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Middlemarch and the Woman Question

KATHLEEN BLAKE

EVERYBODY SAYS that *Middlemarch* is a great work. Many of its original reviewers said that it raised the Woman Question.[1] Yet the body of criticism from then till now makes surprisingly little case for it as a great feminist work. I think it is.

There are several ways of saying that *Middlemarch* is not a feminist novel. One is by arguing from one's own sexual stereotypes. In 1873 Frederick Napier Broome said that *Middlemarch* was not after all "some special impeachment of the fitness of the present female lot" because Dorothea did not represent a female character at all; Broome said she was a masculine type, since "unsatisfied ambitions are masculine rather than female ills." In 1974 John Halperin said that an epic life is not possible to Dorothea—it is typical of one cast of modern sensibility to acquiesce in limitations that George Eliot asks us to feel as painful pressure. He goes on to say that Dorothea is not the epic type anyway. The only reason

[1] For example, a reviewer of *Middlemarch* in *The Athenaeum,* 7 Dec. 1872, pp. 725–26, saw the Woman Question in Dorothea's life—see W. J. Harvey, "Criticism of the Novel, Contemporary Reception," in *"Middlemarch": Critical Approaches to the Novel,* ed. Barbara Hardy (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1967), p. 131; and R. H. Hutton in *The British Quarterly Review,* 57 (1873), 407–29, said that *Middlemarch* is "a pictorial indictment of modern society for the crippling conditions it imposes on men and women, especially women, of high ideal enthusiasm"—quoted by W. J. Harvey in *"Middlemarch": Critical Approaches,* p. 132. A reviewer in *The Saturday Review,* 7 Dec. 1872, pp. 733–34, hoped young ladies would not take to being as advanced as Dorothea—see *George Eliot and Her Readers: A Selection of Contemporary Reviews,* ed. John Holmstrom and Laurence Lerner (London: Bodley Head, 1966), pp. 87–90, and a summary of contemporary commentary on the feminist theme on p. 120. Leslie Stephen in *The Cornhill Magazine,* Feb. 1881, pp. 152–68, found in *Middlemarch* almost a satire on modern young ladies' aspirations—rpt. in *A Century of George Eliot Criticism,* ed. Gordon S. Haight (London: Methuen, 1966), p. 147.

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offered for this is her sex: "What she really needs as an object of devotion is a genuine husband and a family." This is "her discovery of her own nature and her real needs as a woman and a wife." Another recent critic, Bert Hornback, also reconciles himself cheerfully to Dorothea's fate. However doubtful a prize Will Ladislaw may be, "he is, however, real and male, a husband for Dorothea and a father for her child." Once accustomed to this point of view, we are not surprised—this is Halperin again—to hear Dorothea compared to Amelia Smedley and George Eliot called "no feminist."[2]

Another way to divest *Middlemarch* of its feminism is to ignore the issue of sex altogether. A good example is found in an essay by Von Norbert Kohl treating the "Prelude" as a guide to the novel. The "Prelude" devotes much of its third paragraph (and there are only three) to a discussion of the "inconvenient indefiniteness" of "the natures of women." The paragraph offers several possible explanations for this phenomenon, but wherever one might decide that Eliot takes her stand on the issue, she has certainly posed it. However, what she poses, Kohl transposes. For woman's nature he substitutes human nature and discusses that.[3]

A third argument against feminist interpretation of the book deserves to be taken more seriously. A number of nineteenth-century reviewers questioned whether the "Finale's" indictment of society for its treatment of women is convincingly supported by the novel's action. Specifically, the first edition of 1871–72 says that

[2] Broome, *The Times* (London), 7 Mar. 1873, pp. 3–4, rpt. in *George Eliot and Her Readers,* pp. 108–9. Halperin, *Egoism and Self-Discovery in the Victorian Novel* (New York: Burt Franklin, 1974), pp. 146, 151. It is symptomatic of Halperin's eagerness to blame Dorothea before she buckles down to a proper womanly role that he misquotes (p. 146) the epigraph to chapter 4: "Our deeds are fetters that we forge ourselves"; he leaves out the second line: "Ay, truly: but I think it is the world / That brings the iron." Hornback, "The Moral Imagination of George Eliot," *Papers on Language and Literature,* 8 (1972), 389. Halperin, p. 161. Other critics who think Dorothea's second marriage is the best thing that could happen to her are Robert F. Damm, "Sainthood and Dorothea Brooke," *Victorian Newsletter,* No. 35 (1969), pp. 18–22; Willene van Loenen Pursell, *Love and Marriage in Three English Authors: Chaucer, Milton, and Eliot* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1963); and Reva Stump, *Movement and Vision in George Eliot's Novels* (Seattle: Univ. of Washington Press, 1959).

[3] Kohl, "George Eliot, *Middlemarch:* 'Prelude'—eine Interpretation," *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte,* 42 (1968), 182–201. George Eliot, *Middlemarch,* ed. Gordon S. Haight, Riverside ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1956), pp. 3–4; citations in the text are to this edition, which is based on the 1874 edition, the last one revised by Eliot, and taken by Haight as the standard.

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Dorothea's mistakes owe something to a society that "smiled on propositions of marriage from a sickly man to a girl less than half his own age." The reviewers pointed out that Middlemarch did not smile, certainly not Celia, Mrs. Cadwallader, Sir James Chettam, not even Mr. Brooke.[4] In 1873 Sidney Colvin offered a good response to this criticism, that Dorothea's whole education prepares her for the mistake of her marriage.[5] However, Eliot did change the disputed paragraph. Specific criticism of social pressure towards marrriage and of scanty education for women gives way in the 1874 edition, now taken as the standard, to a general complaint against "the conditions of an imperfect social state" (612), which does not mention women at all. Is Eliot backing off from the Woman Question?

We know that she shared some of the feminist views of her period. In 1855 she wrote a sympathetic essay on Margaret Fuller and Mary Wollstonecraft that anticipates the concerns she takes up in *Middlemarch*: women's natures, their need for work, men's presumption of superiority and its destructive consequences. Eliot says of Fuller, "some of the best things she says are on the folly of absolute definitions of woman's nature and absolute demarcations of woman's mission." She quotes Fuller: "I think women need, especially at this juncture, a much greater range of occupation than they have, to rouse their latent powers" if they are to avoid "the *ennui* that haunts grown women." Both Wollstonecraft and Fuller write forcibly, says Eliot, on "the fact, that, while men have a horror of such faculty or culture in the other sex as tends to place it on a level with their own, they are really in a state of subjection to ignorant and feeble-minded women."[6]

Still, avowedly feminist critics of *Middlemarch*—their number

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4 For instance, see *The British Quarterly Review,* 57 (1873), 407–29; *The North American Review,* 116 (1873), 432–40; *The Spectator,* 7 Dec. 1872, pp. 1554–55; *The Times,* 7 Mar. 1873, as summarized by Harvey in *"Middlemarch": Critical Approaches,* pp. 133–34. *Middlemarch,* ed. Haight, p. 612, n. 1, gives the words of the first edition of 1871–72 that were changed in the 1874 edition.

5 *The Fortnightly Review,* 19 Jan., pp. 13, 143–44, rpt. in *George Eliot and Her Readers,* p. 104.

6 "Margaret Fuller and Mary Wollstonecraft," *The Leader,* 6 (1855), 988–89, rpt. in *Essays of George Eliot,* ed. Thomas Pinney (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963), pp. 201–4. See Gordon S. Haight, *George Eliot: A Biography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), pp. 396–97, on Eliot's caution in lending her name to feminist causes, because of her own peculiar position as the great—and ambiguously married—lady of letters. She did subscribe to Girton College and the idea of higher education for women, but she kept out of the suffrage campaign.

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is small considering the attention originally paid to the issue—tend to find their expectant feminism disappointed by the novel.[7] I will return to this fourth way of disqualifying *Middlemarch* as a feminist novel and argue against it at the end of the essay. Now I wish to argue that the deletion of the indictments of the "Finale" makes little difference to the novel's focus on the disabilities of a woman's lot.

The story begins and ends with Dorothea. Even in its revised state the "Finale" still completes the theme launched in the "Prelude." That theme concerns what may be called the "Saint Theresa syndrome," the state of a soul that aspires to epic life but finds no channel for "far-resonant action," and so achieves only a blundering life, its aspirations "dispersed among hindrances." This fate is specifically feminine. The "Prelude" concerns itself with "the natures of women." The ardor that appears extravagant because its object is so vague alternates with the "common yearning of womanhood." If she tries to take her stand anywhere but at the level that defines her by sex—which Eliot hardly recommends, calling it a "lapse"—a woman's character becomes liable to the odd condition of "indefiniteness."

George Eliot is fascinated by this condition, as much of *Middlemarch* goes to show. It may afflict men as well as women, but she repeats the idea twice in the "Prelude" in relation to women. The reason is that she is not with those who judge that an "inconvenient indefiniteness" is part of the fashioning of feminine nature by supreme power, for this psychic slackness resists the scientific measurement that should be possible if it were a natural given. Rather it is the result of social conditions, those which favored Saint Theresa but do not favor Dorothea. It is interesting that Eliot pictures a Saint Theresa not of mystic beatitude but of very concrete accomplishment, the reform of a religious order. To be favored is to be able to "shape . . . thought and deed in noble agreement." But no "coherent social faith and order" give latter-born Theresas something to work for, and the result is "inconsistency and formlessness."

[7] Some critics who take notice of the feminist issue, although they do not concentrate on it, are Virginia Woolf, "George Eliot," *The Common Reader* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1925), pp. 229–42, rpt. in *Discussions of George Eliot*, ed. Richard Stang (Boston: Heath, 1960), pp. 26–30; Joan Bennett, *George Eliot: Her Mind and Her Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1948); Barbara Hardy, *The Novels of George Eliot: A Study in Form* (London: Athlone Press, 1959).

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Women are especially vulnerable because society offers them so little to do, expects less, and never imagines that they need work as much as men do. A woman's life offers a paradigm of the novel's theme—lack of vocation as tenuousness of identity. This may be why Eliot says that she, like Herodotus, thinks it well to take a woman's lot as her starting point (71). If she modified her finishing point to make it less specifically concerned with the problems society creates for women, the modification is minor. For there remain in the "Finale" strong reminders of the social conditions that break the force of women's strivings. In the water-obstruction imagery, which is important in the novel and with which it ends, a full nature like Dorothea's "spent itself in channels which had no great name on the earth" (613).

Letty Garth, "whose life was much checkered by resistance to her depreciation as a girl" (417), finds herself beleaguered in the "Finale" by brotherly arguments and parental oracle that girls are good for less than boys. Letty seems to exist in *Middlemarch* so that the feminist theme may be simply stated now and again, lest it should be muffled in the massive orchestration. She is Middlemarch's staunchest feminist, "her feeling of superiority being stronger than her muscles" (609). But Letty is only a little girl. It is doubtful that her feeling of superiority could last in a society that gives no credit to women even when it is due, let alone expects anything of them so that they might have something to aim at and to be. We learn in the "Finale" that Middlemarch attributes Fred Vincy's book on farming to Mary because it is sure that he is above turnips and mangelwurzel. It attributes her book, drawn from Plutarch, to Fred because it is sure that whatever is the higher accomplishment must be his. In a society where even the disarming Mr. Brooke assumes that female intelligence "runs underground, like the rivers of Greece," to come out in the sons, and the amiable Sir James assumes that his masculine mind is of a higher kind than a woman's, no matter how soaring, as a birch to a palm tree (33, 16), it is no surprise that Mary is not sorry to bring forth men children only (608). In his estimate of the soundness of ignorance itself if it is masculine, Sir James receives the benefit of tradition, which "furnishes the limpest personality with a little gum or starch" (16). No such tradition holds female character together—hence its greater susceptibility to formlessness. We see what tradition Letty inherits.

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George Eliot may have been right to modify the passage in the "Finale" that blames Middlemarch for smiling on Dorothea's marriage to Casaubon, because the social pressures she actually shows are a good deal less direct, while none the less telling. Let us look at one instance among many that could be given of the subtle means by which Middlemarch delivers Dorothea into the arms of Casaubon. That it does not mean to only gives Eliot's analysis greater depth by avoiding the sentimentality of attributing every victim to somebody's intention.

Dorothea is characterized by ardor and energy. These words are used over and over to describe her. In chapter 1 she is "animated," has "inward fire," responds to a "current of feeling," "glowed." Her pleasure in the jewels and in riding establishes one component of her "Puritan energy," while her pleasure in renouncing them establishes the other. Dorothea enjoys her authority in her uncle's household, she has established an infant school in the village, she wants to arrange Mr. Brooke's papers, and she works on designs for cottages. She looks forward to the day when she will be of age to command her own money and implement her own schemes.

"Her mind was theoretic, and yearned by its nature after some lofty conception of the world which might frankly include the parish of Tipton" (6). Several critics have misread Dorothea's character to conclude that there is something blamably abstract in her way of thinking, that her myopia symbolizes her oversight of the tangible in favor of nebulous ideals.[8] While she often does not see what is before her face, and this can give her apprehension a certain Dodo quality, not all she overlooks is worth seeing—the Maltese puppy, for instance. Sometimes she is protected by her own blindness—"her blindness to whatever did not lie in her own pure purpose carried her safely by the side of precipices where vision would have been perilous with fear" (273). Her idealizing vision is sometimes truer than the short view—her belief in Lydgate restores him in some measure to himself. And the carnally minded do not see everything there is either—however right Celia is about Casaubon, she misses a great deal that matters. But most important to bear in mind is that Dorothea *wants* to include the parish of Tipton in her ideal. It is simply not true that she seeks intensity

[8] Good examples are Damm, p. 22, and Halperin, pp. 144–46.

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and greatness separate from the actual. She wants to realize them "here—now—in England" (21).

Dorothea does not abjure the concrete. But such concrete goals as society offers a woman in her position cramp her. She would need to combine "girlish instruction comparable to the nibblings and judgments of a discursive mouse" (which she has) with "an endowment of stupidity and conceit" (which she has not), if she were to be satisfied with them. Then

> she might have thought that a Christian young lady of fortune should find her ideal of life in village charities, patronage of the humbler clergy, the perusal of "Female Scripture Characters" . . . and the care of her soul over her embroidery in her own boudoir—with a background of prospective marriage to a man who, if less strict than herself, as being involved in affairs religiously inexplicable, might be prayed for and seasonably exhorted. From such contentment poor Dorothea was shut out. (21)

The cramping narrowness of a woman's prospects is frequently conveyed in imagery of enclosure and compression: in Dorothea's dissatisfaction with the "walled-in maze of small paths that led no whither"—"so heavily did the world weigh on her in spite of her independent energy"; in the description of her hopes for her first marriage—"she was going to have room for the energies which stirred uneasily under the dimness and pressure of her own ignorance and the petty peremptoriness of the world's habits" (21, 465, 32).

But when she rejects narrow conventions in order to find room for her energies, her problem becomes the reverse of cramp—too much space. Her goals necessarily suffer from haziness of outline since they are not demarcated with the rigid precision of those offered ready-to-hand by society. Far from complacent in her vague ideals, Dorothea is aware from the first of this vagueness as a problem. "For a long while she had been oppressed by the indefiniteness which hung in her mind, like a thick summer haze, over all her desire to make her life greatly effective. What could she do, what ought she to do?" (20). Worth considering in this connection is Dorothea's confusion at the wide vista of Rome. Her inability to seize upon any single object leaves her strength scattered and diffuse. Eliot shows that this confusion is as capable

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of obstructive effect as simple narrowness of outlook, for instance in the intriguing image of "a glut of confused ideas which check the flow of emotion" (144). This is one of the "doubtful pains of discovering and marking out" one's own path (610).

Energy that produces no impact is energy squelched or diffused or redirected. Dorothea speaks at her uncle's table "with more energy than is expected of so young a lady." Mr. Brooke's response—"Young ladies don't understand political economy, you know"—comes like "an extinguisher over all her lights" (12–13). But Dorothea has too much spark to be extinguished, and she wants anything but the haze of undirected energy, so she grasps at the closest objects of enthusiasm, Mr. Casaubon and his work. During the rest of the dinner she wants only to be left alone to hear him explain it. The rebound to Casaubon is shown again when Dorothea's cottage designing is dismissed by Celia as a fad. "The *fad* of drawing plans! What was life worth—what great faith was possible when the whole effect of one's actions could be withered up into such parched rubbish as that?" (27). Not even Dorothea is a powerful enough personality to be exempt from the principle, shown repeatedly in *Middlemarch* and in all of George Eliot's works, that part of the way we see ourselves is the way we think others see us. This is why, for instance, Fred begins to feel more uncomfortably culpable when he imagines his culpability revealed to the Garths. Dorothea would need an obliviousness to others' opinions that even Savonarola lacks in *Romola*; the novel describes the self-doubt he feels when Florence turns against his work as inevitable to anyone without "a stupid inflexibility of self-confidence."[9] "It always remains true that if we had been greater, circumstance would have been less strong against us" (428). But how great can we be, facing "the hampering threadlike pressure of small social conditions, and their frustrating complexity"? (133–34). Opinion is part of social conditions.

Tipton and Freshitt are "unfriendly mediums" to Dorothea (28). And "there is no creature whose inward being is so strong that it is not greatly determined by what lies outside it" (612). When Dorothea rejoices in getting away from Tipton and Freshitt, she does not expect to transcend mediums, as some critics of her

[9] *The Works of George Eliot,* Cabinet ed. (Edinburgh and London: Blackwood, 1878–85), XX, 432.

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theoretic nature suggest. Rather she hopes for something friendlier in Lowick. The stymieing of energy in the scene with Celia prepares her for accepting Casaubon's proposal, as delivered in the next scene. Casaubon takes on the aspect of a winged messenger holding out his hand. He will give Dorothea the room she needs while at the same time saving her from the haze of her own indefiniteness. He offers "large yet definite duties" (20, 32).

He also offers entry into "those provinces of masculine knowledge"—Latin and Greek. Dorothea is interested in education because she believes it will remove the doubt of her own conclusions that adds to their haziness. While she casts herself in prospect in a self-subdued role as a wife, as her husband's lamp bearer and so on, she is hardly so selfless as she thinks. "She had not reached that point of renunciation at which she would have been satisfied with having a wise husband: she wished, poor child, to be wise herself" (47). Caleb Garth says that no work can be done well if you mind what every fool says. "You must have it inside you that your plan is right" (300). Dorothea has plans but not confidence that they are right. "She constantly doubted her own conclusions, because she felt her own ignorance: how could she be confident that one-roomed cottages were not for the glory of God, when men who knew the classics appeared to conciliate indifference to the cottages with zeal for the glory? Perhaps even Hebrew might be necessary" (47). Hence her vulnerability to fools. She conceives of education as something that will enable her to act. She says to Sir James, "I am often unable to decide. But that is from ignorance. The right conclusion is there all the same, though I am unable to see it" (23). Casaubon is to supply an object of action already decided and the means also of decisiveness on her own account. With him she can do something. Middlemarch has made, Middlemarch is, the conditions that make a poor dry mummified pedant appear to an ardent young woman who has seen nothing better as a sort of angel of vocation and of the education that enables vocation. Middlemarch need not smile on their union to bring it about.

The question of vocation is central to *Middlemarch*. It is a question whose satisfactory answer lies not only, not even primarily, in what is done, but in the doing. The novel is one of the most psychologically profound literary investigations of the Victorian work ethic, for it shows that not to shape the world is to be shape-

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less oneself, which for natures conscious of shaping energy means painful consciousness of their own dispersal. Eliot says that her story does not simply tell the often-told romance of man and woman, but the romance of vocation, of those who mean "to shape their own deeds and alter the world a little" (107). It hardly needs long repeating that virtually all of the characters are engaged in the latter less-celebrated but hardly less passionate romance: Dorothea, Lydgate, Casaubon, Bulstrode, Garth, Farebrother—though some of his passion has gone over into resignation—and Fred Vincy—though he has the requisite passion supplied him by the expectations of his future wife, which is also to some extent the case with Will Ladislaw. Even Rosamond Vincy can be included in the list, though that will take some explaining later.

The intensity of the desire to do, to make, to count, that fills George Eliot's people may be represented by two passages on what it is to fail of fruition. When Casaubon is forced to give up his "Key to all Mythologies," he is presented as tragic, however little sublime his soul—"to renounce a work which has been all the significance of its life—a significance which is to vanish as the waters which come and go where no man has need of them" (310). When Lydgate must leave Middlemarch, he knows he leaves "the new hospital [to] be joined with the old infirmary, and everything [to] go on as it might have done if I had never come" (562). In both cases the work that leaves no trace makes the self as if it had never been.

Lydgate's energy falls short of its task, as of course does the dim Casaubon's. But each man goes further with what he has than Dorothea can. Casaubon finds motivation in the "outward requirements" of authorship and marriage (207). Eliot often speaks of his "acquitting himself" in life. Lydgate's path comes less ready-made, but he has the direction and inspiration of his education as well as the small increments of felt achievement that reinforce his sense of strength and so carry him forward to further effort, as in the beautiful and often-remarked image of the swimmer floating, for whom even repose is no loss of impetus (122). Dorothea has only the meagerest work in which to acquit herself and the meagerest education to help her tread out her own path. Instead of being reinforced, her energy, which is greater than anyone else's in the book, often fails of effect precisely because energy is not expected of a woman.

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Eliot's analysis of this last failure is penetrating and subtle. She shows that energy begins to relax when no impact results from effort. This accounts for Lydgate's slackening of will in the face of the impervious Rosamond. "Lydgate sat paralysed by opposing impulses: since no reasoning he could apply to Rosamond seemed likely to conquer her assent, he wanted to smash and grind some object on which he could at least produce an impression, or else tell her brutally that he was master. . . . [but] the very resolution to which he had wrought himself by dint of logic and honourable pride was beginning to relax under her torpedo contact" (483). Any "mutual understanding and resolve . . . seemed blocked out by the sense of unsuccessful effort" (556). Women are more subject to such paralysis than men because their efforts are more likely to be received as null, not wanted in the first place, and of no consequence when made.

A passage on Dorothea's life at Lowick after her return from Rome merits close analysis. The poor do not need her. Casaubon has not proved a teacher who will help her to be sure of her own schemes, but has rather discouraged them. She is shut out of his work first by himself and then by Will's revelation that the project is worthless. The result is a blank that begins to invade her sense of herself. Crucial here is the energy supply, which is threatened in two related ways. What is not called for may cease to be forthcoming, what sees no sign of its own power may grow powerless. The passage returns to the idea of indefiniteness. It figures this mental state again as one surrounded by a haze, here a "dun vapour," and combines what seems to be the opposed pair of liberty and oppression, understandable when liberty is merely lack of anything definite to do, which makes of the very width of the space a hampering medium. The more one can do anything one pleases, the more difficult is pleasing to do any one thing, or pleasing to do anything at all.

Meanwhile there was the snow and the low arch of dun vapour—there was the stifling oppression of that gentlewoman's world, where everything was done for her and none asked for her aid—where the sense of connection with a manifold pregnant existence had to be kept up painfully as an inward vision, instead of coming from without in claims that would have shaped her energies.—"What shall I do?" "Whatever you please, my dear:" that had been her brief history since she had left

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off learning morning lessons and practising silly rhythms on the hated piano. Marriage, which was to bring guidance into worthy and imperative occupation, had not yet freed her from the gentlewoman's oppressive liberty; it had not even filled her leisure with the ruminant joy of unchecked tenderness. Her blooming full-pulsed youth stood there in a moral imprisonment which made itself one with the chill, colourless, narrowed landscape, with the shrunken furniture, the never-read books, and the ghostly stag in a pale fantastic world that seemed to be vanishing from the daylight. (202)

The passage also concerns the feeling of impotence that is a correlative of oppressive liberty. Consider the odd image of the vanishing stag. It is linked to the description in the paragraph that follows of Dorothea's nightmarish struggle "in which every object was withering and shrinking away from her." Later, Dorothea sees Will in the same terms, "receding into the distant world of warm activity and fellowship" (348). He literally recedes from her when she passes him in her carriage; she feels that they are moving further and further apart and yet that she cannot stop (465). Such images of recession and loss of contact, of the self left stranded, are to be found in a curiously similar passage in "The Legend of Jubal," written while Eliot was working on *Middlemarch,* in 1870. It expresses "that dream-pain / Wherein the sense slips off from each loved thing / And all appearance is mere vanishing." What gives these lines special bearing for our understanding of Dorothea is that they are part of a description of the bewilderment of Jubal's sense of his identity. When the singing crowd fails to recognize him as the creator of song, his power of impact is thrown into question. Things seem slipping away from him and so too does his very self.[10]

Dorothea approaches a disorientation and despair that resembles Armgart's in the poem of that name, also written by Eliot in 1870, which in its treatment of a woman's failed vocation is a study in themes worked out at length in *Middlemarch.* With the loss of her superb voice and her power to move audiences Armgart feels "I can do nought / Better than what a million women do— / Must drudge among the crowd and feel my life / Beating upon the world without response." Her feeling of impotence is beautifully captured in the image of a classical statue whose every line expresses

[10] *Works,* X, 37.

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energy but energy that cannot touch its mark because the instrumental arms are missing: "A Will / That, like an arm astretch and broken off, / Has nought to hurl—the torso of a soul." Armgart wants to die rather than get used to her ordinary woman's lot because if she did, her life would not be beating even in frustration. She feels she would have lost herself.[11]

The "manifold pregnant existence" from which Dorothea feels disconnected includes a sense of her own existence, for the passage insists on the shaping force of outward things for the energies that reach out to shape the world. Outward claims elicit energy as well as shape it. Outward manifestation confirms energy and keeps it coming. Dorothea's life is a prospect "full of motiveless ease—motiveless, if her own energy could not seek out reasons for ardent action" (394). The worst danger of ease is that it might leave one motiveless. Worse than reaching out to touch things that shrink and wither away would be no longer reaching out to touch at all.

Everyone comments on George Eliot's celebration of duty and work and the renunciation of self in favor of some worthy object. Most concentrate on the content of that duty or work: what is the worthy object? Answers can be found, but they skip over an important point, which is Eliot's deep concern with the human need for duty, work, or object, whose worthiness is to be measured as much by the sense of worth it can confer upon the man or woman who strives for it as by its independent content.[12]

For all her criticism of the shabby devices of egoism, Eliot never suggests that there is any way of transcending it. *Middlemarch*'s famous pier glass, with its random scratches revealed as particular patterns by the light of particular beholders, is a parable even for those who, like Dorothea, are capable of imagining how differently the light must fall for someone else (194–95, 157). Even in the latter image, used to describe Dorothea's realization that Casaubon has

[11] *Works,* X, 127, 119.

[12] For instance, in *The Victorian Sage* (London: Macmillan, 1953), p. 112, John Holloway quotes a passage from *The Mill on the Floss,* bk. 4, ch. 3, that describes the dreariness and futility of the prospect of life in England, whether in factory, mine, or in the lonely, rainy country: "Under such circumstances there are many . . . who have absolutely needed an emphatic belief . . . something that good society calls 'enthusiasm,' something that will present motives in an entire absence of high prizes . . . that includes resignation for ourselves and active love for what is not ourselves." Holloway says that the passage justifies a search in Eliot's novels for philosophy and ethics. But he pays less attention to the part of the passage that explains why people *need* philosophy and ethics—they "present motives."

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his own separate center of self, there is no suggestion that she can see exactly as he sees or know that difference first hand. It suggests the limitations of her own ego at the same time that those limits expand in the act of imagining another's. I think what is emancipating about the idea is not that she can transcend herself, but that in partly, only partly, imagining another self she can imagine herself as making a difference in the way the light falls for him. She can imagine herself as making part of the pattern that his candle illuminates. To make a difference in this way is less crude than other ways of fulfilling egoism, but it is a way. In *Architects of the Self* Calvin Bedient pounces on the egoistic implications of empathy and altruism as if he had made a great discovery of the philosophical George Eliot's inconsistency, the moral George Eliot's self-delusion.[13] But evidence in addition to *Middlemarch* itself can be offered that she knows what she is saying and means to say it—that one works out of one's own pressing need as well as the world's.

An extremely interesting letter of 10 December 1874 to Mrs. Ponsonby answers the question of how to combat the feeling of futility that accompanies loss of belief in god and immortality. The danger is "petrified volition," Eliot says. She advises cultivating the imagination of others' needs and altruistic work, which will liberate this volition: "we can say to ourselves with effect, 'There is an order of considerations which I will keep myself continually in mind of, so that they may continually be the prompters of certain feelings and actions.' " A letter of 2 October 1876 to Madame Eugène Bodichon also casts the weight of its argument upon the value of altruism for the purpose it gives rather than the purpose it serves. This time Eliot addresses herself to women's purpose: "Yes. Women can do much for the other women (and men) to come. My impression of the good there is in all unselfish efforts is continually strengthened. Doubtless many a ship is drowned on expeditions of discovery or rescue, and precious freights lie buried. But there was the good of manning and furnishing the ship with a great purpose before it set out."[14]

In a letter of 4 November 1872 to Alexander Main upon the

[13] *Architects of the Self: George Eliot, D. H. Lawrence, and E. M. Forster* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1972), pp. 54, 86.

[14] *The George Eliot Letters*, ed. Gordon S. Haight, 7 vols. (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1954–55), VI, 97–100, 290.

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completion of *Middlemarch* Eliot describes her satisfaction. She considers the work's value separately from its intrinsic worth. She is at peace with it not because it is perfect but because in it she was able to do as perfectly as she could. Yet the impulse to work flags without some faith in the value of the result. This is why in another letter to Main of 26 May 1875 she speaks of the paralyzing impression bad art makes on her. "Great art, in any kind, inspirits me and makes me feel the worth of devoted effort, but from bad pictures, bad books, vulgar music, I come away with a paralyzing depression." Ruby Redinger's recent biography shows how subject Eliot was to such paralysis of initiative. She needed constant validation of the independent worth of her work—from Lewes, from friends and reviewers, from her books' popularity, even as measured by sales and receipts—to such an extent that Lewes learned to filter through to her only those responses that could give her the validation that kept her working.[15]

Dorothea experiences a dismay similar to Eliot's own at the sight of bad art in Rome. Bad art is the vanity of effort made visible. The pictures suggest objectified lives, which would look equally ugly and bungling if hung on the wall. Dorothea suffers the collapse of impulse that this comparison of art and life implies. For once, instead of giving out ardor with little return, she needs to be fed with somebody else's ardor (163–64). But Will's encouragement misses the mark on an essential point. Their discussion of art turns to poets, and he says that to be a poet is to possess a certain state of feeling and intellect. This fails to satisfy Dorothea. She says the poems "are wanted to complete the poet." Possessing a poetic state of mind is no consolation because "I am sure I could never produce a poem" (166). This is Carlyle's "produce, produce!" or Mary Garth's "might, could, would—they are contemptible auxiliaries" (103). It is the Victorian work ethic understood without the crassness of the merely materialistic or utilitarian, for it locates in the product the motive to self-completion.

Will says that if Dorothea is no poet because she cannot produce a poem, she is herself a poem. She is pleased by this, which at first surprised me since it is no fulfillment of that "idea of some active good within her reach [that] 'haunted her like a passion' " (557).

[15] *Letters,* V, 324; VI, 147; Redinger, *George Eliot: The Emergent Self* (New York: Knopf, 1975).

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It seems so passive. But Dorothea must be consoled where she can, and I think the consolation here is the thought of the difference she makes in the consciousness that might make the poems, in a word, the difference she makes to Will. She enjoys the idea that she has a little kingdom in him, that he is willing to be swayed by her, when she has generally found very little room in other people's minds for what she has to say (269, 264). He is the one person she has found to be receptive (266). Will does not please only because his eyes give out light, but because his eyes tell her that not the smallest movement of her own passes unnoticed, which realization "came like a pleasant glow to Dorothea" (203).

John Halperin interprets this glow as the sign of Dorothea's discovery that "she is a woman who needs a man,"[16] which is true in a way that he pays very little attention to, that is, what she needs him *for*. For one thing, and it is not a little thing, she needs him for the testament he gives her of her own power. The glow signals a movement towards hope in that near-despairing meditation on the stifling oppression of a gentlewoman's life. It signals the returning sense of power which is also the sense of life, called "vivid." It does not turn her away from her husband as one would imagine ordinary love for another man would do, and Halperin seems to have something very ordinary in mind. Rather, it turns her towards him, with a hope that formulates itself in a reversal of the nightmare images of a world receding from her touch—that is, in hope of impact: "She felt as if all her morning's gloom would vanish if she could see her husband glad because of her presence" (203). Here we see the lapse between vague ideals and "the common yearning of womanhood," and we see the reason for it. Failing everything else, Dorothea falls back on "the ardent woman's need to rule beneficently by making the joy of another soul" (265). That this is work, with the same psychological benefits at stake as in any other form, is illustrated by the fact that Dorothea experiences the same sensations at the unresponsiveness of Casaubon's arm when she takes it as he does at Carp's dismissal of his publications (312).

Women's work is men: a tired old saying, but full of fine insight in Eliot's treatment, or perhaps three fine insights. She shows that men are just about all the work women have and little enough for some large souls; she shows that making the *joy* of another soul is by

[16] Halperin, p. 155.

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no means its only form; and she shows the void that threatens should this work too be cut off. All three follow in ways Middlemarch would never expect from its easy assumption that as the world can pretty much do without the work of women, women can pretty much do without work.

Dorothea illustrates the first point.[17] On the next two points let us turn to Mary Garth and Rosamond Vincy. Mary makes considerably more than Fred's joy. To all intents and purposes she makes Fred. She is the audience whose demand for the best supplies his deficiency of self-activating enterprise (178). Mr. Garth says a good woman's love "shapes many a rough fellow," and Mr. Farebrother reflects that "to win her may be a discipline" (411, 496). Dorothea's high expectations of others also provide the motive and channel to effort that women often supply but very seldom enjoy. In her believing conception Lydgate salvages something of his best self, and without her love Will would give up trying to amount to anything more than a dilettante.

Rosamond does not the less make Lydgate what he finally is for concerning herself not at all with the joy of his soul. It is abundantly clear that she has energy and a will. She is as "industrious" in her way as other characters; her ideas too have "shaping activity" (124, 200). One can almost discern in Rosamond the makings of a feminist of the most literal-minded sort, for she is introduced in the novel as someone who sees no reason why Fred should get his way any more than she should: "I cannot see why brothers are to make themselves disagreeable, any more than sisters" (74). She displays no feminist rejection of a woman's scope of action though, throwing all her will and energy into achieving the daintiest wardrobe and the highest-ranking, best-providing husband. In view of the doubtful pains it costs a woman to mark out anything more original, and in view of the odds against learning a taste for originality, or pains, at Miss Lemon's school, we are not invited to blame Rosamond with as much cold dislike as most critics permit themselves.[18]

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17 Some biting words of Armgart's might be added here. She asks if she can really be expected to devote her operatic talents to her husband instead of to the world: "Sing in the chimney corner to inspire / My husband reading news?" (*Works*, X, 97).

18 William Dean Howells puts it simply: Rosamond is "altogether odious" ("George Eliot's Rosamond Vincy and Dorothea Brooke," *Heroines of Fiction* [New York: Harper, 1901], II, 71). Henry James calls her this "gracefully vicious" and "practically baleful nature," "this veritably mulish domestic flower" (*The Galaxy*,

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I think a case can be made for some sympathy with Rosamond, even while we respond to the pathos of Lydgate's losing struggle with Middlemarch, of whose meshes she represents a particularly strangling coil. If she removes the house from the market without consulting him, he put it on without consulting her. The justice on his side is smaller, even according to Middlemarch standards of wifely versus husbandly prerogative, when he becomes angry at her for sending out invitations without consultation. This is surely a wife's right. If the invitations are ill-timed, it is because he failed to tell her of the disgrace that makes them so. But Eliot's bid for our sympathy with Rosamond depends less on our feeling that she is wronged than on our understanding that the wrong she does proceeds from her position as a woman.

Her petty maneuvers seem less blameworthy when we consider how little else she has to do. Again and again Eliot reminds us of how much time Rosamond has to fill (123, 319, 439). The "elegant leisure of a young lady's mind," if not occupied with something, leaves her "wondering what she should do next" (221, 579). Lydgate is bitter when he asks himself, "what can a woman care about so much as house and furniture?" (480), but it is a question that goes to the heart of the matter. Eliot shows that a main cause of the failure of their marriage is one of Lydgate's "spots of commonness." This spot is indeed common; if it were less so Rosamond would not be what she is. Lydgate completely fails to imagine that she is like himself in needing something to do and that he himself becomes her work by default. "It had not occurred to Lydgate that he had been a subject of eager meditation to Rosamond, who had neither any reason for throwing her marriage into distant perspective, nor any pathological studies to divert her mind from that ruminating habit, that inward repetition of looks, words, and phrases, which makes a large part in the lives of most girls" (123). In the same scene in which Lydgate expresses his deep need to do and to be recognized for what he does—"What good is like to this, / To do worthy the writing, and to write / Worthy the reading and

15 [1873], 424–28; rpt. in *A Century of George Eliot Criticism,* p. 85). What sympathy there is for Rosamond is found among feminists—see, for example, Patricia Beer, *Reader, I Married Him: A Study of the Women Characters of Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, Elizabeth Gaskell and George Eliot* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1974), pp. 188–89.

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the world's delight?"—he wonders why Rosamond has no "ambition." But what he means by ambition in a woman is that she should want her husband to achieve much (319–20).

Lydgate's theory of women as beings providentially framed to live in and through their husbands in this way is met by the refuting irony that Rosamond does not identify with him at all, as becomes clear during his troubles (436). He expects that women should find fulfillment through a vicariousness that his own experience, indeed all of *Middlemarch,* puts to question. For when women fulfill their need for vocation through men, they do so through their effect on the men, not through the men's independent achievements. Rosamond knows that the area of Lydgate's work is not one in which she makes a great deal of difference. When he is ruminating on his work, "Rosamond's presence at that moment was perhaps no more than a spoonful brought to the lake, and her woman's instinct in this matter was not dull" (334). Rosamond can be more measurably effective towards house and furniture than towards discovery of the primitive tissue, and if we are not charmed to see her aiming at these things, we can hardly feel the surprise necessary for outrage. When women have no work but men and men do not even realize it, two things may follow. One is that a man may find the romance of vocation disrupted by the romance of the sexes—as Lydgate does (107). The other is that a woman may find marriage itself the condition of discontent, more than the particular husband—as Rosamond does (552).

We see the result in Rosamond's ordinary nature of the same narrow scope offered women which has very different consequences in an extraordinary nature like Dorothea's. Both feel energy and will in want of something to do, both find their work in men, both know the void of meaning, the devastation of self, that threaten should these men prove impervious. This last point is most explicitly presented in Rosamond's case. When Will turns on her and destroys her presumption of romantic rule, she "was almost losing the sense of her identity" (571).

Rosamond collapses into a torpor of the same kind that Dorothea faces in the nonresponse of Casaubon. Why do anything that will only read back to you your own incompetence?—"What [Dorothea] dreaded was to exert herself in reading or anything else which left him as joyless as ever" (349). Eliot returns repeatedly to the idea

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of arrest of energy by premonition of impotence, showing Dorothea's "nightmare of a life [with Casaubon] in which every energy was arrested by dread," "a perpetual struggle of energy with fear." "Her ardour, continually repulsed, served, with her intense memory, to heighten her dread, as thwarted energy subsides into a shudder" (275, 285, 311). The last is a striking image of energy defeated of outward impact, turning back upon itself. Dorothea's nature has too much force to lose it all in torpor. She learns "timidity" (312), but hardly the passive kind. Her "self-repression," her "resolved submission" are strenuous (361, 313). A good instance of the effort of motionlessness is her constraining herself to lie still in bed lest she should wake her husband (350). Eliot shows the energy that goes into "shut[ting] her best soul in prison . . . that she might be petty enough to please him" (313). She also shows the reason—that for a woman in Dorothea's position, constraint of her best soul, which might otherwise have acted to the highest account, is the only way to count at all.

Dorothea does count. She produces a movement of human fellowship in Casaubon. She does the same with Rosamond after a struggle to subdue the claims of self, which, if somewhat different in its occasion, is very similar in its psychological movement. She wrings motive out of despair: "She said to her own irremediable grief, that it should make her more helpful, instead of driving her back from effort" (577). Dorothea knows that her power of making an effort is a precious resource, and one that can be lost. She understands her troubles as specifically a woman's. She says to Will,

> I had no notion . . . of the unexpected way in which trouble comes, and ties our hands, and makes us silent when we long to speak. I used to despise women a little for not shaping their lives more, and doing better things. I was very fond of doing as I liked, but I have almost given it up. (397)

An indication of how much Dorothea has given up is that she has given up even certain ways of talking—is silent where she used to speak. According to Derek Oldfield's fascinating linguistic analysis, her unchecked idiom is characterized by exclamations, declarative assertions, imperatives, simple, direct sentences often beginning with "I." He is especially acute in showing the atrophy of her figurative mode of speaking and her curious shift from questions

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posed so as to elicit a "yes" response to rhetorical questions that really demand no response at all.[19]

Another instance of Dorothea's growing inhibition is in the way she moves—as if her hands were tied. This can be seen in her interviews with Will, which become progressively more stilted. They are conducted at a significant distance. Eliot specifies the distance—two yards, one yard (266, 397, 591). "She looked at him from that distance"; "Dorothea looked at him from the distance" (396, 463). He sits on one settee, she on another (395). When she moves to the window, he does not follow, or he moves away from it (286, 462). These scenes are painful because they have so much emotion and so little motion: "She looked as if there were a spell upon her, keeping her motionless and hindering her from unclasping her hands, while some intense, grave yearning was imprisoned within her eyes"; "they were like two creatures slowly turning to marble in each other's presence, while their hearts were conscious and their eyes were yearning" (591, 396).

On the level of action Dorothea comes closest to giving up altogether when she decides to acquiesce in Casaubon's request that she carry on his work after his death. This would truly be work to no avail in that, as we have seen, the only avail to which Dorothea works is Casaubon himself, the living man. Significantly, the decision for this self-sacrifice is attended by a "passivity which was unusual with her" (352). Dorothea comes uncharacteristically close to torpor. It seems that only circumstances can save her from this fate, "so heavily did the world weigh on her in spite of her independent energy" (465). Casaubon dies. Dorothea is liberated from the "strain and conflict of self-repression"—but only to emerge into "another sort of pinfold than that from which she had been released" (361).

Does Dorothea escape from this pinfold when she takes the initiative and marries Will despite Middlemarch? I think not entirely, for the tone of regret is strong in the "Finale," even if it is a regret for what could hardly be helped. Dorothea's fate represents a sacrifice, only less sad than it might have been (612). When Eliot says that "many . . . thought it a pity that so substantive and rare a creature should have been absorbed into the life of another. . . .

[19] "The Language of the Novel, the Character of Dorothea," in *"Middlemarch": Critical Approaches,* pp. 73–80.

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But no one stated exactly what else that was in her power she ought rather to have done" (611), she points to the limits of power for an individual not helped by her medium.

Dorothea is not a nineteenth-century Saint Theresa. The blocking of the channels to deeds is also the diffusion or retreat of the character who might have done them, hence the "inconvenient indefiniteness" of even the most impressive women, or their lapse into "the common yearning of womanhood." Dorothea achieves the definite at the expense of her highest potential, which is too vague to be of much good to her or the world. In explaining her decision to marry Will she says, "I might have done something better, if I had been better. But this is what I am going to do" (601). I think *Middlemarch* shows that Dorothea would have *been* better if she had been in a position to *do* better. George Eliot does not allow us the sentimental consolation of contemplating great souls trapped in an insignificant universe; souls that do not contribute significantly lose some of their greatness. Lydgate feels this in his own case (473). While less her own fault, the loss is felt in Dorothea's case too. In her essay on Margaret Fuller and Mary Wollstonecraft, Eliot commends the two feminists for not idealizing women. What argues a need for women's emancipation is their present debasement, she says, not their excellence in all virtues.[20]

While generally recognizing that Dorothea hardly liberates herself from Middlemarch to the extent of epic action, opinion varies as to the scope of her pinfold and the amount of satisfaction we are to feel in it. At the center of this debate is Will Ladislaw. Many early reviewers were disappointed in Dorothea's marriage to Will,[21] as were early readers such as those Eliot describes in a letter to John Blackwood of 19 September 1873: Two ladies came up to her at Oxford; one wondered how she could let Dorothea marry that Casaubon, while the other said Ladislaw was just as bad.[22] Will is often criticized as inadequate for his impressive wife. Henry James, Leslie Stephen, Lord David Cecil, and Walter Allen speak for the view that Eliot is carried away by her own fondness for him. Jerome Thale at least gives her credit for a lapse in artistic control rather

[20] "Margaret Fuller and Mary Wollstonecraft," in *The Leader,* rpt. in *Essays of George Eliot,* p. 205.

[21] Early reviews, summarized by Harvey in *"Middlemarch": Critical Approaches,* pp. 128–29.

[22] *Letters,* V, 441.

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than a lapse in her taste in men. He thinks Will's weakness is not to be held to the account of authorial indulgence but of insufficient development. The feminist critic Patricia Beer reverses the usual analysis by saying that it is a distaste for Will as a conceited dilettante that Eliot "cannot help" expressing, though intending otherwise. All of this criticism is based on the assumption that the author means Will to be a match for Dorothea but goes wrong. Calvin Bedient states the assumption baldly, that *Middlemarch* is "a book that has written itself," that the theme has Eliot "helplessly and almost mindlessly in its spell."[23] In the face of the overwhelming intelligence of the author and the systematic, even laborious cast of her mind, which hardly anybody fails to mention—to the unsympathetic, like William Ernest Henley, her books read like "the fruit of a caprice of Apollo for the Differential Calculus"—and in the face of the deliberateness of the construction of *Middlemarch,* shown in studies by Anna Theresa Kitchel and Jerome Beaty, I think this assumption deserves little credit.[24]

Some critics have taken the other course of concluding that since Eliot ends her book with a second marriage better than the first, she must mean it to be the final solution. Foremost among these are the believers in marriage and the family and the woman finding her man, those whom one might expect to be Victorians but who are not necessarily. But Eliot's ironies at the expense of the third-volume marriage in "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists" indicate that she did *not* always think of marriage as "that desirable consummation."[25]

[23] James's review in *The Galaxy,* rpt. in *A Century of George Eliot Criticism,* p. 83. Stephen, *George Eliot,* English Men of Letters Series (1902; rpt. London: Macmillan, 1919), pp. 178–80; Cecil, "George Eliot," *Early Victorian Novelists: Essays in Revaluation* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1935), pp. 309–36, rpt. in *A Century of George Eliot Criticism,* pp. 204–5; Allen, *George Eliot* (New York: Macmillan, 1964), pp. 159–60; Thale, *The Novels of George Eliot* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1959), p. 119, n. 2; Beer, pp. 207–11; Bedient, pp. 94, 86 (these passages do not concern Will; they only illustrate the theory of involuntary writing that is often used to explain Will).

[24] Henley, *Views and Reviews: Essays in Appreciation* (London: D. Nutt, 1890), pp. 130–32, rpt. in *A Century of George Eliot Criticism,* p. 162; Kitchel, *Quarry for Middlemarch* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1950), accompaniment to *NCF,* 4 (1950); Beaty, *"Middlemarch" from Notebook to Novel: A Study of George Eliot's Creative Method,* University of Illinois Studies in Language and Literature, No. 47 (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1960).

[25] Eliot, *Westminster Review,* 66 (1856), 442–61, rpt. in *Essays of George Eliot,* p. 308. Felicia Bonaparte suggests in *Will and Destiny: Morality and Tragedy in George Eliot's Novels* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1975), pp. 41–42, that Eliot's own "happy" endings are ironic formalities.

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I place myself among the small number of critics for whom R. H. Hutton speaks in 1873: "one feels, and is probably meant to feel acutely, that here too, it is 'the meanness of opportunity' and not intrinsic suitability, which determines Dorothea's second comparatively happy marriage."[26] Will is a slight creature beside her. Surely we are meant to feel this, for instance, when Eliot follows the climactic chapter on Dorothea's noble resolve in going to Rosamond by one that opens with Will, whose resolve is "a state of mind liable to melt into a minuet with other states of mind, and to find itself bowing, smiling, and giving place with polite facility" (586). Will combines his own limitations with certain assumptions about the limitations of women, so that his resemblance to Mr. Brooke, Sir James, Lydgate, and Casaubon sometimes becomes uncomfortable. He can be as put off by her power and eloquence as any of them. Eliot says of him, "A man is seldom ashamed of feeling that he cannot love a woman so well when he sees a certain greatness in her: nature having intended greatness for men" (285). Two things he does love in her are her innocent shortsightedness and her inaccessibility. He would almost rather do without her love than that she should be sullied by recognizing the obvious fact of his feelings for her and the implications of Casaubon's jealousy (286). Also, "what others might have called the futility of his passion, made an additional delight for his imagination." His pedestal theory—Dorothea is "enthroned in his soul" as per the "higher love-poetry"—is sometimes experienced by Dorothea as a problem (344). She in her carriage, passing him on foot, "felt a pang at being seated there in a sort of exaltation, leaving him behind" (465). One wonders if she does not lose a bit of her charm for him in delivering herself from the pedestal into his arms, just as she does in speaking with unfeminine greatness. Will is not exempt from some of the attitudes that contribute to the meanness of a woman's opportunity. At the same time the very irresoluteness and flexibility that make him slight make him impressionable. He can take the pressure of

[26] Hutton in *The British Quarterly Review,* quoted by W. J. Harvey in *"Middlemarch": Critical Approaches,* p. 142. According to Jerome Beaty, there is less irony at Will's expense in the final version of *Middlemarch* than in the original; see his "The Text of the Novel, a Study of the Proof," in *"Middlemarch": Critical Approaches,* p. 53. The question is, and it cannot be answered really, did Eliot reduce the irony because she did not want us to see Will in too ironic a light, or because she felt that that light would remain harsh enough even when softened by revisions?

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other people's thought (364). And Dorothea certainly needs to make a mark somewhere.

Any discussion of the scope and satisfaction we are to attribute to Dorothea's final lot should turn on her husband's work as well as his character, for we know that she gives him wifely help in it (611). This issue is too seldom addressed, whether by those who think a husband is enough or by those who think he is not. Michael York Mason is right in saying that critics have not dwelt enough on *Middlemarch* as a historical novel that evokes the past in relation to the present.[27] The present for Eliot's readers was the recent passage of the second Reform Bill. *Middlemarch* treats the period of the first, and though it ends with its defeat, the historical perspective that shows this to be but temporary is built into the novel; for instance, to locate the story in "ante-reform times" (20) is to locate it in relation to the ultimate passage of reform. Dorothea, through a husband who works for this passage, contributes something to a movement that is not defeated and that qualifies, as much as Saint Theresa's reform of a religious order, as a "far-resonant action." The importance of Reform is I think a given. To understand it is part of the necessary equipment for reading the novel. Eliot ranks it as one of the momentous events of the period in her notebook.[28] We can trust to Felix Holt as a spokesman for her political views, more so than is usually safe when it comes to fictional characters, since Eliot used his persona in a separate nonfictional political article for the *Westminster Review* in 1868. Felix Holt is for Reform. He says he would despise any man not interested in the great political movement of the time. His friend and fellow radical calls it a "massive achievement."[29] Will Ladislaw emerges with the upper hand in contending against Lydgate that the Bill must be passed, even if it is done without immaculate political tools (341). Whatever Eliot's reservations about the transaction of Reform, there is no doubt that she holds it part of "the growing good of the world" (613). While the reader's hopefulness in response to the end of *Middlemarch* should be somewhat dashed in Will Ladislaw, it should take some heart in Reform.

It is interesting that the feminist critics are even more depressed

[27] "*Middlemarch* and History," *NCF*, 25 (1971), 419–20.

[28] "More Leaves from George Eliot's Notebook," ed. Thomas Pinney, *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 29 (1966), 372.

[29] *Felix Holt, Works*, VII, 95, 262–63.

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by the novel's end than most, and more than they need be. Neither Abba Goold Woolson in the 1880's nor Lee Edwards or Patricia Beer in the 1970's pays any attention to Reform. Woolson and Edwards are disappointed that Eliot makes a woman who might have been great come to so little; Beer thinks it is unnecessarily little. Woolson reproaches Eliot for suggesting that a heroine must fail when some real women did not; Edwards and Beer point out that Eliot herself did not.[30]

Exasperation with heroines who are not models of success turns up frequently in feminist criticism. When Harriet Rosenstein excoriates Elizabeth Hardwick's book *Seduction and Betrayal* for seeming to endorse a literary tradition that dignifies women by measure of their tragic calamity, she implies a contrary ideal of what the woman novelist should write.[31] Woolson supplies a description of the ideal, to which, in less Victorian terms, many modern feminists seem to subscribe: "From the fictitious scenes upon her pages, her gifted sisters will gather inspiration and hope, to quicken all their brave endeavors after good. For she will picture their advancing life, not as a gloomy valley, into which their pathways must descend through ever-deepening shades, till existence closes in endless night, but as a broadening upland, along whose sweet ascents they are summoned to pass, with bounding steps and uplifted gaze."[32]

George Eliot does not show her heroine summoned to sweet ascent, but surely to supply such a satisfactory summons would be to endanger realism. I agree with Ruth Yeazell when she chides critics for expecting literary pictures of strong women succeeding in a period that did not make them likely in life. As Virginia Woolf says, George Eliot stuck to the sad facts. And yet everything that is not a broadening upland is not necessarily endless night. Lee

30 Woolson, *George Eliot and Her Heroines* (New York: Harper, 1886), pp. 99–102; Edwards, "Women, Energy, and *Middlemarch*," *Massachusetts Review*, 13 (1972), 236; Beer, p. 181.

31 "A Historic Booby Prize," *Ms.*, July 1974, pp. 35–37, 85–87. It should be noted that Rosenstein's doubts of Hardwick's feminism have some foundation, if Hardwick's earlier views are evidence. In a review of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* in *A View of My Own: Essays in Literature and Society* (New York: Farrar Straus, 1951), p. 180, Hardwick wonders whether women's constitutions may not make them naturally less great as writers than men.

32 Woolson, p. 176.

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Edwards is too quick to decide that *Middlemarch* "can no longer be one of the books of my life."[33]

If I examine my own feeling upon finishing *Middlemarch,* I do not find depression predominant. I think a simple but important reason for this is that if the main characters all slip below their own intention (except Mr. Garth with his fences), the novel does not. I am venturing a reason here that I know may seem to stretch thin because it can be made to cover so much. What great work cannot be said to redeem sad content by the inspiration of its artistry? But then again, is there not a particular triumph of form in a work so acutely concerned with the forces of dispersal? I think the idea bears considering, at least briefly.

Most critics recognize in George Eliot's works a strong narrative control and, further, a control that not only operates but makes itself felt. In fact a standard complaint is against her insistence as a narrator. She generalizes, she judges, she philosophizes, she aphorizes, she moralizes. Those who resist this intrusive narrative persona, whom they would rather see disappear behind the characters, attest to its power. I have noticed that power is a word much used in criticism of George Eliot. It is a commonplace of critical discourse, certainly, but I think it is often applied rather literally to Eliot. Sidney Colvin's essay offers a good example. He keeps coming back to the "overwhelming power," the "potency" and "trenchancy" of the style. He phrases the idea to suggest also that the style is "displaying its power," that the potency and trenchancy are "equally subtle and equally sure of themselves." Quentin Anderson says, "when one is reading *Middlemarch* there are many moments when one looks up and says, 'How intelligent, how penetrating this woman is!' " I know exactly what he means, and I believe most readers know.[34]

Eliot's potency draws attention to itself. I, at least, am struck by the fact that there is nothing glutinous about the expanse of

[33] Yeazell, "Fictional Heroines and Feminist Critics," *Novel,* 8 (1974), 35; Woolf, "George Eliot," in *The Common Reader,* rpt. in *Discussions of George Eliot,* p. 29; Edwards, p. 238.

[34] Colvin's review in *The Fortnightly Review,* rpt. in *George Eliot and Her Readers,* p. 100; Anderson, "George Eliot in *Middlemarch,*" in *From Dickens to Hardy,* ed. Boris Ford (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1958), rpt. in *Discussions of George Eliot,* p. 90.

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Middlemarch, by marked contrast to Mr. Brooke's desultoriness (6). The unfolding of its eighty-six chapters, "Prelude," and "Finale," follows a principle of human speech different from the usual, which is to say what one has said before (28). How can Eliot keep up for so long the precision, density, and force of her images and phrases?—memory as "the ordinary long-used blotting-book which only tells of forgotten writing"; Mr. Casaubon's benighted labors—"in bitter manuscript remarks on other men's notions about the solar deities, he had become indifferent to the sunlight"; Rosamond's pettiness, in whose mind "there was not room enough for luxuries to look small in" (19, 147, 514). The spectacle of Rome is "a disease of the retina"; to be sensitive to ordinary human suffering would be to "die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence" (144). There is something noticeably strenuous here. George Eliot is as strenuous as her characters. Anderson thinks that she is present as the most fully realized individual in *Middlemarch.* Isobel Armstrong thinks she is chorus to her own novel.[35]

From this point of view the narrator may be seen to play counterpart to the characters. Where they fail, she succeeds, and I think we feel it, palpably, on every page. *Middlemarch* itself is a testament to the possibility of "far-resonant action," and "long-recognizable deed." No feminist need feel disappointed.

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[35] Anderson, "George Eliot in *Middlemarch,*" rpt. in *Discussions of George Eliot,* p. 90; Armstrong, " 'Middlemarch': A Note on George Eliot's 'Wisdom,' " in *Critical Essays on George Eliot,* ed. Barbara Hardy (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1970), p. 117.

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