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The Reader as Part of the Fiction: *Middlemarch*

> In every novel the work is divided between the writer and the reader; but the writer makes the reader very much as he makes his characters. When he makes him ill, that is, makes him indifferent, he does no work; the writer does all. When he makes him well, that is, makes him interested, then the reader does quite half the labor. In making such a deduction [about *Adam Bede*] as I have just indicated, the reader would be doing but his share of the task; the grand point is to get him to make it. I hold that there is a way. It is perhaps a secret; but until it is found out, I think that the art of story-telling cannot be said to have approached perfection.—Henry James, "The Novels of George Eliot"[1]

Since the publication of Wayne Booth's *Rhetoric of Fiction* in 1961, it has become a commonplace that the narrators of novels are not necessarily identical to the authors and that even works which have no stated "narrator" are often controlled by a rhetoric so distinctive and influential as to be, in effect, a personality within the novel. What is less commonly recognized but equally true is that the audience, too, is a presence within the novel, and one which may be as distorted a representation of the actual audience as the narrator is of the author. The tone of the narrative, intimate or formal, jocular or ironic; the choice of which events to explain and which to treat as too familiar to need any explanation; the assumptions about the reader's interests and scruples; and even the deliberate effort to shock—all imply a reader whose personality and tastes are well enough known for his reactions to be predicted, known in a way that no author can ever know his actual readers. The actual reader may conform to this implied image of himself or he may rebel against it, but the image is there, for every author must make some decisions about whom he is addressing before he will be able to write at all.[2]

The element of audience-creation, present in all literature, is particularly powerful in those works which actually include a "dear reader" within the text. An epistolary novel like *Pamela* provides an extreme example of this kind of fictive reader, a specific audience

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which is at least a presence if not quite a character within the text. Few actual readers of *Pamela* resemble the parents to whom that much-abused lady's letters are addressed, nor is it likely that Richardson thought or hoped they would. Yet we all accept the presence of her correspondents as the primary audience of Pamela's letters, an audience whose intimate acquaintance with the writer and involvement with her sufferings not only dictates the form of the narrative but also makes possible a tone that is rather different from what it might have been had Richardson addressed himself directly to the more spohisticated and presumably less sympathetic audience of his actual readers.

Such extreme cases of a fictive audience that is clearly different from any actual reader are relatively rare, however, and always somewhat awkward. Much more common and more powerful is the kind of fiction in which the presence of an audience is clearly assumed but its nature not defined, so that the addresses to "dear reader" or "you" or even "we" involve an ambiguous reference that places the actual reader in a double position, at once an outside observer and a presence within the special confines of the world created in the narrative. As I hope to show, this creation of an ambiguously defined audience is intrinsic to the narrative technique of George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, but it is a method that may best be analyzed by looking first at a more compact example, Jane Eyre's famous confession, "Reader, I married him." This declaration is not the first that Bronte's heroine has made directly to her audience, but it is the most effective. As the opening sentence of the "Conclusion" of *Jane Eyre*, it has the effect of jolting us into attention, making us acutely aware that this story is being told *to us* by a narrator who is fully conscious of our presence. Further, it implies that our awareness of these events is somehow necessary for the story to come to its natural close; it is the "reader" who begins to draw the novel to an end. The story of Jane's romance with Edward Rochester is not a private recollection or a meditation. It is a dramatic account that finds at least part of its meaning in the response of its audience, and without that response it would be incomplete.

The "Reader" Jane addresses here is not a specific companion or even one of those lonesome travelers who are forever discovering hidden manuscripts in their hired rooms, but *you*, a stranger who has taken up this narrative for whatever private reasons of amusement or instruction and who may put it down again for equally private reasons. And yet it is not quite you, for by the time we finish *Jane Eyre* we individual readers, unknown masses of idiosyncratic experiences and tastes, have taken on the character of the fictive reader Jane

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addresses, a faithful follower who has often been, in all these pages of passion and suffering, the governess's sole confidant. In the process of reading the novel we have accepted the reality of Jane's talents and her scruples, and so have also accepted our own role as her companion and supporter.

This ability and even necessity of the actual reader to take on the role provided for him by the author suggests that the fictive reader, the reader implied within the text, is not so autonomous as some recent theorists have supposed.[3] While novelists often create a fictive audience that is, inevitably, different from many members of their real audience, an essential aspect of the success of their work depends upon the destruction of that distinction. The act of reading is itself an extended process which often entails a great many unconscious adjustments of the reader's attitudes and expectations about both language and theme.[4] Included among these changes should be the psychological adjustment that results in the temporary suppression of the reader's individuality, for few actual readers are ever able to maintain a very strong sense of their separation from the confidant addressed as "you," no matter how alien the traits attributed to "you" may be. The importance of the identification cannot be exaggerated: while we may respond with great feeling to a sympathetic character in a novel, we maintain our sense of separateness, but the very act of reading forced us not to sympathize with but to become the audience within the tale.

This transformation of actual reader into fictive reader, an important part of any novel, is essential in a morally didactic work like *Middlemarch*. Eliot's loss of Christian faith led her to an even more exacting religion of duty, and one aspect of her highly developed sense of individual responsibility was her constant assumption that one of the purposes of her work was to awaken her readers as well as her characters to an admission of their human frailties and to an awareness of how they must act in light of those frailties. It is not enough that the reader be entertained by what Eliot subtitled "A Study of Provincial Life," though that is certainly one of the hopes and triumphs of the novel. He must also become ethically engaged in the issues raised by the story. The automatic and often passive tolerance of an author's views implied by Coleridge's "willing suspension of disbelief" will not suffice; those views must be actively espoused. By becoming aware of the kind of audience that is created in *Middlemarch*, we can see how Eliot's direct acknowledgments and subtle manipulation of her readers contribute to the persuasive force of her narrative.

The obligations that Eliot places on her readers create a vague dis-

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comfort that often has been felt but rarely examined critically. V. S. Pritchett, while praising the fascinating richness of Eliot's characters, has noted the modern reader's boredom "when, in the Victorian habit, she harangues the reader and pads out the book with brainy essays."[5] Quentin Anderson has admitted that contemporary readers tend to find *Middlemarch*'s intricate plot "exhaustive," and goes on to confess:

> I have found that youthful readers nowadays are restive when confronted by such careful plotting and such familiar traits of character; they shy away and quite miss the light which illumines all these things in their mutual relations, the voice of the wise woman. That voice is often heard speaking directly with an authority which makes use of the Victorian reader's involvement with the characters to make him look up and look about, to see how human relations are established within the world of the story—to see the whole of what the wise woman surveys.[6]

Pritchett and Anderson are, of course, exceptional readers. It is revealing, then, that both find it necessary to take time from discussions of rather different issues to make note of "the common reader's" responses. It is also revealing that both identify these negative responses as products of the contemporary distance from what is loosely described as a "Victorian" sensibility, but in this case the revelation is of a frequent misconception. As modern readers, we come to *Middlemarch* expecting great but not intense pleasure; or, if we are students, we read it because we have been told it will be good for us and, in any case, it must be confronted. We savor the satiric portraits of characters like Mrs. Cadwallader, with her thrifty ways and her razor tongue, and Mr. Brooke, who "looked into" so many things in his youth. If the novel seems slow, we assume it is because we of the late twentieth century have lost the patience and attentiveness of a hundred years ago, as surely as the English Midlands have lost the serene backwardness Eliot was even then recalling as a distant past. And if we are unable to be quite so compassionate with characters like Casaubon as Eliot suggests we ought to be, we assume it is because we lack the author's greatness of soul. The determining events of *Middlemarch*—the tragedy of Dorothea's and Lydgate's misguided marriages, the disappointment of Fred Vincy's expectations, or the infamy of the shady dealings that lie behind Bulstrode's surface piety—may seem like faraway issues, but in a guilty way we regret their remoteness as evidence of our own inability to accept the serious dilemmas of life. Watching the slow unfolding of Eliot's provincial panorama, wondering at the subtlety of her moral

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vision, knowing that what we read is a defining example of the apex of the nineteenth-century English novel, we tend to discount the importance of our personal responses to the work. But those responses are not entirely comfortable, at least on a first reading, and they have never been.

Contemporary reviews of *Middlemarch* support this last contention. An anonymous essay in the *Saturday Review* of 7 December 1872, for example, complains about the obtrusive didacticism of Eliot's narrative in terms that contradict Pritchett's assumption of Victorian tolerance for such sermonizing:

> The same reader who gives himself in unreserved trust to the master of humour and pathos whose object is to please him by his art, is justified in suspecting a biased or one-sided estimate of qualities where a moral has to be worked out through human agency. His confidence is disturbed, he is at once put upon his mettle, when the same gifts [of narrative persuasion] seem employed to betray him into unconscious, and perhaps unwilling admissions. Self-respect calls upon him at every turn either to renounce principles and prejudices or to stand up and defend them—attitudes of mind altogether alien from that relaxation which it is the assumed office of fiction to provide for its votaries.

While we may question the definition of relaxed amusement as the state which all fiction should strive to produce, these comments describe an aspect of literary experience which is more significant than current critical fashion allows us to admit. The act of writing is indeed an act of attempted persuasion. We may not notice the effort if the object is simply to persuade us of the plausibility or interest of the writer's imagined world, and we may ignore it if the argument is sufficiently uncongenial or the writer sufficiently inept; but it would be naive to think that we are not always being called upon "either to renounce principles and prejudices or to stand up and defend them." As Wolfgang Iser has noted, the purpose of literature is more often to change our view of reality than to confirm it, with the result that all good literature is disturbing.[7]

Richard Holt Hutton's reviews for the *Spectator* are even more revealing, for they illustrate precisely those "unconscious, and perhaps unwilling admissions" of which the *Saturday Review*'s writer complained. Published from December 1871 to December 1872, the reviews are especially helpful in considering changes in the reader's attitudes during the reading process because they were written after the publication of each serial installment of *Middlemarch*. Thus each review until the last is a considered opinion based on incomplete in-

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formation; together they present an unusually complete view of at least one reader's ongoing responses to the unfolding narrative and show that for the reader the process of reading *Middlemarch* is in part a process of conversion.

Hutton's reviews of the first three books of *Middlemarch* all applaud the humor, the realism, and the moral complexity of Eliot's story, but they each contain a long complaint at the author's sarcastic treatment of her characters and of her reader's preference for those characters. His comments on Rosamond Vincy are typical. In an early review he writes:

> Sometimes the reader feels that the author is unfairly running down one of her own characters. . . . She cannot help making us feel, especially of Rosamond Vincy, that however conventional she may be, hers is really a sweet and lovable nature at bottom, and yet she won't let anyone entertain the feeling without an admonitory "shallow creature that, that you are admiring so," in his ear.

It is no longer common for a reviewer to have so strong a sense of the independent reality of a novel's characters that he will accuse the author of misunderstanding them, and it is tempting to say that Hutton is being naive. But in his complaint of being manipulated by the narrator, Hutton has captured an often overlooked aspect of Eliot's treatment of the reader, her willingness to interrupt her story to question and even criticize her audience's views. Nor is it unimportant that Hutton confessed in later reviews that he had been quite wrong in liking Rosamond, that she was indeed a hateful creature, and that he would hereafter trust his guide. In his review essay for the *British Quarterly Review* on 1 April 1873, he wrote:

> [Rosamond's] exquisitely-painted figure is the deadliest blow at the common assumption that limitation in both heart and brain is a desirable thing for women, that has ever been struck. The first impression is of grace, gentleness, propriety, conventional sense, soft tenacity of purpose, and something even that almost looks like tenderness. We refer to the time when Rosamond first falls in love with Lydgate. The reader is even a little disposed at this time to resent the author's evident scorn for Rosamond, and almost to take her part against the critic who seems to have hardened her heart against her own creation. But as the story proceeds, when Rosamond is married, when Lydgate gradually falls into money difficulties, and his graceful wife shows herself not only not able to give him sympathy, but constrained, apparently

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> by her poverty of nature, to turn her heart away from him, and even to intrigue against his plans, the picture becomes painfully real and convincing. The reader has no power to doubt its fidelity.

The defiant reader has been made docile, the opinionated reader made to accept the author's views. The question remains, however, for nineteenth-century and modern readers alike, of how we move from these initial misgivings and resentments to the acceptance of Eliot's perspective with which most readers end. The conventional answer, the answer of the review above, would be to say we are persuaded by the realism of her situations and characters, creatures so convincingly portrayed that we cannot help but be swayed by the lesson of their experiences and the wisdom of their historian. But to read *Middlemarch* is not entirely to lose oneself in the adventures of these highly plausible individuals, for between the reader and the characters falls the large and articulate shadow of the narrator, commenting upon the larger implications of the action she describes and also upon the significance of the reader's responses to that action.[8] The debates are endless as to the precise nature of Eliot's narrative voice and the merits of the novelistic assumptions and traditions that voice echoes, but there is little disagreement that the voice is there—that the narrator is indeed an active presence within the novel, quite possibly the most active and, as Quentin Anderson has suggested, the most interesting.[9]

To note the importance of the narrator, however, is also to discover the presence of the fictive reader. If we accept Eliot's narrator as a tangible presence within the novel, we are forced to conclude that ultimately the meaning of *Middlemarch* lies in the implicit conversation between that narrator and the reader, a conversation in which the stories of Dorothea and Lydgate and the town of Middlemarch are not an end in themselves but the illustration of a point.

This aspect of the novel—its discursive as opposed to its dramatic plot—becomes more apparent if we look at some of the variations of style in *Middlemarch*, characteristics of tone and structure that have more effect on the reader's sense of himself than on his understanding of the novel's characters. Although the voice of Eliot's narrator is often impartial and universal to the point of sounding oracular, her direct addresses to the reader are typically either interrogative or cautionary, and her tone in them is conversational. Here are some characteristic asides to the reader: "Does it seem incongruous to you," "would it not be rash to conclude," "now why on earth should Mrs. Cadwallader," "Do not imagine," and "You will hardly demand."[10] The questions are generally rhetorical, but the effect of asking them at all is to evoke the presence of a listener, an audience whose ongoing

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responses are visible to the narrator and whose questions and objections must be answered before the story can proceed. In analyzing the novel's persuasive force, then, it would be more accurate to say that the reader of *Middlemarch* is won over by rhetoric than by realism, and the force of that rhetoric is directed toward making the reader accept the character imputed to him.

In fostering this acceptance, Eliot combines overt flattery with covert accusation. Throughout *Middlemarch*, though most conspicuously in the opening books, Eliot creates a fictive reader whose position seems to be one of secure and privileged detachment, and endows that reader with traits of superior wisdom and experience that imply he is far above the mistakes and illusions that prevail among the characters whose lives he explores. This fictive reader, companion and equal to the novel's omniscient narrator, is attractive enough to lure the actual reader into an identification with him. Having nurtured that identification, Eliot then assails her fictive reader with quiet, individually imperceptible accusations that force the actual reader unconsciously to reexamine his own behavior in a more serious effort to understand the center of values within the novel.

It is the flattery, however, that is most immediately apparent, and it begins in the reiterated assurance that the reader's position of looking back on the past from the comparatively enlightened present is a superior perspective that puts him far above the lives he surveys. Chapter 19, for example, begins:

> When George the Fourth was still reigning over the privacies of Windsor, when the Duke of Wellington was Prime Minister, and Mr. Vincy was mayor of the old corporation in Middlemarch, Mrs. Casaubon, born Dorothea Brooke, had taken her wedding journey in Rome. In those days the world in general was more ignorant of good and evil by forty years than it is at present. Travellers did not often carry full information on Christian art either in their heads or their pockets; and even the most brilliant English critic of the day took the flower-flushed tomb of the ascended Virgin for an ornamental vase.

The tone of the passage is ironic, but part of the effect is to remind the reader that he is indeed a stranger to those older days. The emphasis is not so much on any specific relationship between "then" and "now" as on the enormous distance between them. In writing what might be considered an historical novel, Eliot deliberately flouts the most common effort of historical novelists, which is to make the reader forget the present and enter wholly into the vitally recreated past.[11] Eliot's constant repetition of phrases like "then," "in that

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time," "in those benighted days," and "in that dark period," which run like a leitmotif through every chapter, keeps the reader forever at a distance from the inhabitants of Middlemarch, never letting him forget that even the youngest lovers have by now grown old and some of them have died.

Distant in time, the fictive reader is also assumed to be distant in culture. Whatever we as individuals may know about the Midlands or remember about early nineteenth-century culture must be forgotten, for the reader addressed in *Middlemarch* is most certainly a stranger to the land. Local customs must be explained and historical footnotes provided if he is to make his way all through this alien territory. At times the reader is simply treated as a stranger, ignorant of the native ways, as in the opening paragraph of chapter 74:

> In Middlemarch a wife could not long remain ignorant that the town held a bad opinion of her husband. No feminine intimate might carry her friendship so far as to make a plain statement to the wife of the unpleasant fact known or believed about her husband; but when a woman with her thoughts much at leisure got them suddenly employed on something grievously disadvantageous to her neighbours, various moral impulses were called into play which tended to stimulate utterance. Candour was one. To be candid, in Middlemarch phraseology, meant, to use an early opportunity of letting your friends know that you did not take a cheerful view of their capacity, their conduct, or their position; and a robust candour never waited to be asked for its opinion. Then again, there was the love of truth—a wide phrase, but meaning in this relation, a lively objection to seeing a wife look happier than her husband's character warranted.

"To be candid, in Middlemarch phraseology. . . ." Here the narrator is quite literally the reader's interpreter, providing a gloss of the strange uses to which language was put in the special territory of 1830s Middlemarch. Again, the irony of this passage does not negate the very strong image that is created of a reader who is an amused but uninformed tourist, a favored pupil willing and eager for whatever instruction the narrator may be able to offer.

Ignorance of local ways may also be a sign of superiority and freedom from local error, and there is often a flattering contrast invoked between what the natives think and what the reader knows. Chapter 15 of *Middlemarch*, which opens with Eliot's famous farewell to the expansiveness of Fielding's style, continues with the memorandum:

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> At present I have to make the new settler Lydgate better known to any one interested in him than he could possibly be even to those who had seen the most of him since his arrival in Middlemarch. For surely all must admit that a man may be puffed and belauded, envied, ridiculed, counted upon as a tool and fallen in love with, or at least selected as a future husband, and yet remain virtually unknown—known merely as a cluster of signs for his neighbors' false suppositions.

Eliot implies here that the reader she addresses is not merely the only person interested enough to learn the truth about Lydgate, but also the only one disinterested enough, and the combination is flattering indeed.

As we join the narrator in her survey of the foibles of Middlemarch society, we willingly take on the character she provides for us, the interested but also at times sardonic observer. This sense of being outside the action and allied with the narrator is reinforced by the air of intimacy and easy familiarity I have already noted in the novel's direct addresses to the reader. When the narrator describes Dorothea's engagement to Casaubon, for example, she interrupts her meditations on the ways of the world to confide some practical considerations. "Before he left the next day it had been decided that the marriage should take place within six weeks. Why not? Mr. Casaubon's house was ready." The "why not?" is a response to the reader's objections.

These addresses which have the air of dialogues imply a reader who is the companion and equal of the narrator. Wholly dependent upon that narrator as historian, translator, and guide, the reader finds compensation for his lack of unmediated contact with Middlemarch society in the unerring vision, so striking in this novel of distortion and misapprehension, in which the narrator allows him to share. But I began by saying that the act of reading entailed a transformation of the actual reader into the possibly uncongenial mold of the fictive reader, and there is little growth or change if the audience simply shares the privileged perspective of uninvolved omniscience. The difficult transformation of *Middlemarch* for which the fictive reader is such an important tool lies in the need for the actual reader to admit his kinship to the antique and unfamiliar society he surveys, and it is here that we tend to balk and must be converted.

Yet converted we are. As individual readers we accept the privileged status of the fictive reader, and thus unwittingly accept his limitations as well. A closer examination of the narrator's addresses to

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the fictive reader in *Middlemarch* reveals some unflattering assumptions about the nature of the reader's ideas and opinions and qualifies the enlightened disinterest which had seemed to separate him from the provincial follies of Middlemarch society. The discussion of Dorothea's marriage quoted above, which is from the last paragraph of chapter 5, illustrates Eliot's technique of masking a didactic rebuke with a tone of cordial familiarity. Even this early in the novel it is apparent that Dorothea's idealism is matched by her shortsightedness, and if we really could interrupt and object to the brevity of her engagement to Casaubon, it would not be because we were worried that her house would be unfurnished or her trousseau incomplete. This is the way the people of Middlemarch would think, and to assume that an answer about the house being ready will satisfy the reader's question is to place the reader on a par with the locals.

The many passages beginning "do not suppose" or "if you think," which often presume opinions few actual readers of *Middlemarch* would ever have been likely to consider, have the same effect of implicit accusation. "If you think it incredible that to imagine Lydgate as a man of family could cause thrills of satisfaction that had anything to do with the sense that she was in love with him, I will ask you to use your power of comparison a little more effectively, and consider whether red cloth and epaulets have never had an influence of that sort" (ch. 16). The misconception is introduced only to be dismissed, but some of the error rubs off on the reader in passing.

The persuasive process through which the actual reader is moved to identify with the fictive reader and then to recognize the close relationship between the fictive reader and the characters of the novel is most evident in the rhetoric of Eliot's many discursive asides. Although the characters of *Middlemarch* are portrayed so fully that the meanings and motives behind their actions are manifested in every gesture, every gesture is still followed by the narrator's gloss, an explanation of a specific act which soon becomes a general observation on the nature of human behavior. These commentaries would be largely redundant if their function were simply to help us understand the events of the novel; their real purpose lies in making us understand our own involvement in those events.

The pattern begins typically in a discussion of a particular failing of a particular character, expands into a comparison of this individual trait with qualities associated with a more widely known figure, and ends with a demand that both reader and narrator admit that they, too, have often behaved so. Local and individual weaknesses become compelling issues when understood as part of the larger drama of human behavior in which we all have a role. Consider, for example,

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this early analysis of the way Dorothea convinces herself that Casaubon is a man whose mind is a larger and richer version of her own thoughts:

> "He thinks with me," said Dorothea to herself, "or rather, he thinks a whole world of which my thought is but a poor twopenny mirror. And his feelings too, his whole experience—what a lake compared with my little pool!"
>
> Miss Brooke argued from words and dispositions no less unhesitatingly than other young ladies of her age. Signs are small measurable things, but interpretations are illimitable, and in girls of sweet, ardent nature, every sign is apt to conjure up wonder, hope, belief, vast as a sky, and coloured by a diffused thimbleful of matter in the shape of knowledge. They are not always too grossly deceived; for Sinbad himself may have fallen by good-luck on a true description, and wrong reasoning sometimes lands poor mortals in right conclusions: starting a long way off the true point, and proceeding by loops and zigzags, we now and then arrive just where we ought to be. Because Miss Brooke was hasty in her trust, it is not therefore clear that Mr. Casaubon was unworthy of it. (ch. 3)

As it happens, Mr. Casaubon is quite unworthy of her trust, and the narrator is indulging in the teasing refusal to pass judgment with which she often mocks her reader's desire to know things conclusively before the time is right for such knowledge. The surface irony of these comments should not be allowed to obscure their deeper accuracy, however, for the progress of Eliot's reader through this passage demonstrates precisely that journey by which "starting a long way off the true point, and proceeding by loops and zigzags, we now and then arrive just where we ought to be." In moving from "Dorothea" to "other young ladies of her age" to "Sinbad" to "poor mortals" to "us" and back to "Miss Brooke," the reader is forced to trace his own human kinship to Dorothea and to recognize this chain of relationships as the necessary connection which enables him to return to Miss Brooke, "the true point," with understanding. The reader's recognition of Dorothea's decisions as ones he, too, might make and learn to regret marks the difference between sympathy and empathy, and Eliot is well aware of the greater persuasive force of the second emotion.

This chain of identification is forged in the larger movements of the novel as well as in single passages. A typical chapter of *Middlemarch* will open with observations of how "one" behaves, then will lapse into the demonstrative "that" (as in "that saving silence"), with

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its assumption of familiarity, and will end by turning to the reader with a direct appeal to mutual experience.[12] Thus Eliot revitalizes the dead metaphor of drawing the reader into the story by beginning chapters with an address to a reader who is apart from (and above) the action but then altering that position until the reader is literally incorporated into the tale. Throughout *Middlemarch*, the privileged detachment of the reader is challenged by reiterated assertions of a human community that transcends individuality. Despite their personal idiosyncrasies, the differences between the limited and self-interested characters of *Middlemarch*, the far wiser and more generous narrator of that volume, and the unknown readers of her tale are all overshadowed by the universal similarities that unite what Eliot repeatedly refers to as "we mortals."

One could multiply examples, but it seems sufficiently clear that there is a contradiction inherent in Eliot's treatment of her fictive reader, a figure who is at once assured that he is very distant and very superior to the residents of Middlemarch, and at the same time forced to admit that he is very much like them. Instead of attempting to resolve the conflict, I would like to consider some of the ideas suggested by this ambiguous portrait of the reader in *Middlemarch* as they relate to our understanding of Eliot's novel and of the role of the reader in any work.

On the simplest level, the study of the fictive reader helps substantiate and confirm some of the less easily explained responses to literature. In the case of *Middlemarch*, the conflicting roles in which the fictive reader is cast explain a large part of the uneasiness the novel often provokes; it is not necessarily that actual readers disagree with Eliot's views but that they sense, in a vague, unconscious way, the contradictions of their position and the irony and accusation behind her seemingly flattering "we." Halfway between Fielding, from whom she is a rebellious descendant, and James, who obviously learned much from her even as he was rejecting her "too diffuse" narrative perspective, Eliot cultivates that eighteenth-century voice which promises to tell the reader exactly where he stands, but uses it to provoke the reactions of discomfort and dislocation we have come to associate with twentieth-century literature.

The shifting role accorded the reader in *Middlemarch*, sometimes detached and superior, sometimes deeply implicated in the events of the story, is also a paradigm for the actual reader's position in any experience of reading and provides the continual changes in perspective which enable us to understand the text both intellectually and emotionally. Wolfgang Iser has described this position of the actual reader as inevitably and necessarily double:

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> In thinking the thoughts of another, the reader's own individuality temporarily recedes into the background since it is supplanted by these alien thoughts, which now become the theme on which his attention is focussed. As we read, there occurs an artificial division of our personality because we take as a theme for ourselves something that we are not. Consequently, when reading we operate on different levels. For although we may be thinking the thoughts of someone else, what we are will not disappear completely—it will merely remain a more or less powerful virtual force. Thus, in reading there are these two levels —the alien "me" and the real, virtual "me"—which are never completely cut off from each other.[13]

Iser's approach is phenomenological, but he also recognizes that the involvement of the reader in the literary process is only a means toward an end. As he goes on to state, the process by which we as readers are induced to "think the thoughts of another" is "a stratagem by means of which the author stimulates attitudes in the reader."

What, then, does the reader's ambivalent role in *Middlemarch* tell us about Eliot's larger purpose in writing the novel—about the attitudes she means to stimulate in her readers? The answer, perhaps not surprisingly, is that the audience is meant to arrive at the historical and moral perspective of the narrator, a figure who is involved with the people of Middlemarch because she shares their human hopes and limitations, but is superior to them because she has found ways of dealing with those eternal conditions. By becoming for a time the fictive reader, entering the world of *Middlemarch* ready to be entertained, being in fact entertained by the frailties displayed for him there, and then gradually realizing that he himself may share those frailties, the actual reader achieves the combination of responsible insight and detachment which Eliot feels is necessary if we are to live humanely in the modern world.

The only way to arrive at that perspective is to lose it, surrendering oneself to the role of that shadowy figure, the fictive reader. Like the characters of *Middlemarch*, we, too, must be educated through suffering, taught the seductive but dangerous follies of vanity and made to feel the personal truth behind Eliot's famous statement that "we are all of us born in moral stupidity, taking the world as an udder to feed our supreme selves." Only then can we stand back and say we really understand the world of *Middlemarch*.

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Notes

1. Henry James, "The Novels of George Eliot," *The Atlantic Monthly*, October 1866, p. 485.

2. The nature of an author's audience, which is in some respects the most ancient concern of criticism, has enjoyed renewed interest over the last decade, in part because of the current tendency to incorporate theories of linguistics and of the psychology of cognition into the field of literary criticism. John R. Searle's *Speech Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1969) introduces many of the linguistic concepts that form the basis of reader-response criticism. Wayne Booth's *Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1961) is an important starting place for any consideration of the communication between novelist and reader. Walker Gibson treats the relationship of reader identity to reader response in greater depth in "Authors, Speakers, Readers, and Mock Readers," *College English*, 2 (1950); Walter J. Ong's "The Writer's Audience Is Always a Fiction," *PMLA*, 90 (1975) illustrates how "the writer, in isolation, constructs a role for his 'audience' to play, and readers fictionalize themselves to correspond to the author's projections." Wolfgang Iser's *Implied Reader* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1974) [*Der Implizite Leser* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1972)] traces the different kinds of active participation demanded of the reader of prose fiction from Bunyan to Beckett; as Iser demonstrates, the reading process is an "actualization" of the potential meaning "prestructured" by the text. Martin Price's "The Fictional Contract," *Literary Theory and Structure* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1973) and Paul de Man's "Proust et l'allegorie de la lecture," *Mouvements Premièrs* (Paris: Corti, 1972) also discuss the need to recognize the process of reading as a crucial aspect of the development of meaning in literature and as an action that often mirrors the development of the novel's plot.

3. See Gerald Prince, "Introduction a L'étude du Narrataire," *Poétique*, 14 (1975).

4. See Stanley Fish, *Self-consuming Artifacts* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1972).

5. V. S. Pritchett, *The Living Novel and Later Appreciations* (New York: Random House, 1964), p. 106.

6. Quentin Anderson, "George Eliot in *Middlemarch*," *The Pelican Guide to English Literature, Vol. 6: From Dickens to Hardy*, ed. Boris Ford (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1963), p. 279. W. J. Harvey voices similar irritation in a discussion of *Adam Bede*: " ' "This Rector of Broxton is little better than a pagan!" I hear one of my readers exclaim.' The infuriating thing about this is, of course, that she hears nothing of the sort; the reader is repelled by having his reactions determined for him; he feels himself, and not the characters, to be a puppet manipulated by the author. . . . George Eliot is here being tactless; we feel insulted at being identified with such a crass reaction as George Eliot assumes us to have" ("George

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Eliot and the Omniscient Author Convention," *Nineteenth Century Fiction*, 13 [1958], 88–89).

7. Iser, *The Implied Reader*, p. xii.

8. For a more detailed discussion of Eliot's authorial comments, see Harvey (note 6). John Preston's *The Created Self* (London: Heinemann, 1970) provides a background for Eliot's narrative stance in his exploration of the effects on the reader of eighteenth-century versions of this authorial intrusion.

9. "Those who like *Middlemarch* take pleasure in the writer's judiciousness. They are far more tempted to invest themselves with her sensibility than they are to identify themselves with any of her characters" (Anderson, p. 287).

10. George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, ch. 15, 5, 6, 13, and 23. Since there are so many editions of *Middlemarch*, I have cited all quotations by chapter. The text used is that of the 1874 edition (W. Blackwood and Sons, Edinburgh).

11. For a discussion of Scott's very different sense of the historical novel, see Iser, *The Implied Reader*, ch. 4.

12. See Isobel Armstrong, " 'Middlemarch': A Note on George Eliot's Wisdom," *Critical Essays on George Eliot*, ed. Barbara Hardy (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970).

13. Wolfgang Iser, "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach," *New Literary History*, 3 (1972), 298. See also *The Implied Reader*, ch. 11.

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