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THE DIALOGIC UNIVERSE OF *MIDDLEMARCH*

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The rediscovery of the work of M. M. Bakhtin in recent years has led to a quantum leap in the understanding of the stylistics of the novel. Bakhtin's treatment of the novel as an emergent genre, one that resists canonization and opposes itself to canonized genres, and as an art form that works as a meeting-place for many different voices drawn from literature and from wider social discourses, has proven very fruitful for an understanding of the language(s) of novels.[1] Bakhtin's examples of novels that employ polyphonic, dialogized language are drawn from Rabelais, Dickens, and Dostoevsky, among others.[2] But many novelists that he does not treat are similarly oriented, in terms of style, toward the linguistic world that they portray. George Eliot is not usually considered alongside Rabelais or Dostoevsky, but she belongs to the tradition of many-voiced texts in which they wrote. *Middlemarch* is one of the greatest achievements of dialogic fiction.

More than any other English novel, *Middlemarch* constructs its own heteroglot universe. The Loamshire village of the novel displays what Bakhtin calls "the internal stratification of any single national language into social dialects, characteristic group behavior, professional jargons, generic languages, languages of generations and age groups, tendentious languages, languages of the authorities, of various circles and of passing fashions, languages that serve the specific sociopolitical purposes of the day, even of the hour . . . this internal stratification present in every language at any given moment of its historical existence" (pp. 262-63).[3] The linguistic world of *Middlemarch* is, as far as Eliot can create it, a self-contained universe, complete with its own stratifications and competing dialects.

The gossip and dialects of Middlemarch form a matrix for the development of the characters. Dorothea, Lydgate, and Will Ladislaw oppose their own "pure" languages to the noisy, stratified ones of Middlemarch. Naturally, they fail in this attempt, being unable to transcend the speaking community they are embedded in. Still, Eliot is far from presenting their struggles in a satiric or cynical light. The struggles of the three young characters eventually connect them, making

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sympathy and true communication possible. Dorothea ultimately manages to create a restricted community of expression by her sympathetic understanding of the languages of those closest to her. Such sympathetic construction of linguistic community is Eliot's main aim as a novelist, as she speaks with the different voices of Middlemarch and unites them with her own authorial voice.

We can best trace the contours of the linguistic world of *Middlemarch* by charting the struggles of Dorothea, Lydgate, and Will to transcend that world. The struggle between the individual voice and the circumstances of the linguistic community is central right from the start, in Eliot's "Prelude." Many women have had the makings of a Theresa within them, and "with dim lights and tangled circumstance they tried to shape their thought and deed in noble agreement; but after all, to common eyes their struggles seemed mere inconsistency and formlessness; for these later-born Theresas were helped by no coherent social faith and order which could perform the function of knowledge for the ardently willing soul" (Prelude:3).[4] The key terms in Eliot's picture of the unrecognized Theresas are "to common eyes" and "no coherent social faith and order." One's achievement, in a given linguistic milieu, cannot transcend the material one has to work with—the language of the community itself. Theresa built her order from her society's "coherent social faith." But in Dorothea's England of 1829 (or Eliot's of 1871) the social material is less coherent, less useful for building.

In particular, Dorothea's immediate world—that of the local gentry—displays a diverse and contradictory language. She has grown up with heteroglossia, from her European education to the daily conversation of her uncle Mr. Brooke. In Chapter 2, the vagueness and confusion of conversation even about common objects in this milieu is signalled by the epigraph, where Sancho and Don Quixote debate about the golden helmet. Brooke is unable to make sense on any subject; he has "documents," but "they want arranging" (p. 19). Brooke asserts that "he himself was a Protestant to the core, but that Catholicism was a fact" (p. 19). Meanwhile Dorothea herself participates in the general round of misinterpretations, reading Chettam's courtship as mere politeness because she assumes he is interested in Celia.

Dorothea is clearly dismayed by the stagnation and inertia of the talk surrounding her; she wishes to transcend the voices of her uncle's disorganized "documents." She transfers her desire onto Casaubon's "Key to All Mythologies," a great centripetal force that she feels can unite all the fragmentary dialects around her. "He had undertaken to show . . . that all the mythical systems or erratic mythical fragments in the world were corruptions of a tradition originally revealed" (p. 23). Casaubon's project is an example of what Bakhtin calls "the category of 'unitary language'" (p. 271), akin to the search for the Indo-European root language. Whether the sought-for-object is real (like Indo-European) or illusory (Casaubon's "Key"), the impulse to seek it is the expression of a centripetal trend in living language. "A unitary language gives expression to

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forces working toward concrete verbal and ideological unification and centralization, which develop in vital connection with the processes of sociopolitical and cultural centralization" (p. 271). This project is just what Dorothea needs; Casaubon's apparent transcendence of her heteroglot world combines religion and self-abnegation, for her, and the fact that she understands little of it is almost a guarantee of its purity.

Remarkably similar to Casaubon's "Key," or at least to Dorothea's idealization of it, is Lydgate's project to discover the nature of "the primitive tissue." Lydgate longs to extend the work of the French physiologist Bichat. "This great seer did not go beyond the consideration of the tissues as ultimate facts in the living organism, marking the limit of anatomical analysis, but it was open to another mind to say, have not these structures some common basis from which they have all started, as your sarsnet, gauze, net, satin and velvet from the raw cocoon?" (p. 146). Lydgate's assumptions mirror Casaubon's precisely. Given the appearance of the world as a Babel of contrary voices, each man decides that an underlying, univocal reality must be underneath that appearance. Any superficial diversity must be the result of corruption or accident.

"But the centripetal forces of the life of language, embodied in a 'unitary language,' operate in the midst of heteroglossia" (Bakhtin, p. 271). By the time Dorothea meets him, Casaubon has already run up against the heteroglot world. Try as he may to keep his search for the "Key to All Mythologies" pure and monologic, he is drawn irresistibly into a dialogue with other researchers. The great aim is continually deflected as Casaubon stops to conduct verbal skirmishes with his detractors. "The difficulty of making his Key to All Mythologies unimpeachable weighed like lead upon his mind: and the pamphlets—or 'Parerga' as he called them—by which he tested his public and deposited small monumental records of his march, were far from having been seen in all their significance" (p. 273). To Will Ladislaw, who sees only these "Parerga," Casaubon is merely "crawling a little way after men of the last century . . . and correcting their mistakes" (p. 217). But Eliot, though giving this contemptuous view of Casaubon some dialogic play, refuses to be contemptuous of Casaubon in her own voice. Dorothea, naturally, is the slowest to see that the centripetal impulse of Casaubon's work has been altogether diffused into dialogue.

When we first meet Lydgate in Chapters 10-18, he has not yet experienced the disillusionment that Casaubon has come to know (if not admit). Much of the development of his character is the record of slow deflections of purpose, of compromises with the heteroglot world around him. Lydgate's purpose is seen, over and over again, as double: to be a good practitioner and a great scientist. For him, medicine offers "the most direct alliance between intellectual conquest and the social good. Lydgate's nature demanded this combination" (p. 142). "The two purposes would illuminate each other . . . he would be a good Middlemarch doctor, and by that very means keep himself in the track of far-reaching investigation" (p. 144). But in longing to live in both worlds—the univocal quest

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for "the primitive tissue" and the heteroglot society of Middlemarch—Lydgate assures his own comeuppance. It will be an especially bitter one because there is no strictly logical contradiction between his two purposes; he simply confronts the embeddedness that resists any transcendent impulse.

Will Ladislaw has a similar faith in pure language, although in his case it is poetic, not scientific; and this poetic conception of language makes him far more able to move between dialects than Lydgate, or, initially, Dorothea. When his friend Naumann wants to paint Dorothea, in Chapter 19, Will asks "What is a portrait of a woman? Your painting and Plastik are poor stuff after all. They perturb and dull conceptions instead of raising them. Language is a finer medium . . . Language gives a fuller image, which is all the better for being vague" (p. 186). He idealizes Dorothea in a purely linguistic way, which allows him to say "I have only seen her once before, for a couple of minutes" (p. 185), but then to say just afterward "her voice is much diviner than anything you have seen of her" (p. 186). It is a voice of which Will himself has heard just four sentences, none of them addressed directly to him (pp. 77-78). But his concept of the purity and power of language leads him to ascribe the greatest possible virtue to Dorothea's language.

Will must, like Lydgate, enter the linguistic realm of Middlemarch. And for someone with such a profound faith in language, it is ironic that he is brought into Middlemarch for the impossible job of "arranging" Mr. Brooke's ideas and "making his mind tell upon the world at large" (p. 350) as editor of The *Pioneer*. Brooke, whose original pure intentions have subsided into a vague sense of understanding things in general, is taken with Will's idealism, which he calls "a fine thing under guidance" (p. 350). But Brooke's guidance consists of diffusing Will's energies and his own by qualifying their purpose until it isn't clear what the purpose is. When he is to stand for Parliament, in Chapter 46, he wants to adopt—and to critique—all sorts of radical voices. Will sounds the note of centripetality: "If you go in for the principle of Reform, you must be prepared to take what the situation offers . . . If everybody pulled for his own bit against everybody else, the whole question would go to tatters" (p. 451). And of course Brooke's electioneering does go to tatters when his wandering speech invites a pelting in Chapter 51.

But in the course of helping Brooke, Will comes to a different reconciliation of his idealism with the Middlemarch milieu than Lydgate or Dorothea. Ironically, he is far more successful in his work for the community than Lydgate, because he has far less initial commitment. In fact, his commitment is entirely personal—a desire to be near Dorothea—and his joy in establishing communication with her spreads to encompass a dialogue with the entire community. Part of Will's attractiveness is his ability to speak so many of the stratified languages of the town. His mixed origin leads many not to trust him, but it also means that he can enter many of the small speaking communities, being equally an outsider in each. He converses fluently with Brooke, the Farebrothers (especially Miss

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Noble). Trumbull, the Bulstrodes, and all the children of the village. The most imperfect linguistic community is that of the Lydgates, who never manage to speak the same language; but in Book 5 we see Will providing both Lydgate and Rosamond with the kind of interlocutor neither has found in the other. Will's sympathy with so many points of view helps make the final reconciliations of the novel possible.

The stories of Will, Lydgate, and Dorothea revolve around their desire to transcend the heteroglot community. What gives the novel its unique texture, however, is Eliot's evocation of the heteroglot milieu itself. The town of Middlemarch is evoked by means of its voices: the voices of gossip that unite small speaking communities within it, and the divergent voices of the groups into which it is stratified. Within this multiplicity of voices, Eliot uses dialogic interrelation between her narrating voice and those of characters to create images of their languages. She uses what Bakhtin calls "hybrid constructions," fused together from different voices, not only to mark tensions within Middlemarch but also to define the role of her own authorial voice. And in the novel's pure dialogue, which is always spoken within these dialogized contexts, she shows her consciousness of the embeddedness of the characters' voices in the historical and social whole of the novel's language.

Middlemarch is a town of gossip. To put it another way, it is a town where reality is defined by gossip; what the Middlemarchers forge in conversation is what *is*. In Chapter 26, Lydgate writes a prescription for Fred, who has a fever. It is a simple professional action, but complicated by the fact that the Vincys have always been patients of Wrench. Fred recovers; but the importance of the act is multiplied many times by the material for gossip that it provides. "Some said, that the Vincys had behaved scandalously, that Mr Vincy had threatened Wrench, and that Mrs Vincy had accused him of poisoning her son. Others were of opinion that Mr Lydgate's passing by was providential, that he was wonderfully clever in fevers, and that Bulstrode was in the right to bring him forward. Many people believed that Lydgate's coming to the town at all was really due to Bulstrode; and Mrs Taft, who was always counting stitches and gathered her information in misleading fragments caught between the rows of her knitting, had got it into her head that Mr Lydgate was a natural son of Bulstrode's, a fact which seemed to justify her suspicions of evangelical laymen" (pp. 257-58). Middlemarch subordinates whatever the original facts might have been to its own interests and prejudices (and even to its own misprisions, as with Mrs. Taft). Lydgate, "really believing that Wrench was not well prepared to deal wisely with a case of this kind" (p. 255), sees the matter as an abstract problem, ignoring the linguistic web that the speaking community casts around his actions.

Often Eliot narrates by means of gossip alone. In Chapter 70, Raffles dies. Bulstrode had disobeyed Lydgate's instructions and allowed Raffles to receive plenty of brandy and opium; but since Lydgate's instructions were idiosyncratic, and plenty of brandy and opium was the standard treatment for *delirium tremens*

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in the 1830s, Eliot rightly asks along with Bulstrode, "Who could say that the death of Raffles had been hastened? Who knew what would have saved him?" (p. 700) This irresolvable ambiguity means that the "facts" of Raffles's death are created entirely out of public reaction.

Chapter 71 traces the course of that public reaction. It is the story of Bulstrode's public disgrace and the consequent suspicion cast on Lydgate; but it is narrated from neither Bulstrode's nor Lydgate's point of view. If we were to try to characterize the narrative point-of-view in Chapter 71, by using F. K. Stanzel's "typological circle," for instance, we would have to call it a third-person narrative from an external perspective, with the teller withdrawn.[5] But how different from the classical "omniscient" narrative of this type where the author's voice is withdrawn—the method of *Dombey and Son*, *Shirley*, *Madame Bovary*, or *The House of the Seven Gables*. The "omniscient" teller in *Middlemarch* does not know the key piece of information—what really killed Raffles. She does know that there are plenty of conclusions drawn by the people of the town, who destroy Bulstrode. Hence, Chapter 71 is not a object lesson in the triumph of appearance over reality, but in the social construction of reality. Some of the participants in this process are major characters, like Mr. Brooke; some are minor ones, like Bambridge and Hawley, the horse traders; some, like the circle of friends at Mrs. Dollop's, are called up specially for the purpose of discussing Lydgate and Bulstrode. None of their perspectives—least of all the withdrawn teller's—has any special privilege or authority. Yet the product of all their conversations is the "growing noise, half of murmurs and half of hisses" (p. 717), that forces Bulstrode out of the Hospital meeting. In the main, the gossip is correct, at least as far as Bulstrode's intentions are concerned. But it is still gossip, with all of gossip's contingencies and self-interests. It is just as effective in tarring the name of Lydgate, who is blameless; and only Dorothea, insulated from the gossip of the town, instinctively comes to Lydgate's defense.

While gossip is the common ground on which the private languages of Middlemarch create their noisy and inconsistent consensus, Eliot is just as concerned with evoking the stratification of the community into those private languages. She achieves this effect with a minimum of exaggerated stylization. The only use of dialect (in the sense of a class or regional marker) is in the portrayal of the laborers in Chapter 56. Neither specialized elites nor groups of marginalized characters play much of a role in the novel; Eliot deliberately aims at the middle range of the gentry and middle class. We meet doctors and scholars, horse traders and billiard players, but we hear little jargon or slang (compared to that heard in a novel by Dickens or Melville).

We do perceive the subtle gradations in dialect that stratify the gentry, professionals, and tradespeople of Middlemarch. We hear the language of the Chettams and Cadwalladers, blunt, sporting, good-humored; we also hear the family dialects of more intimate circles, with their more private resonances: the Farebrothers, Garths, and Vincys, who are "alone together" more often than the

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gentry are. We hear what might be called the duolects of pairs of siblings: Celia and Dorothea in Chapter 1, Rosamond and Fred in Chapter 11. Part of the duolect of the Vincy siblings, in fact, is a self-conscious critique of their language as it relates to other dialects. Fred presents a view radically like Bakhtin's: "All choice of words is slang. It marks a class." When Rosamond counters with a centripetal view ("There is correct English: that is not slang") Fred replies "Correct English is the slang of prigs who write history and essays" (p. 97).

We hear political conversations and rhetoric throughout the novel. Indeed, in the election fiasco of Chapter 51, it is not Brooke's person that is initially attacked, but his voice, which belongs to a different layer of linguistic strata than the common voices of the Middlemarch hustings. Borthrop Trumbull's idiolect, in Chapter 60, defines his auction-world, a narrow meeting place under his control which he manages by being able to deal in scraps of all sorts of different dialects. There are the different languages of religion, from Farebrother's pastoral tolerance to Bulstrode's overstated piety. There are relatively few of what Bakhtin calls "parodic stylizations of canonized genres and styles" (p. 6) in *Middlemarch*, at least compared to the heavy use of parodies of letter, pamphlet, verse, and drama in Dickens, Thackeray, or Melville; but we do see Casaubon's pedantic letter of proposal in Chapter 5. And finally, throughout the novel, we are reminded that the entire linguistic system of Middlemarch is that of 1829-32, forty years prior to the author's own. Eliot constantly uses this perspective to comment on both historical epochs.

Although she deals with such a range of dialects and speakers, Eliot manages to convey sympathy with all of them. She refuses to lend privilege to a central or normative voice, preferring instead to speak and think along with the character directly in view. While she dialogically undercuts attractive characters like Dorothea and Will, she tries to establish sympathy with characters like Bulstrode and Casaubon. She connects her own voice to Casaubon's by means of stylization, or "an internally dialogized mutual illumination of languages" (Bakhtin, p. 362). Casaubon is a difficult character to treat sympathetically; his idiolect is so ridiculous that one is impelled to parody it, as Eliot does with the letter of proposal in Chapter 5. And various characters parody Casaubon, especially Will and Celia. But often Eliot takes up the harder task of trying to identify with Casaubon.

In Chapter 42, Eliot describes Casaubon's anguish over Dorothea in a mixture of dialogic interrelations that is neither parody, nor free indirect style, nor internal monologue, nor external narration, but something of a mix of all. In Bakhtinian terms, Eliot engages with Casaubon's language by means of "variation," where "the stylizing language consciousness may not only illuminate the stylized language, but may also itself pick up a word from outside and introduce it as its own thematic and linguistic material into the stylized language" (p. 363).

The variation at the heart of Casaubon's mistrust of Dorothea in Chapter 42 is in these sentences: "Who, if Mr Casaubon had chosen to expound his

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discontents—his suspicions that he was not any longer adored without criticism—could have denied that they were founded on good reasons? On the contrary, there was a strong reason to be added, which he had not himself taken explicitly into account—namely, that he was not unmixedly adorable" (p. 409). The appeal is first made to us, to identify with Casaubon's unspoken thoughts. But then we are asked to include another observation, here specifically one which Casaubon won't admit: "that he was not unmixedly adorable." That phrase verges on ironic parody of Casaubon's own thoughts; the inflated "adored without criticism" from Casaubon's free indirect style is deflated by "not unmixedly adorable." Yet even with this tension that the variation creates, the stylizing voice pulls back from the irony one would find in Thackeray or Trollope by performing an analogous variation on its own pretensions: "He suspected this, however, as he suspected other things, without confessing it, and like the rest of us, felt how soothing it would have been to have a companion who would never find it out" (p. 409). Casaubon's verbal pretensions are eminently deflatable, but they are not perverse; the author is quick to confess her own, and by extension our own, susceptibility to them.

Eliot proceeds in the next paragraph to give an account in free indirect style of Casaubon's suspicions of Will, followed by a paragraph far more heavily overladen with variations and parodies. Here she explains that since even the discomfiture of the critic Carp outweighs Casaubon's hope of heaven, how much more must he be concerned with preventing Will from marrying Dorothea. Now the stylizing voice becomes acid, mocking Casaubon's jealousy and his religion, but then breaks off with: "This is a very bare and therefore a very incomplete way of putting the case. The human soul moves in many channels, and Mr Casaubon, we know, had a sense of rectitude and an honourable pride in satisfying the requirements of honour, which compelled him to find other reasons for his conduct than those of jealousy and vindictiveness" (p. 411). And Eliot proceeds to let Casaubon frame his own construction of his conduct in direct discourse; to himself, Casaubon is justified by what he sees as a selfless desire to protect Dorothea. But even as Eliot lets Casaubon have the last word on himself, even after disclaiming her own previous analysis as "bare," she sets up his own discourse as a rationalization, motivated by Casaubon's tautological "honourable pride in satisfying the requirements of honour." The passage is remarkable stylistically, as Eliot sets up another voice in opposition to her own and engages it in a dialogical struggle over the interpretation of its motives. The author, who has created Casaubon, cannot help but "win," but in winning she also brings her voice into close contact with the reprehensible voice of her character, and is forced to acknowledge points of resemblance. What is the device of letting Casaubon have his direct "say," after all, but a fulfilling of the requirements of narrative "honour"?

Several of the passages in Chapter 42 are "hybrids," sentences or paragraphs which fuse two voices. They are clearly deliberate artistic hybrids, where

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one voice is representing and the other is represented. The hybrid construction, which Bakhtin shows to be such an important device in Dickens (pp. 302-308), is a key element in the style of *Middlemarch*. Or rather, its *styles*, because as Bakhtin observes, "it is precisely the diversity of speech, and not the unity of a normative shared language, that is the ground of style" (p. 308). (Fred Vincy puts it this way: "The strongest slang of all is the slang of poets," p. 97.) Eliot, in a relatively serious way, follows the English comic tradition of Fielding, Smollett, Sterne, and Dickens, which is based "on the stratification of common language and on the possibilities available for isolating from these strata, to one degree or another, one's own intentions, without ever completely merging with them" (Bakhtin, p. 308). The movement of the authorial voice through *Middlemarch* is a complicated and dynamic process; at times Eliot's voice withdraws, to report gossip, dialogue, or free indirect style; at times it re-emerges, nearly isolated from her fictional linguistic world; at times it is engaged in a close struggle with the stratified voices of that world. The hybridizations so characteristic of the novel's "styles" are these points of intimate contact.

Eliot often uses a hybrid sentence to twist a character's ostensible motives back against that character, as when Featherstone asks Rosamond to sing. "This hard-headed old Overreach approved of the sentimental song, as the suitable garnish for girls, and also as fundamentally fine, sentiment being the right thing for a song" (p. 113). Probably not even Featherstone would think of himself as an Overreach, or as needing garnish for girls (with the implication that he devours them); those parts of the sentence are in Eliot's language. But "sentiment being the right sort of thing for a song" is in Featherstone's language. The yoking together of the two voices in this hybrid sentence shows two constructions of Featherstone's behavior: one his, for the public, the other the inference of an observer about his unspoken urges.

Another use of hybrids in *Middlemarch* is to dissect traditions, thereby seeing how closely actual behavior comes to the secondary explanations the community gives for it.[6] The auction in chapter 60, for example, is described in this way. "At Middlemarch in those times a large sale was regarded as a kind of festival. There was a table spread with the best cold eatables, as at a superior funeral; and facilities were offered for that generous drinking of cheerful glasses which might lead to generous and cheerful bidding for undesirable articles" (p. 588). Here Borthrop Trumbull himself might go along with much of the description; but "as at a superior funeral" and "generous and cheerful bidding for undesirable articles" are imported by Eliot to get behind the specious presentation.

The description of the auction is "a typical double-accented, double-styled hybrid construction" (Bakhtin, p. 304). Here, the nature and boundaries of the authorial commentary are clear. Many of Eliot's hybridizations are more complex, though, and also more serious and ambiguous. In Chapter 28, for example, Eliot tells of the Casaubons' settling-in at Lowick. "By-and-by Celia

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would come in her quality of bridesmaid as well as sister, and through the next weeks there would be wedding visits received and given; all in continuance of that transitional life understood to correspond with the excitement of bridal felicity, and keeping up the sense of busy ineffectiveness, as of a dream which the dreamer begins to suspect" (pp. 267-68). The language of this sentence starts in the communal dialect where the post-wedding customs are taken for granted; then the tone becomes explanatory. But the explanation slips out of the communal dialect, by means of a device that Bakhtin refers to as "pseudo-objective motivation." In this device, "the logic motivating the sentence seems to belong to the author, i.e., he is formally at one with it; but in actual fact, the motivation lies within the subjective belief system of his characters, or of general opinion" (p. 305). The wedding-visits "correspond with the excitement of bridal felicity," but that is the general opinion, not the author's, as we see when the sentence slides further toward Eliot's view. She calls the transitional period one of "busy ineffectiveness," but this is surely not a view the average Middlemarcher would express quite so bluntly; and to see the first weeks of keeping house together as "a dream which the dreamer begins to suspect" is to undercut the entire custom, and arrive at a position that reduces the keeping of that custom to cynicism. In fact Eliot has steered the tone of the paragraph, and indeed of the entire chapter, away from the public face of the Casaubons' marriage to a position where we are better placed to appreciate Dorothea's growing disillusionment, the subject of the succeeding paragraphs.

Over the course of this massive novel (which would have had an even greater temporal dimension in its first serial publication than it has for a reader today) Eliot draws on the verbal texture that has accumulated in previous chapters to form a context for the language of the later chapters. The book becomes self-dialogizing. Sometimes the effect is humorous and *ad hoc*, as in Chapter 51 when Will doesn't want to hear too much about election maneuvers. "Parliament, like the rest of our lives, even to our eating and apparel, could hardly go on if our imaginations were too active about processes" (p. 492). It is a debased context, but the idea and language echo, at a distance, the great sentence in Chapter 20: "If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence" (p. 189).

More often, the mass of language that has been built up in the early chapters becomes problematic for the characters themselves. Just like any linguistic system, the language of *Middlemarch* has a history. The characters cannot escape what they have heard, thought, and said in the earlier chapters. This historical dimension is brought home vividly to Lydgate in Chapter 58. Lydgate's own thoughts, as he meditates on his debts and the deterioration of his marriage, become hybridized with, and set in dialogic relation against, the history of the novel's language. "Eighteen months ago Lydgate was poor, but had never known the eager want of small sums, and felt rather a burning contempt for any one who

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descended a step in order to gain them" (p. 573). The phrase "small sums" had appeared in connection with Lydgate's disdain for Farebrother's gambling in Chapter 18, where "he had an ideal of life which made this subservience of conduct to the gaining of small sums thoroughly hateful to him" (p. 174). In Chapter 58, Lydgate's memory of Farebrother is not directly alluded to, but it functions dialogically, as an echo, to embitter him; and the function is clinched in Chapter 66, when Lydgate gambles and is mortified to think that Farebrother might catch him at it.

Later in Chapter 58, Lydgate conceives of his failing relationship with Rosamond entirely in dialogic terms. As he watches and listens to her impassive treatment of him, he forms a mental context of other voices. "His mind glancing back to Laure while he looked at Rosamond, he said inwardly, 'Would *she* kill me because I wearied her?' and then, 'It is the way with all women'" (p. 578). But his own voice cannot support these words, particularly given the counter-example of Dorothea. Her voice, full of devoted, purposeful sympathy, overwhelms his voice and his memory of Laure. Dorothea's voice becomes "a music from which he was falling away" (p. 579). Lydgate forms his views of his marriage within the dialogic interrelation of the novel's earlier voices that takes place in his memory.

And this dialogic interrelation takes place even though Lydgate misconstrues Dorothea's voice. He remembers her saying "He has been all his life labouring and looking forward. He minds about nothing else—and I mind about nothing else" (p. 579). Lydgate's memory is perfect, as these were Dorothea's exact words to him in Chapter 30 (except that she says "labouring all his life," p. 283). But he misses the context the words had for her, the context of a struggle to remain faithful to her ideal of marriage. We know by this point that she had lost that struggle, because we have read her "letter" to Casaubon, written after his death: "Do you not see now that I could not submit my soul to yours, by working hopelessly at what I have no belief in?" (p. 527). The dialogic force of an utterance depends not on its truth value, but on the meaning it assumes for the listener.

In the charged linguistic atmosphere of Lydgate's meditations, Rosamond is "silvery neutral" (p. 579); when she starts to talk to Lydgate about their money problems, "Rosamond's thin utterance threw into the words 'What can *I* do?' as much neutrality as they could hold" (p. 580). Eliot summons up, in the abstract, "varied vocal inflexions . . . expressing all states of mind" (p. 580) to form a context for Rosamond's neutrality. But for Lydgate her voice is set in a realized context; he hears it in dialogic relation to what he construes of Dorothea's voice, and its neutrality is all the more disheartening.

Indeed, the most salient feature of the pure dialogue between characters in *Middlemarch* is the amount of care Eliot takes to contextualize the dialogue. Even in isolation, the novel's major characters are drawn into the web of the language of the whole book, as Rosamond and Lydgate are in Chapter 58. There,

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the voice of Dorothea is the context; elsewhere, it is often the novelist's own voice. In Chapter 39, Dorothea is telling Will about her personal religion of selflessness. "'God bless you for telling me!' said Will, ardently, and rather wondering at himself. They were looking at each other like two fond children who were talking confidentially of birds" (p. 383). The moment is serious, and the principles that Dorothea expresses are given the highest value in the novel; they reappear in Lydgate's thoughts as the "voice of deep-souled womanhood" (p. 579). But in Chapter 39, the seriousness of the interchange between Dorothea and Will, a crucial one for them, is cut neatly by the author's characterization of their demeanor.

In a *Middlemarch* dialogue, there are rarely only two voices; there is the author as well, and there are also the resonances each speaking voice conveys—resonances, as we are made acutely aware, that may be different for the auditor than for the speaker. The dialogues involving Casaubon, Featherstone, and Bulstrode are filled with such multiple resonances, often because there is deliberate deceit or obfuscation involved. But most striking of all of these resonant dialogues is Will's farewell visit to Dorothea in Chapter 54. He comes to announce to her that he is leaving Middlemarch, probably for a long time. It is the oldest line imaginable, obviously meant to provoke her into declaring affection for him. Each does love the other, but does not know that the love is returned; and this potentially comic misunderstanding is twisted further by the codicil to Casaubon's will (that word "will" resonating oddly against Ladislaw's name). Will is ignorant that Dorothea cannot keep Casaubon's fortune if she marries him, but she knows it, and supposes (Middlemarch gossip being what it is) that he must know. So she can not interpret his gambit as a profession of love; she is not in a strong enough position. And she is nonplussed when Will does not refer to the will or express indifference towards it. She is forced to conclude that his "I am going away" gambit is not a gambit but an innocent, honest resolve. "He had never felt more than friendship for her—had never had anything in his mind to justify what she felt to be her husband's outrage on the feelings of both: and that friendship he still felt" (p. 530). So she tries to be as supportive as possible, saying "You must have patience. It will perhaps be a long while" (p. 531). This, naturally, seems hard, even patronizing, to Will, and he tries again: "'I shall never hear from you. And you will forget all about me.' 'No.' said Dorothea, 'I shall never forget you. I have never forgotten anyone whom I once knew'" (p. 531). We know what this utterance means to her, and how totally in keeping it is with her philosophy of forbearance, but imagine how it would sound to Will. "Good God!" is his response, and it is a measured one under the circumstances. The dialogue of the scene proceeds, but the limits of mutual understanding have been set, for now; neither character can get any closer to the other's feelings. The whole dialogue is stunningly intricate, and is made all the more intricate by the author's running commentary on the failures of communication. As a result, it is far more intricate than any dramatic dialogue could be; it is essentially novelistic, built on a multiplicity of idiolects and interpretive strategies.

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Middlemarch, for all its manifold languages and its evocation of the power of heteroglossia, does not simply present that heteroglossia and mock those who would try to transcend it. In this its technique is markedly different from the similarly heteroglot *Vanity Fair*, where all possibility of transcendent action is dismissed by Thackeray, and where there is no "hero," only Becky Sharp, who speaks all of the novel's languages with equal cynicism and is "rewarded" for her flexibility with a "booth" in Vanity Fair. Eliot, by contrast, does not see the inevitability of heteroglossia as mandating a cynical world view. Not that anyone ever thought she did; I am speaking here of a matter of technical approach. Thackeray values facetiousness, an ability to know and to stand outside of all dialects. Eliot has, implicitly, a more feminist aesthetic, marked by what Dorothy Richardson sees as the ability "to act as a focus for divergent points of view" and calls "the characteristic . . . of being all over the place and in all camps at once."[7] Becky Sharp steers her way through her heteroglot world to her booth in Vanity Fair by mimicking all of the dialects of that world. Eliot's characters reach resolution, when they do, by forging limited but effective new dialects among themselves, in the midst of heteroglossia. They cease trying to master every language, or to reduce all of the languages to one; they establish a new private language among themselves—a move to which the heteroglot world is very amenable.

One of these small communities is established in Chapter 81. Dorothea has been mortified at finding Will and Rosamond in an embrace (p. 764). Nevertheless, she goes to Rosamond, sensing a common ground between them even in the painful fact that they are both attracted to Will. Their conversation hinges on Rosamond's admission that she cannot communicate with her husband. "Tertius is so angry and impatient if I say anything" (p. 785). But Dorothea corrects her, showing how Lydgate has a similar problem: "It was himself he blamed for not speaking" (p. 785). Once this initial connection has been made, the more difficult issue of Will remains, and Dorothea can only approach it by sending fragments of language across the gap between her and Rosamond. She tries to unite the failed discourse of her own marriage to that of Rosamond's marriage, hoping that the analogy will form a bond between them. "'Even if we loved some one else better than—than those we were married to, it would be no use'—poor Dorothea, in her palpitating anxiety, could only seize her language brokenly" (p. 785). Dorothea has every reason to distrust Rosamond, at this point, but she is "filled with the need to express pitying fellowship rather than rebuke" (p. 785-86). And Rosamond, sensing this effort to forge a language between them, responds, at first silently: "Rosamond, taken hold of by an emotion stronger than her own—hurried along in a new movement which gave all things some new, awful, undefined aspect—could find no words, but involuntarily she put her lips to Dorothea's forehead which was very near her, and then for a minute the two women clasped each other as if they had been in a shipwreck" (p. 786). Rosamond is hearing a new language for the first time, and it frightens her; then

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she begins to respond in the dialect they have established, and tells Dorothea of Will's love for her, making communication between Will and Dorothea possible at long last.

Middlemarch presents a heteroglot universe and asks how we can deal with such a universe. In the face of messy, loose and imperfect language—the language of the real world—Eliot takes an approach opposite to that of monologic purifiers of language, like her own character Casaubon. Dorothea stops trying to reduce her world to a single language, and settles for the creation of local harmonies within that polyphonic world. And, ultimately, "the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive" (p. 825). Not unifying or uniting, but diffusive, its sympathy spreading into several lives and communities, linking characters as opposite as Chettam and Ladislaw, while each maintains a separate identity. The achievement of Dorothea is like that of the novelist herself. Eliot's project of constructing a huge dialogic universe is akin to the search for the primitive tissue; but it is redeemed by a sympathy that recognizes the diverse manifestations of language in that universe, and relishes the individuality of "sarsnet, gauze, net, satin and velvet" even more than the central figure of "the raw cocoon."

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NOTES

1 See *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. Michael Holquist and Caryl Emerson (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1981).

2 See *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1984); *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: Univ of Minnesota Press, 1984); and *The Dialogic Imagination*.

3 All quotations from Bakhtin are from *The Dialogic Imagination* and are cited parenthetically by page number.

4 All quotations from *Middlemarch* are from the edition by David Carroll (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986) and are cited parenthetically by page number.

5 F. K. Stanzel, *A Theory of Narrative*, trans. Charlotte Goedsche (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1984).

6 For the concept of "secondary explanations" see Claude Lévi-Strauss's discussion of the work of Franz Boas in "Introduction: History and Anthropology," in *Structural Anthropology*, trans. Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf (New York: Basic, 1963), pp. 1-27.

7 *The New Adelphi*, n.s. 2 (June-August 1929): 347; quoted in Rachel Blau Duplessis, "For the Etruscans," in Elaine Showalter, ed., *The New Feminist Criticism* (New York: Pantheon, 1985), p. 276.

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