reality" in terms of timeless enchantment. We sometimes feel romance on the

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fringes of her technique as much as we feel it in the aspiring lives of her Midland Dorotheas. In *Adam Bede,* for example, we are enjoined to read the Bunyanesque landscape closely, for the romanticized allegory enacted in the woods, behind the hedgerows, and on the dusty roads symbolizes vital spiritual needs as well as touching self-delusions. Yet her point is always the same; in *The Mill on the Floss,* where romance is almost negligible, the reality of Maggie Tulliver's behavior is much too complex to be judged by the appearances of her actions, though the raw forces of St. Ogg's puritanism do exactly that. As she tells us in a key passage, we are to reject maxims and general principles for "particular circumstances" and "spontaneous ideas."

Eliot's capacious but rigorous love—this is *her* tone—dominates her world-view so completely that it extends, perhaps to our annoyance, even to characters like Hetty Sorrel, Tom Tulliver, and Bulstrode, with whose stunted feelings we tend least to sympathize. Her authorial comments, in fact, often directly assault our own intellectual judgments, hence our preconceptions. One man's appearance may be another's reality. Bulstrode has no conception of his doubleness. To Eliot he is not, therefore, a hypocrite: "This was not what Mr. Bulstrode said to any man for the sake of deceiving him: it was what he said to himself—it was as genuinely his mode of explaining events as any theory of yours may be, if you happen to disagree with him. For the egoism which enters into our theories does not effect their sincerity; rather, the more our egoism is satisfied, the more robust is our belief." In this passage, and many similar ones, Eliot reminds us that true wisdom understands, if it does not approve of, other realities. It is important to remember, however, that her charity does not degenerate into an indiscriminate democratic relativism that ignobly blesses all failings; her sympathy never immobilizes her judgment, and her judgment has no self-righteous cant about it.

As I. A. Richards once said in lecture, no literary form is more "self-reflective" than the genre of the novel. Within the classical novel itself constant reference is made to the art of the novel. The novelist's awareness of narrative "realism" as an imitation of the real physical world that he wishes to reproduce in language paradoxically extends

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to a skeptical attitude towards the use of language. The novelist is sensitively alert to his own literary mode of expression: this story that imitates real life is itself the greatest illusion imaginable! When, for example, Cervantes has characters in Part II comment on Part I, he sets, as Harry Levin has shown, the "example" that all novelists emulate. It is conventional for characters within novels (to say nothing of authors of novels) to comment upon novels and novel-reading. Rosamond Vincy's terrible reverence for mere appearances is effectively revealed by her comment to her brother Fred about George Eliot's beloved art. This alone is enough to damn her: " 'Fred's studies are not very deep,' said Rosamond, rising with her mama, 'he is only reading a novel.' " This convention parallels the soliloquy of the drama in which a character may comment directly to the audience, as Iago comments, outrageously, on the very role he is playing: "And what's he then that says I play the villain,/ When this advice is free I give and honest."

A subsidiary theme of appearance and reality, then, is the classical novelist's interest in language itself. To illustrate the linguistic confusion among characters in *Middlemarch* we would need a long essay alone on the ways in which the actors misunderstand each other as a result of the inadequacy of language, or rather as a result of their inability to use language adequately. Mr. Tulliver in *The Mill on the Floss* has a nearly primitive superstition about the power of language: Lawyer Wakem is a kind of devil possessed of a mysterious Faustian word-horde to prevent a man from obtaining his own water rights. In *Middlemarch* there are many moments of psychological crisis among pairs of characters when an emotional block prevents one from uttering his deepest feelings to the other. It is chiefly through her reaction to Casaubon's language that Dorothea begins to comprehend the "anterooms and winding passages" of his mind. But, as Eliot points out, Casaubon "was as genuine a character as any ruminant animal, and he had not actively assisted in creating any illusions about himself." His vocabulary has not changed, and the illusion of his understanding of great matters was always of Dorothea's own making:

> In their conversation before marriage, Mr. Casaubon had often dwelt on some explanation or questionable detail of which Dorothea

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> did not see the bearing; but such imperfect coherence seemed due to the brokenness of their intercourse, and, supported by her faith in their future, she had listened with fervid patience to a recitation of possible arguments to be brought against Mr. Casaubon's entirely new view of the Philistine god Dagon and other fish-deities, thinking that hereafter she should see this subject which touched him so nearly from the same high ground whence doubtless it had become so important to him. Again, the matter-of-course statement and tone of dismissal with which he treated what to her were the most stirring thoughts, was easily accounted for as belonging to the sense of haste and preoccupation in which she herself shared during the engagement.

A full comment on appearance and reality in language in *Middlemarch* would have to account not only for the ways in which the main characters misinterpret and abuse language but also for the crowd scenes of high and low life in which, for example, there is great speculation about whether Dorothea will marry again, whether reform will ever come to England, or whether Lydgate ought or ought not to prescribe drugs. About all of this political and social gossip Eliot is appropriately clinical and ironic. Lydgate's future as a doctor is being determined—saved or broken—by well-intentioned but ignorant citizens who cannot resist playing a guessing game about the efficacy of his new medical techniques or the political purity of his motives. Eliot is very clear about the verbal confusion: "Thus it happened that on this occasion Bulstrode became identified with Lydgate, and Lydgate with Tyke; and owing to this variety of interchangeable names for the chaplaincy question, diverse minds were enabled to form the same judgment concerning it."

These roustabout debates in Eliot often correspond to the joyous confusion Cervantes and Fielding depict in scenes at inns or along the road or among servants, where crowds gather and strident Rumor dominates the action. Servants (Sancho Panza and Partridge) know both more and less than their masters, and comedy results from the clash of fact and fancy. We remember that Pratt, Dorothea's butler, "knew the fact of which Ladislaw was still ignorant [the codicil in Casaubon's will barring Dorothea's marriage to Ladislaw] and had drawn his inferences; indeed, had not differed from his betrothed Tantripp when she said, '*Your* master [Casaubon] was as jealous as a fiend—and no reason.

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Madam would look higher than Mr. Ladislaw else I don't know her.' " But Tantripp, Dorothea's maid, doesn't know her Madam any more than Casaubon did, for Dorothea marries Ladislaw, grandson of a Polish Jew, and shocks her sister, Sir James, and Middlemarch in general. Eliot delights no less than Cervantes, Fielding, and Stendhal (where would the list end?) in showing how far-fetched verbal speculation about another person's reality can become. This fascination with levels of appearances can even work to her detriment. In certain chapters of *Felix Holt, A Radical* there are so many clashing political and social "realities" that the reader follows with difficulty the debates and levels of intrigue. One flaw of that novel is a superabundance of reportorial data. A novelist's realism may sometimes overwhelm the reader's credulity.

One of the main themes in *Middlemarch,* then, is the elaborate and intriguing ways in which each character constructs his intellectual beliefs in order to explain reality satisfactorily to himself. Those who are deeply deceived wish even to hide truths they themselves subconsciously suspect. Others face disenchantment, and, though sacrificing ideals to stubborn facts, find a painful lesson in self-understanding. These are the ones most likely to share in the spontaneous feelings of life that Eliot hopes to awaken in the reader. But how does the theme of appearance and reality serve to advance the action of this particular novel? What movement or "action" does the plot make?

Why *Middlemarch, A Study of Provincial Life*? The characters are not isolated, of course; they comprise the most representative community in George Eliot's imaginative recreations—from the Dowager Lady Chettam to the drunken tenant farmer Dagley. And they are all aware, relatively speaking, of one social fact that dominates the mood and tone of the historical setting. The word "reform" and the spirit of reform echo throughout the novel with rhythmical variation. Some are ignorant of reform and sense only vaguely the ferment of a wider public life. Others are conscious of reform and aggressively pursue its spirit.

In *Middlemarch* the idea of reform, if not its achievement, is the leitmotif of both the community and of its individual members during

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the early years of that key decade. Viewed broadly, reform is yet another way of expressing the appearance and reality of the individual and of the communal character. England's bent for social changes and self-improvement is reflected above all in the idealistic quests of Dorothea and Lydgate. Their altruism is ardently but unwisely devoted to a quick reform of the status quo. They are representatives of their era, advanced and eager reformers. Lydgate wants to become a great doctor who will combine practical medicine with productive research. Dorothea has many "plans" (how ironic that word becomes as the novel develops). The first is to improve the conditions of the workers on Sir James Chettam's estate. In general she seeks an epic sense of immediate usefulness in her religious dedication to the community and to other lives. In the social enthusiasm of Dorothea and Lydgate, however psychologically tainted it may be, there is a genuine search for the psychological "life beyond self."

Yet the St. Theresa theme of reform—self-betterment leading to a spiritual fulfillment—applies to all of the characters. Each in his own way aspires, searches, and believes. Sir James Chettam, more conservative than liberal, is amenable to reform, although he does not understand to what degree he depends upon Dorothea's approval of his motives. Although Casaubon's Syntoptical Tabulation is an absurd appearance to Ladislaw and a tragic fact to Dorothea, Casaubon himself genuinely believes his work of a lifetime will advance man's knowledge. He thinks he is reforming theology, though he is pathetically behind the times. Ladislaw's religion is to worship beauty, and with romantic wanderlust he searches vaguely for it in all of its aesthetic forms. He is Eliot's representative of the young bohemian, the social rebel of the avant-garde. Bulstrode's great philanthropic aim is the construction of a new hospital, and in view of his evangelical belief in good works, "reform" is on his tongue with cant repetition. Even the addled Mr. Brooke runs on the Reform ticket, although he has no practical idea of what reform is. Fred Vincy's dream is to become a gentleman with a rich inheritance, and his sister Rosamond wishes a fashionable marriage that will enable her to leave provincial

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Middlemarch permanently. All trades, professions, and social ranks in *Middlemarch* are placed against the social background of reform.

Yet as he attempts to rearrange or "re-form" his reality, each character in his own way is seriously deluded about the realistic chances of attaining his ideals. And so we come to the central theme of disenchantment associated with the ideals, projects, hopes, and plans of Middlemarch citizens. We can say of *Middlemarch* that many changes occur during the reform period, but we must hastily add that change is as much a slipping backward as a moving forward, as much an appearance as a reality. Growth appears in fits and starts, and regression as much as progress is characteristic of the evolving life Eliot chooses to dramatize. How important this statement is to an understanding of the "action" and the plotting of the novel: "For the fragment of a life, however typical, is not the sample of an even web: promises may not be kept, and an ardent outset may be followed by declension; latent powers may find their long-waited opportunity; a past error may urge a grand retrieval." George Eliot's own variegated web—the only genuinely adult novel in English fiction said Virginia Woolf—expresses pictorially the depth and the expansiveness of communal life in a state of constant unfolding. But she never freezes the endlessness of becoming into the popularized dogma of nineteenth-century Victorian progress. Like so many of her genuinely intellectual contemporaries she saw existence, somewhat tenuously, with the tempered sight of a conservative reformer.

Although *Daniel Deronda*, her next and last novel, expressed her darkest feelings about man's reasoning powers, nowhere in her fiction does she think of the past with the black pessimism of the American romancer, or of the future with the jejeune religiosity of the liberal European novelist. Reform, in other words, is a painstaking, very English process of meliorism in both public and private life—it is halting, regressive, painful, confused, startling, and obscure. In one way or another each *Middlemarch* character has mistakenly appraised the relationship of his desires to the hard facts of the stubborn world.

Disenchantment is the painful result of still perceiving things as they might be (appearances), not as they actually have become

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(reality). As she shows individuals struggling to mould life to their own wishes, Eliot records the process of their disenchantment. She shows their awareness and unawareness, their knowledge and their ignorance of the choices they make and of the beliefs they follow. Dorothea above all has will and ardent desire, but little psychological perception into the lives of others, and no social possibility of putting her plans of reform into action. In Chapter II of Book I Eliot quotes a typical bit from Cervantes in which the Don and Sancho discuss the reality of a barber's basin, which Don Quixote has transformed into Mambrino's helmet. Dorothea is the female Quixote whose short-sightedness (it is mentioned a number of times) spiritualizes Casaubon's appearance into something heroic and utterly false. Because reality is subjective, Casaubon becomes an intellectual hero matching Dorothea's ardent dream for a Locke or a Milton as a husband. But to Celia, who has more perception but less feeling than Dorothea, he is an old man who makes noise with his soup. To Sir James he is merely a humorous figure with a bad cut to his legs.

Lydgate, too, learns with wry bitterness of the world's stubborn resistance to his ambitions. In choosing the infantile blonde, Rosamond Vincy, he makes a familial and financial mess of his life. Eliot puts it quite simply—in spite of his intellectual powers, Lydgate knows little about women and furniture. And, by the way, these count immensely in the "reality" that the genre of the novel records. His "spot of commonness" transforms Rosamond into a beautiful repose from the ardor of his work. He sees only her external beauty, none of her inward limitations.

Eliot leads both Lydgate and Dorothea down the novelist's familiar path of disenchantment—both falsely romanticize their choice of mates. And we observe, not without detachment, the very process of their wide-eyes responses. For both it is truly a matter of limited vision. But confusions in love extend to Rosamond and to Casaubon as well. Rosamond has no insight into Lydgate's ideals. She is blandly destructive of every altruistic desire he cherishes. Nor can Casaubon understand why Dorothea married him nor how he can give her the sense of usefulness she demands from life. The delusions of the other charac-

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ters are also deep. For a long time Ladislaw and Fred Vincy fool themselves into thinking that life supplies interests and prosperity without much effort. Their common problem is to understand the relation between work and time. The dullness of quotidian reality is again the proper subject for the novel. Bulstrode's *innocent* hypocrisy is complete; it sets the tone of even his spiritual life—it enables him in the most secretive manner possible to commit legal murder. Nor does Casaubon ever admit that his *magnum opus* is impossibly out-of-date, dead before he even starts it. It is perfectly apt that aspiration and disenchantment should be studied in a social setting as formative and evolving as that of the early 1830s.

In the anti-heroic, anti-romantic Midlands of historical England, Eliot creates, as it were, the youthful tone—the liberal ferment—of a developing era full of social changes, new opportunities, and important choices. Even the two words of the novel's title suggest a barely perceptible poise between two seasons and between two geographical places. And appropriately *Middlemarch* is a novel about a time and a place in which the destinies of "young lives" are decided by marriage as well as by career. For all of the eligible men and women court, choose, and settle down into what, in the novel's "Finale," Eliot calls "the beginning of the home epic." To gossip and intrigue, dreams, plans, reform, aspiration, disenchantment, money, furniture, work, time, and career, we add—courtship and marriage.

> Every limit is a beginning as well as an ending. Who can quit young lives after being long in company with them, and not desire to know what befell them in their after-years? For the fragment of a life, however typical, is not the sample of an even web: promises may not be kept, and an ardent outset may be followed by declension; latent powers may find their long-waited opportunity; a past error may urge a grand retrieval.
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> Marriage, which has been the bourne of so many narratives, is still a great beginning, as it was to Adam and Eve, who kept their honeymoon in Eden, but had their first little one among the thorns and thistles of the wilderness. It is still the beginning of the home epic—the gradual conquest or irremediable loss of that complete union which makes the advancing years a climax, and age the harvest of sweet memories in common.

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Of all the choices to be made, marriage is perhaps the most important, for it is the irrevocable union of one life with another. Harassed by indecision all his life, Mr. Brooke chooses never to make that choice. Underneath this genial uncle is a "scrappy slovenliness" degenerating into a timid fear of life and love. Sir James Chettam chooses Celia, Fred Vincy Mary Garth, Casaubon Dorothea, Lydgate Rosamond, and Ladislaw Dorothea. Dorothea chooses twice, and Rosamond flirts twice. But choices may also be rejections, and a man's character may be determined not only by the woman he chooses but also by those he has rejected. Dorothea turns down Sir James and Mary Garth refuses Mr. Farebrother. Ladislaw decides not to flirt with Rosamond. A resounding irony, one that must remain largely unspoken, is that the two who from the beginning seem in character most alike, Dorothea and Lydgate, are never granted the opportunity of discovering each other until after each is married. Then one of the tender triumphs of the book begins in the developing relationship, a mature friendship full of good will and honest feeling, between Lydgate and Dorothea. (It is a remarkable example of the rare friendship that infrequently exists between a man and a woman, one that is just this side of amorousness.)

In her domestic definition of marriage as the "home epic," Eliot provides an unconscious description of the classical novel nicely paralleling Fielding's "comic epic in prose." Both phrases are oblique commentaries on the demise of the epic genre, of the popular literature devoted to the lives of saints, and of the medieval romances. Both phrases succinctly express the novel's endless concern for daily life, with all its minor frustrations and major joys.

Dorothea and Lydgate, together with Ladislaw and Fred Vincy, have "problems." But in spite of their problems, they form a group of characters who are saved from a gracelessly neurotic existence largely because of their sensitivity to the directions in which life is leading them. They become educated, as it were, in disillusionment, able to accept it and to lead ordinary if not epic lives. Here, as so often in Eliot, their disenchantment is a major theme. Yet they somehow learn to grasp the sense of realistic fact that the novelist himself uses for the basis of his art. This change occurs, naturally, at the

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expense of the spirit of romance. They necessarily learn to rest more easily with what they cannot have, although in Lydgate's acceptance of Rosamond's elusive obstinacy the ruin of his ambitions becomes truly pathetic. "His skill was relied on by many paying patients, but he always regarded himself as a failure; he had not done what he once meant to do," the Finale says in summary of his life. His research on the organic principle of life—how significant!—has become a treatise on that aristocratic disease, the gout.

Dorothea, at least, finds a more satisfactory mate. But she has become a motherly housewife. She too is foundress of nothing, ". feeling that there was always something better which she might have done, if she had only been better and known better." In a husband and family she finds at least limited fulfillment. Fred Vincy gives up the vain wish for the idle life and accepts a job and a sensible wife—and takes a step downward in the society of Middlemarch. The native resourcefulness of all these "positive" characters admits them to Eliot's version of Dante's purgatory—the mythical place where, his vision readjusted, one willingly accepts the *realistic* burden of reform and self-improvement. Lydgate's compromise, as he tells Dorothea, is to develop a suffering patience before Rosamond's "torpedo contact." He knowingly becomes a martyr to his own imperfect marriage. In the epic, man lives a public-spirited life of honor, but Lydgate's reality is pathetically defined by Rosamond's caprice—by the character of a woman rather than by the heroic quest or the gods.

Although they are close in spirit to the group I have just defined, Celia Brooke, the Reverend Cadwallader, Mary and Caleb Garth, and Mr. Farebrother are essentially more static, minor characters, whose lives are without great turbulence. Yet, in contrast to the major characters, they are meant to possess the kind of wise repose that also takes its place in Eliot's studies of reform. Portraits and Attitudes of Reform, we might fancifully subtitle the novel. They do not *desire* as much as the others and so disenchantment does not pursue them. They have given up the useless struggle for romantic fulfillment. (This is both their strength and their weakness.) They are, essentially, relative studies in the virtues of common sense. Realists all, they are either

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natively shrewd, tolerant, or knowing. All seem to have been made passive, mellow, or wise by experience. And significantly they have no dogma to advance to improve the state of the world.

Superficially their wisdom seems exemplary; they illustrate not only a rather eighteenth-century golden mean of adjustment, but also traditional novelistic compromises to the endless struggles between appearances and realities. Celia, who is amusingly tolerant of "Dodo's planning," is Sancho Panza to her sister, just as the Reverend Cadwallader is to his wife, who constantly plays a luckless game of matchmaking. Caleb Garth tells Fred Vincy exactly what Huck Finn in effect says to Tom Sawyer (that boy pedant who always plays by the rules): "A good deal of what I know can only come from experience, you can't learn it off as you learn things out of a book." His mellow wisdom, which is never as intriguing to Eliot as the knowledge that aspires high, is more trenchantly witty in his daughter Mary ("ten to one you will see a face like hers in the crowded street to-morrow") who, like the provincial Jane Austen, has the novelist's quickness of insight into the social intrigue about her. She enjoys looking into the firelight and meditating, "for having early had strong reason to believe that things were not likely to be arranged for her peculiar satisfaction, she wasted no time in astonishment and annoyance at that fact. And she had already come to take life very much as a comedy in which she had a proud, nay, a generous resolution not to act the mean or treacherous part." Mr. Farebrother, who tries so hard to educate Lydgate to the virtues of reconciliation, is the epitome of the genially wise and non-doctrinal clergyman in Eliot's novels. Always kind and tolerant, he is nostalgically aware that he might have done something else with his life had he had more will and fewer female relatives to care for. "I shall never be a man of renown. The choice of Hercules is a pretty fable."

To see the function of this group in the scheme of the novel, we must recognize how traditional their attitudes are in the empirical pragmatism that the classical novelist since Cervantes has, with a part of his heart, advanced as the "truth": imitate Sancho Panza, leave off matchmaking, throw away the book, develop the comic sense, ridicule

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romance, beware of playing the hero! Yet, were we to look more closely at their characters we should note that Eliot has offset the balance of their "wit" with subtle foibles—a silly domesticity in Celia, for example, and in Farebrother too quick an eagerness to play the role of the failure and to judge others solely by his own experience. Their basic fault as a group is that they do *not* feel the tug of romance. They do not aspire to reform, though they do not really oppose it.

A third group of characters whose lives are intricately related to the pattern of Middlemarch society are put in strong psychological contrast to Dorothea, Lydgate, Ladislaw, Fred Vincy (and even Mr. Brooke). Utterly unable to stand outside themselves, they have no insight into their own reality. These "negative" characters are essentially self-destructive, full of neurotic strength and inhibitions. Their weakness becomes especially clear in moments of crisis. If hell exists in George Eliot it is undoubtedly in the sickness of self-security. They rarely doubt their beliefs; "reform" for them is merely an egoistic urge to strengthen their grasp on their own private reality. We see their egoism most clearly in their relation to others; they find it impossible to share the ordinary give-and-take of human relationships. They characteristically double the force of their wills against any opposition threatening their inward beliefs. And in this respect they are the true dogmatists of the novel, clutching their fetishes rigidly to their bosoms. Casaubon, Bulstrode, and Rosamond—who compose this contrasting group—merely harden their illusions when they sense challenge. They are utterly impervious to criticism, and hence to self-knowledge. They even reject understanding and compassion. These, rather than the less willful group, are the ones who become desperate when true suffering comes into their daily routines, forcing their precarious secrets into the open.

With more compassion than most people can feel, Eliot reveals their deepest doubts and fears. We see, for example, how under Dorothea's innocent probing of the progress of his great work, Casaubon actually wills his own heart attack and death. This seems to be the pathetic penalty he pays for his willful ignorance. Bulstrode commits himself so strongly to the illusions of his own virtuous power that he

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virtually guarantees his own downfall. Public disgrace comes inevitably as a result of the persistent lies he tells to himself and to others. And briefly—but only briefly—we see despair on Rosamond's composed face when Ladislaw disappoints her neurotic search for romance beyond marriage. Perhaps she alone emerges untouched.

The subtle movements of characters in an endless state of becoming show how careful we must be in generalizing about any single character's reality. The will to fulfill desire is always an important faculty in Eliot's psychology, and we must judge character by determination as much as by sympathy. Some characters have too much will (Casaubon) or not enough (Mr. Brooke); others live too diligently (Lydgate) or too permissively (Ladislaw) with their ideals. But we need only consult again the often-quoted Prelude to see how aspiration and desire, however they combine with will in individual motivation, ultimately result in frustration and a bewildered sense of life's opportunity having passed by. If we take the St. Theresa legend as a parable with meaning for the community of Middlemarch, and not just as a biographical revelation of George Eliot or as a description of Dorothea alone, then the Prelude is, after all, the best summary of what the novel is all about. Middlemarch, indeed, is made up of a few failed saints and many average sensual people.

The pressures upon its citizens are both inward and outward. As Eliot never tires of showing, they mould Middlemarch and Middlemarch moulds them. Beyond any single destiny, the community itself has caught the word "reform." And the choric discussions between citizens about public events and issues is not simply an unrelated background of social realism. Village gossip about Whigs and Tories, high and low church doctrine and politics, the Catholic Bill for emancipation, the new hospital and scientific advances in medicine, the railways invading the fertile Middlemarch farmlands—these many topical allusions to the decade of George IV and of Queen Victoria are functional reminders of progress and reform, whether real or imagined, in mid-century England. In the public discussions and in the interplay of argument and debate there is as much comedy, misunderstanding, deceit, and supersition—as much egoism—as in the life of any single

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person. The dramatic changes in political and social history—of England on the threshold of Victorian turmoil—parallel the pattern of development in the lives of individual members of the Middlemarch community. Eliot shows the delicate poise of individual history and of communal history moving from one era into another.

In Eliot's novels, therefore, society is never delineated merely as a political and economic entity in which the individual's life is defined by shapes and pressures from customs, institutions, and governments—all external stimuli making their imprint upon a bundle of nervous reflexes known as the psyche. Such a modern "psycho-sociological" notion, as the jargon might go, is too limited and confining, too simple-minded for her large-minded appraisals of human conditions. External forces undeniably work against character, but Eliot's novels never simplify existence into an easy triumph of outward pressures over inner endowments. The strands of human involvement are so various that the idea of a society "out there," separate and distinct from each life, is a grand illusion. Society is instead a complex interweaving of lives. It is as various—as stubborn and intractable and as generous and liberal—as the individuals who compose it. It is impossible to say of Middlemarch, "This is it." Middlemarch is an amalgam, not a solvent; it is a complex system of checks and balances rather than an authoritarian fixture. And there is apparently no greater creative joy for George Eliot than in the dramatic rendering of this rich variety of the appearances and the realities of life.

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