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The Unhistoric in History: George Eliot's Challenge to Victorian Historiography

> In fact, much the same sort of movement and mixture went on in old England as we find in older Herodotus, who also in telling what had been, thought it well to take a woman's lot for his starting point.[1]

Like Herodotus, who begins his *History* with a woman, Io, the narrator in *Middlemarch* proposes to start her "history of man . . . under the varying experiments of Time" with Dorothea. Indeed even the very beginning of Herodotus's *History* reveals that the renowned Greek historian and the great Victorian historical novelist share more than just one important affinity. At the onset of his work, Herodotus announces his goal to report the Graeco-Persian war, taking into account "great and marvellous deeds done by Greeks and foreigners."[2] Such marvellous deeds, Herodotus explains, often involved women's (albeit unwilling) participation. Thus, he points out, the Persians accuse the Phoenicians of initiating the feud between Persians and Greeks by abducting Io. In retaliation the Greeks abducted Medea. Years later, Paris, justifying his action by historical precedent, abducted Helen, thus impelling the Trojan-Greek war.[3]

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1. George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, ed. W. J. Harvey (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), 123. Subsequent references will be included parenthetically in the text. This essay is dedicated to the memory of Janet Oppenheim, a renowned historian. I am indebted to the La Mancha Society of the University of Texas for their Research Award and the release time for this essay.

2. *Herodotus*, trans. A. D. Godley, 4 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1920), 1:3. For Eliot's references to Herodotus in her *Middlemarch* notebooks see John Clark Pratt and Victor Neufeldt, *George Eliot's "Middlemarch" Notebooks: A Transcription* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1979), 12, 13, 19, 72, 93, 101, 102, 106, 166, 180, 193, 196, 197.

3. *Herodotus*, 1:5: "Then, (so the story runs) in the second generation after this Alexandrus son of Priam, having heard this tale, was minded to win himself a wife out of Hellas by ravishment; for he was well persuaded that, as the Greeks had made no reparation, so neither would he. So he carried off Helen" (5).

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In times of crisis or sociopolitical change, Herodotus demonstrates, conventionally independent spheres become interdependent. Domestic and public, for instance, usually considered independent arenas, one relegated to women and inaction, the other to men and action, become interdependent. In this respect, Herodotus, often accused of extensive digressions unrelated to heroic figures and actual events, seems to be the precursor of historiography which records multivalent voices silenced by monolithic histories. New historicism, Judith Newton, for instance, points out, constructs history as "a tale of many voices and forms of power, of power exercised by the weak and the marginal as by the dominant and the strong."[4]

Like Herodotus's *History*, Eliot's historical fiction *Middlemarch* seeks significance in everyday experience, particularly in occasions of dissension and resistance to tradition. Also like Herodotus, Eliot demonstrates that, in times of sociopolitical change, here specifically the years immediately preceding the Great Reform Bill of 1832 (which represented the transition from a privileged England to a more representative one), traditional boundaries that separate the public from the domestic sphere disintegrate. *Middlemarch* voices resistance to monological history and recognizes the importance of sociopolitical change in offering the unauthorized an opportunity to speak and to become social agents.

Even before she began writing fiction, Eliot expressed her preference for historiography which records a multiplicity of voices traditionally excluded from monolithic histories. In her early article, "The Natural History of German Life" (1856), where she reviews Wilhelm Heinrich von Reihl's works on social history and extols his portrayal of common people, she regrets the absence of such a historian in England and, perhaps unknowingly, adumbrates her own historiography in *Middlemarch*:

> If any man of sufficient moral and intellectual breadth, whose observations *would not be vitiated by a foregone conclusion*, or by *professional point of view*, would devote himself to studying the natural history of social classes, the degree in which they are influenced by local conditions . . . the interaction on each other . . . his work would be a valuable aid to the social and political reformer (my italics).[5]

4. Judith Newton, "History as Usual? Feminism and the 'New Historicism,'" *The New Historicism*, ed. Aram H. Veeser (New York: Routledge, 1989), 152.

5. George Eliot, *Essays*, ed. Thomas Pinney (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963), 272-73.

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Years later in her well-known essay, "Historic Imagination," written sometime between the publication of *Middlemarch* and *Theophrastus Such*, she seems to reiterate and clarify that early argument when she offers her own historical fiction as a viable alternative to conventional historiography: "I want something different from the abstract treatment which belongs to grave history from a doctrinal point of view [or professional point of view]." She also objects to historiography extolling great men and heroic events, which she calls "a false kind of idealisation [that] dulls our perception of the meaning in words when they relate to past events which have had a glorious issue." Again and again throughout this short essay she reiterates her interest in social change or "pregnant movements," particularly in "the various steps by which a political or social change was reached" and in the "circumstances affecting individual lots."[6]

In *Middlemarch*, Eliot seems to undertake the task of the social and political reformer she foresaw in her early essay on Riehl, one concerned with the impact of sociopolitical change on "individual lots."[7] Taking into consideration monological historiography, she raises questions about its relevance and efficacy and offers her history of common life, "the subordinated individuals . . . as the hidden prime movers of developing humanity."[8] Her numerous entries from diverse histories in the *Middlemarch* notebooks reveal her attempt to familiarize herself with contemporary debates on history and to offer her contribution and challenge to such debates. Such debates, as the novel demonstrates, became intensely relevant during the political disputes surrounding the two Reform Bills of 1832 and 1867. Not surprisingly, Eliot took note of these intellectual and political controversies by working their import into her fiction, and she offered her readers access to epochal phenomena and historical events through individual consciousness. In this regard, she is characteristic of her age. As Brian Rosenberg has shown, her method of employing history,

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6. Eliot, *Essays*, 446-47.

7. Critics who have seen *Middlemarch* as a novel of sociopolitical reform include Bert Hornback, *Middlemarch: A Novel of Reform* (Boston: Twayne, 1988) and Michael Cohen, "Reform, Rescue, and the Sisterhoods of *Middlemarch*," *Victorian Literature and Culture*, vol. 21, ed. John Maynard and Adrienne Auslander Munich (New York: AMS Press, 1994), 89-109. Cohen conjectures that "*Middlemarch* itself may well have helped bring about some specific reforms in The Married Women's Property Act" (89).

8. Alison Booth, *Greatness Engendered: George Eliot and Virginia Woolf* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1992), 93.

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particularly her "historical picturing," is not especially different from that of Ruskin, Carlyle, Arnold, or Dickens.[9]

Yet by means of the characters of Casaubon, Dorothea, and Will, Eliot affords us a perspective on dominant and competing views of history. Quite often in the interactions of these characters we perceive the conflict between monolithic and multivalent historiography. Through these characters, Eliot demonstrates that people's responses to sociopolitical events are largely guided by their understanding of history. Our awareness of Victorian debates over history and historiography, then, can deepen our understanding of these characters, particularly of Will who, since the publication of the novel, has often been dismissed as an insubstantial, unsuccessful character. Henry James, for instance, saw Will as "a woman's man." *The Examiner*, December 7, 1872, commented, "it is not easy to like young Ladislaw . . . in marrying him, Dorothea makes nearly as great a blunder as she did in marrying Mr Casaubon."[10]

Casaubon, Dorothea, and Will also represent the collision of different social classes during times of social instability or change, when traditional boundaries expand to admit others usually excluded. The "pregnant movement" of reform enables Dorothea and Will to voice inequities, to express resistance to tradition. In all three accounts, the conflict resolves itself in favor of a twofold realization: first, the only histories worth considering are those which render life as it is lived in the present meaningful; and second, historical knowledge must be translated into action designed to improve society.

In and through his antiquarian studies, Casaubon, a devoted researcher of "religious history" (33), has developed a learned oblivion to the "pregnant movements" everywhere present in his environs. In his search for originary truths, "a tradition originally revealed" (46), he misses the epochal call to be part of a new beginning promising to improve the living conditions for millions of people. By his own admission, Casaubon lives "too much with the dead" (40) and in so doing manages to deaden his responses to the existential needs of the living. His proposed *Key to all Mythologies* represents tradition resisting change by all means: "But Mr Casaubon's theory of the elements which made the seed of all tradition was not likely

9. "George Eliot and the Victorian 'Historic Imagination,'" *Victorian Newsletter* 61 (1982). See also Jerome Beaty, "History by Indirection: The Era of Reform in *Middlemarch*," *Victorian Studies* 1 (1957):173-79.

10. John Holmstrom and Laurence Lerner, eds. *George Eliot and Her Readers: A Selection of Contemporary Reviews* (London: The Bodley Head, 1966), 111, 87.

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to bruise itself unawares against discoveries" (520). Indeed, Casaubon seems to articulate the aim of antiquarian historiography when he explains to Dorothea the goal of his research: "to construct it [the world] as it used to be, in spite of ruins and confusing changes" (40).

If Casaubon is not an especially sympathetic character, it is because his voice of the antiquarian scholar-historian also becomes that of the disengaged citizen. This is all the more disheartening given that Casaubon's trajectory seems to lead to a position of ecclesiastical authority. His interest in "religious history" (33), his "archangelic manner" (46), his faith in "providential arrangements" (406), and his belief in "a tradition originally revealed" (46) are all signs pointing to the safe prediction that Casaubon is "certain to be a bishop" (90). His notion of history, as exemplified by his mythological and ecclesiastical research, has done little more than prepare him to perpetuate the age-long tradition of attempting to meet people's material needs with an institutionally conceived form of spiritualism. Sadly, such a preparation proves grossly inadequate as he fails to address the great reform issues of the novel's temporal setting (1829-32). Instead, as W. J. Harvey has already demonstrated, Casaubon's research is representative of anachronistic mythography, which attempted to show that all pagan myths were corruptions of the true facts in the Bible, that there was a single original culture before the Flood and a single original language before the destruction of the Tower of Babel. But Karl Otfried Muller had already destroyed that theory in 1825.[11] Casaubon studies history; he does not contribute to its making.

In *Middlemarch*, then, Eliot raises objections against conventional historiography, particularly against the antiquarian approach Casaubon represents. By means of his character, she directs her criticism at those who would posit that the meaning of history resides in the discovery of factual information and the reconstruction of the past. More specifically, Casaubon also seems to be representative of ecclesiastical antiquarianism of the 1840s. Like Edward Casaubon, Edward Freeman (who seems to have served as Casaubon's prototype) devoted his work to antiquarian scholarship often disregarding contemporary sociopolitical issues in favor of antiquarian pursuits. A firm believer in the comparative method, particularly in the study

11. W. J. Harvey, "The Intellectual Background of the Novel: Casaubon and Lydgate," *"Middlemarch": Critical Approaches to the Novel*, ed. Barbara Hardy (New York: Oxford UP, 1967), 25-37.

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of mythology, he seems to echo Casaubon on numerous occasions: "I accept Comparative Philology unreservedly. I may say that I accept Comparative Mythology unreservedly also. . . . I believe that greater things still are in store for the Comparative method. I believe that it will be found to be the *true key* to wide fields of political history" (my italics).[12] Also like Casaubon, he was known for his antiquarian pedantry. When, for instance, in 1871 he passionately favored the restoration to Germany of Alsace, against the wishes of the inhabitants, he defended his position in politically antiquarian terms: "I have ventured to speak of historic right because it is that upon which the whole thing turns. Some persons will, of course, cry out 'pedantry,' 'antiquarian rubbish'; I shall not be greatly troubled if they do."[13] In his view the present could only be interpreted as an extension of the past; the study of the present should be devoted to a better understanding of the past.[14]

Antiquarian historians, as Eliot's presentation of Casaubon indicates, endorse monolithic history by advocating and subscribing to fixed traditions, established dogma, and conservative prescription. Accordingly, Eliot invites her readers to reconsider (better, to reject) the notion of history as an impressive collection of methodically verified but ultimately useless curiosities from the remote past. If nothing else, the very activity of collecting such curiosities requires leisure and freedom from the hardships of survival, two luxuries only a small minority can afford. The rest have to contend with the indignities of hard labor, atrocious working conditions, shameless economic exploitation, and the lack of a representing voice in legislative bodies.

If Casaubon is drawn to the search for some "tradition originally revealed," Dorothea finds herself, at least initially, drawn to "great men" and their intellectual accomplishments. Taught monolithic versions of history, Dorothea can see only "great men" as models for the ideal life she seeks to actualize. Her traditional education, consisting mainly of "the toy-box history of the world adapted to young ladies" (112), gives her no alternative outlook on life but the patriarchal monological history that sanctions tradition and relegates

12. Edward Freeman, "Stray Thoughts on Comparative Mythology," *Fortnightly Review* 8 (1870):536-48, an article Eliot included in her *Middlemarch* notebooks.

13. William R. Stephens, *Life and Letters of Edward A. Freeman*, 2 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1895) 2:3-4.

14. See J. W. Burrow, *A Liberal Descent: Victorian Historians and the English Past* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1981), 164, 225.

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women to the role of the subordinate: "She felt sure that she would have accepted the judicious Hooker, if she had been born in time to save him from that wretched mistake he made in matrimony; or John Milton when his blindness had come on; or any of the other great men whose odd habits it would have been glorious piety to endure" (32). It is not surprising then that she sees Casaubon as a great man with great historical knowledge. In her eyes he is the equivalent of a "living Bossuet" or a "modern Augustine" (47). Already during her honeymoon, however, Dorothea discovers that great men are not related to actual life, do not serve the needs of the present: she "had thought that she could have been patient with John Milton, but she had never imagined him behaving in this way; and for a moment Mr Casaubon seemed to be stupidly undiscerning and odiously unjust" (316). Soon after her marriage, Dorothea dismisses the "great men" approach to history because she intuits that the Lockes, the Bossuets, and the Augustines of the world, no matter how great, are unable to address urgent issues in contemporary society. Not surprisingly, she later discovers that her early fascination with Casaubon serves only to delay her pursuit of some link between historical knowledge and her own life: "this sense of revelation . . . kept in abeyance for the time her usual eagerness for a binding theory which could bring her own life and doctrine into strict connection with that amazing past, and give the remotest sources of knowledge some bearing on her actions" (112).

Furthermore, she realizes that antiquarian historians often disregard present needs and endorse inequities in the name of tradition. Unwittingly perhaps, Dorothea objects to the study of the past for its own sake when she innocently asks Casaubon during their honeymoon: " 'All those rows of volumes—will you not make up your mind what part of them you will use, and begin to write the book which will make your vast knowledge useful to the world?' " (232). But her comment only infuriates Casaubon, who proceeds to lecture her on her feminine ignorance. Dorothea seems to have forgotten that even before her marriage, in one of her first exchanges with Casaubon, she had witnessed the conflict between antiquarian history and life. To her enthusiastic descriptions of her plan to build cottages which would improve the laborers' living conditions, Casaubon had responded by diverting "the talk to the extremely narrow accommodation which was to be had in the dwellings of the ancient Egyptians" (56), thus ignoring present exigencies for antiquarian curiosities. Later on, Dorothea's disillusionment with antiquarian pursuits is so grand that she refuses, despite her loyalty, to undertake the completion of Casaubon's ill-conceived project after his death: "and now she pic-

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tured to herself the days, and months, and years which she must spend in sorting what might be called shattered mummies, and fragments of a tradition which was itself a mosaic wrought from crushed ruins—sorting them as food for a theory which was already withered in birth like an elfin child" (519). Dorothea refuses to become an antiquarian historian who ignores present exigencies for the sake of constructing past realities.

She thus rejects Casaubon's monological history because she realizes that historical knowledge amounts to nothing unless it can have some positive influence on the life and actions of those who possess it. Casaubon's consciousness, Dorothea understands, can never be "rapturously transformed" into "the ardour of a passion, the energy of an action" (314). She has already discovered the irrelevance of monolithic history to women like herself. Neither his antiquarian knowledge nor the great men he symbolizes early on succeed in effecting the "strict connection" between history and life which she had desired.

Unlike Casaubon, Dorothea constantly challenges traditional boundaries that separate the historical world of men from the everyday world of women. Even as a young girl, we are told, she had questioned patriarchal tradition and the inequities it endorsed, "had wrought herself into some independent clearness as to the historical, political reasons why eldest sons had superior rights, and why land should be entailed" (407). Later on, when Will talks to her about his disinherited aunt, she bitterly regrets that woman's victimization by tradition: "What wrong, to cut off a girl from the family protection and inheritance only because she had chosen a man who was poor!" (407). But when she attempts to challenge tradition by pointing out to Casaubon the injustice of Will's situation, "it is not right that he should be in the dependence of poverty while we are rich," she finds herself confronted with relentless authority that fosters inequities in the name of providence: "these, my dear Dorothea, are providential arrangements" (409).

Although not a political mind, Dorothea is quick to teach Brooke that the distance between his political strategy to enter Parliament (keeping himself "independent about Reform" [499]) and his concrete actions (leaving his tenants in sordid conditions) is paved with hypocrisy. As she shows her awareness of the need for land redistribution and more humane working conditions, she raises the need for a historiography which takes into consideration the importance of common people and their everyday experiences. In her view, reform represents a "pregnant movement" that will expand conventional boundaries and will grant privileges to those overlooked by hegemonic

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figures. Indeed, Dorothea becomes representative of the multiple voices silenced by traditional historiography. When she discusses the issue of reform with Brooke, she represents the voice of resistance and dissension to tradition. In her exchanges with Brooke, we also witness the disintegration of the boundaries between the public (or masculine) and the domestic (or feminine) in times of sociopolitical change. Though traditionally relegated to the domestic, she has a clear political vision which Brooke lacks. She logically argues for the connection between political agenda and action, a point which Brooke has disregarded: "Because you mean to enter Parliament as a member who cares about the improvement of the people, and one of the first things to be made better is the state of the land and the laborers" (424).

The traditional dichotomy between the public and the domestic, Eliot shows, collapses in times of change. Although a woman with no political rights, Dorothea becomes an active social agent. Reform, Dorothea recognizes, is too important to be left entirely to the prerogative of the already franchised; to be meaningful, reform must begin within every person's domain of experience and must be carried out by the force of personal commitment: "I think we have no right to come forward and urge wider changes for good, until we have tried to alter the evils which lie under our own hands" (424). Dorothea's minimalist agenda clearly disallows the convenient politics of deferral (it is the government that is in charge of reform), and makes the improvement of the world, the contribution to history, a matter of personal choice—not only of the privileged but of the common people.

Through Dorothea's character, then, Eliot explores both the appeal of the "great men" theory of history and the reasons such an appeal must be declined. The great figures of the past, Eliot seems to suggest, furnish idealized models of human existence—quite often nothing but a "false idealization." As we have seen in Dorothea's case, none of the "great men" of the past can provide answers to the urgent questions of her own life as well as the lives of others around her. In short, the "great men" perspective proves misleading and ultimately useless. Her marriage to Casaubon turns out to be a mistake, and Dorothea's expectation that the "amazing past" would have "some bearing on her actions" is never met. Through her experience with antiquarian and heroic history, represented by Casaubon, Dorothea discovers that the answers she is seeking would have to come from herself guided by her awareness of her surroundings and her moral conscience.

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Certainly the debate over the "great men" version of history was part of Eliot's intellectual horizon. As early as 1830, the temporal setting of *Middlemarch*, Carlyle argued that "history proper, that part of History which treats of remarkable action, has, in all modern as well as ancient times, ranked among the highest arts."[15] And later on, in his *Hero, Hero Worship and the Heroic in History* (1841), Carlyle defined "Universal History" as "the History of the Great Men who have worked here. . . . all things that we see standing accomplished in the world are. . . . the practical realisation and embodiment of Thoughts that dwelt in the Great Men sent into the world."[16] Carlyle's contemporaries as well as later historians shared his view of history as the record of great actions of great men. For instance, more than sixty years after Carlyle's definition, James Froude, the author of *History of England* (1856-70), a work responsible for his reputation as a great historian, reiterated Carlyle's words in his Inaugural Address at Oxford (1892): "The history of mankind, says Carlyle, is the history of its great men. To find out these, clear the dirt from them and place them on their proper pedestals, is the function of the historian."[17]

Yet even Carlyle himself perceived the limitations of the traditional historiography of great men. In the same essay on history, where he speaks of heroic historiography, he advocates a historiography of common people as indispensable to a full understanding of a given culture: "Social life is the aggregate of all the individual men's Lives who constitute society; History is the essence of innumerable Biographies."[18]

Similarly Thomas Macaulay, whose *History of England* (1849-61) reached the popularity of contemporary fiction, also objected to histories of "great men" that excluded the life of common people. As early as 1828, Macaulay argued that a historian should not limit historiography to heroes and heroic actions' "palaces and solemn days," but should consider "ordinary men as they appear in their ordinary business and in their ordinary pleasures."[19] He prided

15. "On History" in vol. 2 of *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays*, in vol. 27 of *The Works of Thomas Carlyle*, ed. Henry Duff Traill, Centenary Edition, 30 vols. (New York: Scribner's, 1897), 84.

16. *Works of Thomas Carlyle*, 5:1.

17. James Anthony Froude, "Inaugural Lecture," *Longman's Magazine* 21 (1892), 162.

18. Carlyle, *Works*, 27:86.

19. Thomas Macaulay, *The Works of Lord Macaulay*, ed. Hannah Trevelyan, 8 vols. (London: Longmans, 1866), 5:157.

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himself in undertaking such a task in his own *History* where he announced in the very beginning that he would consider those aspects of English cultural life which had been overlooked by traditional historiography. At the risk of being reproached for "having descended below the dignity of history," he declared that he would "endeavour to relate the history of the people as well as the history of the government . . . to describe the rise of religious sects and the changes of literary taste . . . and not to pass by with neglect even the revolutions which have taken place in dress, furniture, repasts, and public amusements."[20] For Macaulay, then, the history of a country is much greater than the biographies of its great men.

When considering such historians as Macaulay and Carlyle, Eliot's challenge to traditional historiography does not seem unique in her culture. In fact, her historiography has often been compared to Carlyle's.[21] Yet Eliot's contribution to traditional historiography includes not only common men, as Macaulay and Carlyle suggested, but women, as well, silenced even by these historians' unconventional historiography. George Henry Lewes's extensive reviews of Victorian histories reveal the tendency to exclude women even from unconventional historiography. In 1851 for instance, he argued that "History . . . in its highest form, is not the chronicle of events—not the gazette of camps and courts, of diplomatic intrigues or royal misfortunes—it is the Life of Humanity as evolved by human beings."[22] Yet in "The State of Historical Science in France" (published in 1844, seven years before he met George Eliot), he contends: the "vocation of woman has always been and must be domestic"; it is absurd, therefore, to "give women . . . the education of men" because it would be like giving them "instruments they are not to use; and to give them the political and social privileges is to call them out of the sphere of vocation."[23] Confined to the domestic vocation and not counted as one of the makers of history, Dorothea, and by

20. Macaulay, *Works*, 1:2-3.

21. Brian Rosenberg, in "Historicizing the New Historicism: Understanding the Past in Criticism and Fiction," *Modern Language Quarterly* 50 (1989):375-92, points out the affinities between Carlyle's approach to history and Eliot's "Historic Imagination" and sees both writers as precursors of new historicism. Alison Booth, in "Little Dorrit and Dorothea Brooke: Interpreting the Heroines of History," *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 41 (1986), also describes the affinities that Carlyle's history and Eliot's historical fiction of *Middlemarch* share (190-201).

22. George Henry Lewes, "History by Modern Frenchmen," *British Quarterly Review* 14 (1851):405-6.

23. George Henry Lewes, "The State of Historical Science in France," *British and Foreign Review* 31 (1844):74.

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extension most women like her, would seem to have had no chance to contribute meaningfully to the life of humanity.

Yet Will, who becomes "an ardent public man" and finds his vocation only because of Dorothea's influence, seems to represent the actualization of Dorothea's potential. It is not accidental that Eliot takes pains to attribute to Will, Dorothea's tendencies, like his "enthusiasm for liberty, freedom, emancipation," and to draw his portrait in similar images of light and brightness.[24] Through Will, she demonstrates the accomplishments women like Dorothea would have reached had they had the educational and political advantages Will enjoys. Like Dorothea, Will sees history in the service of life and makes beneficial connections between past and present. But unlike Casaubon, who ignores Rome, "the city of visible history," and Dorothea, who is overwhelmed by the city's "stupendous fragmentariness" and cannot appreciate its historical complexity, Will understands Rome "with a quickening power of a knowledge which breathes a growing soul into all historic shapes, and traces out the suppressed transitions which unite all contrasts" (225). During his dinner with Dorothea and Casaubon in Rome, Will joyfully reports that "Rome has given him quite a new sense of history as a whole" (244). For Will, Rome represents neither the preserved remains of a once-glorious culture nor a great modern city totally foreign and unrelated to other cities. Rather, it represents a rich source of cultural energies born out of the coexistence of its past and present contradictions. More important, Rome stands not only visibly connected to its own past but also imaginatively connected to other European cities. For Will, the Roman and the Victorian ages are not two ages separated by eighteen independent centuries; rather they are two interrelated aspects within a greater span of time, a span without fixed boundaries or strict finality: "the very miscellaneousness of Rome . . . made the mind flexible with constant comparison, and saved you from seeing the world's ages as a set of box-like partitions without vital connection" (244). Given Will's artistic insight into historical connections, we cannot readily accept Hayden White's assertion that in *Middlemarch* "the gist of [Eliot's] thought is clear: artistic insight and historical learning are opposed, and the qualities of the responses to life which they respectively evoke are mutually exclusive."[25] In Will, Eliot interweaves the artistic and the historical

24. See Sophia Andres, "The Germ and the Picture in *Middlemarch*," *ELH* 55 (1988):853-68.

25. Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural History* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1978), 33.

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and shows the importance of interpreting history from an artistic perspective. After all, it is the interdependence rather than the disparity of the artistic and the historical which she advocates in her "Historic Imagination." Indeed, Will embodies historic imagination.

Throughout the novel, Will appears not only as a creative artist who makes comparisons and connections between the disparate aspects of experience but also as a person in step with the social and political rhythms of the times. Committed to specific actions furthering the cause of reform and excited by the prospects of resistance to tradition, he is a living example of the involved citizen who cares about the quality of public life: "his nature warmed easily in the presence of subjects which were visibly mixed with life and action, and the easily-stirred rebellion in him helped the glow of public spirit" (501). On one occasion, impressed by Will's eloquence on the need for the First Great Reform Bill, Brooke tells him that his political sentiments deserve a "pocket-borough": "You have a way of putting things. Burke, now:—when I think of Burke, I can't help wishing that someone had a pocket-borough to give you, Ladislaw." Will turns the compliment on its more serious side: "Pocket-boroughs would be a fine thing . . . if they were always in the right pocket, and there were always a Burke at hand" (500). The obvious allusions to the corrupt practice of buying boroughs as a ticket to the House of Commons, and to Burke's distinguished parliamentary career as a champion of real reform need not be elaborated here. We need only notice the ethical overtones of Will's response as well as his suggestion that Burke, dead for about thirty-five years, is still influential if only because the moral content of his political philosophy speaks well for the current forces of reform. In this respect, Will's perspective is identified with Dorothea's moral commitment which quite frequently, as we have seen, comes in conflict with tradition.

Beyond his newly acquired "sense of history as a whole," Will appears to us as a character indefinable by reference to conventional social roles. Somewhat of an outcast, he lives as a "sort of gypsy, rather enjoying the sense of belonging to no class" and moves about unafraid of losing caste since he "never had any caste" (502). Appropriately, he does not hesitate to become the editor of *Pioneer* and advocate fundamental changes in existing institutions. In this capacity, he draws the ire of Mr. Keck, the editor of *Trumpet*, the adversary of *Pioneer*: "it was disgusting to Keck to see a strip of a fellow . . . get up and speechify by the hour against institutions 'which had existed when he was in his cradle' " (502). Unlike Brooke, who distances himself from the issue of reform to better his chances of standing as a member of Parliament, Will joins the irrepressible

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forces of change, and begins to speak for many common people:

> "But that is what the country wants" .. "Else there would be no meaning in political unions or any other movement that knows what it's about. It wants to have a House of Commons which is not weighted with nominees of the landed class, but with representatives of the other interests. And as to contending for a reform short of that, it is like asking for a bit of an avalanche which has already begun to thunder." (500)

Ironically, it is Will, not Brooke, who becomes a member of Parliament and who, "as an ardent public man," contributes to the making of history by his dedication to the proposition of remedying societal ills through legislation.

Through Casaubon, Dorothea, and Will, therefore, Eliot enters contemporary debates on history, historiography, and historical understanding and shows the different sociopolitical visions they entail. Clearly, antiquarian historiography endorses the study of the past in isolation from the present. Both antiquarian and heroic historiographies resist change and silence common people capable of heroic actions. Throughout *Middlemarch*, Eliot cautions us against seeing the past in isolation from the present.

Our attempts to see the novel in its relevance to the present, on the other hand, engage us in Victorian debates over progress. Intellectuals such as Carlyle, Macaulay, and Lubbock, whose work Eliot esteemed highly, believed that progress was inevitable. Carlyle, for instance, in "Signs of the Times" saw progress as a universal phenomenon, and even interpreted the era's restlessness and discontent as a sign of progress: "Doubtless this age also is advancing. Its very unrest, its ceaseless activity, its discontent contains matter of promise."[26] Macaulay began his *History of England* on a joyous note, asserting that the history of his country during the last hundred and sixty years was that "of physical, of moral, and of intellectual improvement."[27] Lubbock's exceedingly popular anthropological study, *Origin of Civilization and the Primitive Condition of Man* (published in seven editions, the last one in 1912 and a work Eliot quoted several times in her notebooks for *Middlemarch*), best captures the optimistic Victorian belief in progress: "If the past history of man has been of deterioration," Lubbock optimistically reasons, "we have but a groundless expectation of future improvement; on the other hand if

26. Thomas Carlyle, *Works*, vol. 27, *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays*, 2:80.

27. Thomas Macaulay, *Works*, 1:2.

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the past has been of progress, we may fairly hope that the future will be so also" (323).[28]

Eliot, however, as the novel demonstrates, did not share her contemporaries' overt optimism.[29] Several critics such as Sally Shuttleworth, Suzanne Graver, and Gillian Beer have elaborated on the pessimistic tone the Finale conveys regarding the hopes the issue of reform had raised but did not fulfill.[30] Certainly, the dual temporal setting of the novel casts the assertion of progress in doubt, at least for the intervening years. Since the protagonist is a woman and the question of women's education surfaces often, Victorian readers would have been compelled to compare education in the late 1870s to that in the late 1820s, and would have seen that not much progress had been made. Some contemporary critics did see *Middlemarch* as George Eliot's contribution to the Woman Question, particularly to women's education.[31] Ironically, the critics' severe censure of Eliot's indictment of the shortcomings of female education ("modes of education which make a woman's knowledge another name for motley ignorance") in the first edition, a passage later revised in the Cheap Edition of 1874,[32] demonstrated Eliot's point in the novel that most people will generally resist reform.

The novel begins and ends with St. Theresa and Antigone, "great women" who entered history by resisting tradition and patriarchal authorities. Heroic striving sustains the novel's momentum though

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28. John Lubbock, *The Origin of Civilization and the Primitive Condition of Man*, ed. Peter Riviere (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1978).

29. In "Narrative and History," *ELH* 41 (1974), J. Hillis Miller demonstrates that Eliot rejects "historicism with its ideas of progress and of a homogeneous time within which that progress unfolds" (471).

30. Sally Shuttleworth, "*Middlemarch*: An Experiment in Time," *George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Science: The Make-Believe of a Beginning* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1984), 142-74; Suzanne Garver, "'Incarnate History': The Feminisms in *Middlemarch*," *Approaches to Teaching Eliot's "Middlemarch,"* ed. Kathleen Blake (New York: MLA 1990), 64-74; Gillian Beer, *George Eliot* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1986), 152-62.

31. David Carroll, ed., *George Eliot: The Critical Heritage* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1971), 307, 308, 309. Modern critics are disturbed by Eliot's ambivalence about extending the franchise to women. Yet in a letter to John Morley in 1867 apropos the debate over John Stuart Mill's amendment to Gladstone's Reform Bill to permit women to vote, she does not waver: "Your attitude in relation to Female Enfranchisement seems to be very nearly mine. If I were called on to act in the matter, I would certainly not oppose any plan which held out any reasonable promise of tending to establish as far as possible an equivalence of advantages for the two sexes, as to education and the possibilities of free development," *The George Eliot Letters*, ed. Gordon S. Haight, 9 vols. (New Haven: Yale UP, 1954-78), 8:402.

32. Jerome Beaty, "The Text of the Novel," *"Middlemarch": Critical Approaches to the Novel*, ed. Barbara Hardy (New York: Oxford UP, 1967), 38-62.

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it seems to vanish by the end of the novel, when we, like "many who knew [Dorothea]," think "it a pity that so substantive and rare a creature should have been absorbed into the life of another" (894). Nevertheless, the Finale, though revised to appease contemporary critics' objections to Eliot's censure of society, still calls attention to the conditions which exclude human beings from meaningful socio-political contributions. In this respect Eliot echoes Froude, who, in his *History of England*, argues for the significance of conditions which give rise to great individuals that shape culture. A genius like Shakespeare or Raphael, he asserts, "is never more than the highest degree of an excellence which prevails widely round it, and forms the environment in which it grows."[33] And certainly Eliot, who filled eleven pages in the Folger Notebook (the longest section from any single source) from William Lecky's *History of European Morals* (1869), would have probably agreed with his comments on society's responsibility in forming cultural agents and creating the conditions for meaningful and significant actions. "Life is history not poetry," he declares. "It consists mainly of little things rarely illumined by flashes of great heroism, rarely broken by great dangers, or demanding exertions." He emphasizes that "a moral system, to govern society must accommodate itself to common characters and mingled motives. It must be capable of influencing natures that can rise to an heroic level."[34]

Likewise *Middlemarch* describes in detail the conditions, or "pregnant movements," which made social change and agency of the common people possible. In tracing the development of each character's history, the Finale draws together prevalent Victorian approaches to history, and calls attention to figures excluded from conventional historiography. Simultaneously it underscores the significance of such people, since the call for reform (or even progress if one believes in it) does not come from representative hegemonic figures such as Brooke, Casaubon, or Sir James who fear and obstruct change, but from those excluded from social privileges such as Will, whom Sir James labels "the grandson of a thieving Jew pawnbroker," and Dorothea—a woman. In turn, we "insignificant people" are made keenly aware of the importance of "unhistoric acts," of our ability, that is, to contribute to history by fighting inequities, for

33. James Anthony Froude, *The History of England from the Fall of Wolsey to the Defeat of the Spanish Armada*, 12 vols. (New York: Scribner's, 1871), 1:74.

34. William E. H. Lecky, *History of European Morals*, 2 vols. (London: Longmans, 1869), 1:204.

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"our daily words and acts are preparing the lives of many Dorotheas, some of which may present a far sadder sacrifice than that of the Dorothea whose story we know" (896).

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