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MIDDLEMARCH: REALISM AND SYMBOLIC FORM

BY BRIAN SWANN

I SYMBOLIC FORM: GENERAL SURVEY

Unity in essence is multiplicity in existence.
(Feuerbach, *Essence of Christianity*)[1]

"*Middlemarch* is a treasure-house of details, but it is an indifferent whole." Henry James could not see the one quality which all of George Eliot's critics today are agreed on: the amazing unification of meaning and sensibility in *Middlemarch*. James, however, had already decided in *Partial Portraits* that George Eliot's bent was peculiarly intellectual, and when he came to write his review of the novel for *The Galaxy*, he did not meet the new novel as a new experience. "Certainly the greatest minds have the defects of their qualities, and as George Eliot's mind is preeminently contemplative and analytic, nothing is more natural than that her manner should be discursive and expansive. 'Concentration' would doubtless have deprived us of many of the best things in the book. . . ."[2] Blackwood had used the word "panorama" in discussing *Felix Holt*,[3] and James uses the same word when he asks "It is not compact; but when was a panorama compact?" He concludes his 1873 review with these words: "It sets a limit, we think, to the development of the old-fashioned English novel. Its diffuseness, on which we have touched, makes it too copious a dose of pure fiction. If we write novels so, how shall we write History?"[4]

James has raised an important point. The old-fashioned novel did indeed reach a climax in *Middlemarch* and could go no further, but not for the reason James gives, as we shall see later in more detail. At this point we should note that George Eliot as social

[1] Ludwig Andreas Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. Marian Evans (London, 1854), p. 46.
[2] Henry James, *The Galaxy*, 15 (1873), 424-25.
[3] John Blackwood to George Eliot, 24 April 1868, in *The George Eliot Letters*, ed. Gordon S. Haight (New Haven, 1954), IV, 243.
[4] *The Galaxy*, p. 428.

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historian is all the while an artist attempting new forms of art in which to embody her vision. Contemporary nineteenth-century criticism was simply not equipped to deal in critical terminology with that George Eliot was doing in her greatest novel.[5] Today, we are still groping for terms to describe a work which stays so close to the tumultuous surface of life itself that Calvin Bedient can claim that *Middlemarch* is " in effect, all vehicle, all medium, all transparency: dead to itself "; a novel that " wears no aesthetic garment, only the hair shirt of the world." Such an approach which deprecates the " formal mining " of Barbara Hardy and her associates as being " a little like counting the change at Fort Knox," leaves us with a feeling of dissatisfaction. For *Middlemarch* is not a slice of life (" the bare beauty of veracity "), nor is it true to say that " nothing in George Eliot's other novels prepares us for its strong achievement."[6] Only if one insists on a simplistic approach such as Mr. Bedient's can one make out a case for *Middlemarch* as *sui generis*. If, as will be argued later, one sees the real uniqueness of the novel, then one also observes that the poetic texture is related to the realism of *The Mill on the Floss*, for example, or *Felix Holt*, or even *Adam Bede*. In other words, there is a vivid imagination at work which has its eye on the object and on related objects—an " esemplastic " imagination.

The traditional way of looking at such a structure has been in terms of organic unity.[7] George Eliot herself was constantly referring to this aesthetic principle. In a letter to John Blackwood, for instance, she declines to make a change that Lewes had suggested in the *Middlemarch* manuscript. " I don't see how I can leave anything out," she writes, " because I hope there is nothing that will be seen to be irrelevant to my design, which is to show the gradual action of ordinary causes rather than exceptional, and to show this in some directions which have not been from time immemorial the beaten path—the Cremorne walks

[5] Many of the leading journals found themselves baffled by the book, or praised it for the wrong reasons. See, for example, *The Spectator* (2 December 1871), 1458-60; *Atheneum* (2 December 1871), 713-14; *Quarterly Review*, 134 (April, 1873), 336-69; *The Times* (7 March 1873). Frederic Harrison might seem to be George Eliot's perfect reader from the evidence of a letter he wrote in 1866 (*Letters*, IV, 284-85), in which he discusses *Felix Holt* in terms of a poem.

[6] Calvin Bedient, " *Middlemarch*: Touching Down," *Hudson Review*, 22 (1969), 71.

[7] For a brief and cogent introduction to the topic of organic unity, see Richard Stang, *The Theory of the Novel in England, 1850-1870* (London, 1959), pp. 134-35.

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and shows of fiction."[8] The concept of organic unity had become a commonplace for George Eliot by the time she wrote this sentence. We must look elsewhere for the real and fresh aesthetic essence of *Middlemarch,* a novel which includes and transmutes this ancient Aristotelian ideal of organicism. George Eliot herself provides a clue in the above quotation. She intends to take "directions which have not been from time immemorial the beaten path," and in 1863 she had told Richard Holt Hutton that "It is the habit of my imagination to strive after as full a vision of the medium in which a character moves as of the character itself."[9] In this letter, George Eliot puts her failure in *Romola* down to "excess." The "vision" had been too "full." In *Middlemarch,* however, George Eliot realized her ambition. The concept of organic unity has not so much changed as become more subtle and inclusive. Almost every important word finds its sum of meaning increased to the pitch of symbolism, and the most helpful concept for understanding the enormous richness of *Middlemarch* that I have found is Kenneth Burke's notion of "symbolic action." Before we can discuss its value in detail, however, a word on what we mean by the terms realism and symbolism in the novel, especially in a novel which came well before symbolism, having pervaded poetry, conquered drama and the novel by being "discreetly camouflaged under a deliberate show of realism."[10]

Ursula Brumm has pointed out that the novel is a product of historicism and therefore "agnostic, sceptical, empirical, and secular.[11] Along this line of reasoning, therefore, she claims that the novel was originally anti-symbolic, "for it is opposed to the entire class of elements to which the symbol belongs. The realistic novel owes its origin to rejecting the paradigms that had for centuries determined literary forms: fable, legend, myth, and the traditional, typical stories and characters from the storehouse of world literature that were constantly being reworked (i. e., the 'archetypes' that have become so popular again today)."[12]

It is hard to agree with such a selective approach, for it ignores

[8] 24 July 1871, *Letters,* V, 168.

[9] 8 August 1863, *Letters,* IV, 97.

[10] Ursula Brumm, "Symbolism and the Novel," *Partisan Review,* 25 (Summer, 1958), 329.

[11] "Symbolism and the Novel," p. 330.

[12] "Symbolism and the Novel," p. 331.

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the actual workings of the artistic mind. Even *Robinson Crusoe*, that "just history of fact," is structured round a whole series of symbolic incidents which, while anchored in spiritual autobiography, float free into the archetypal. The statement applies even less to George Eliot. It is too simplistic to say that the novel is merely concerned with "the individual and idiosyncratic, that is, the particular in its particular circumstances, with reality as experienced by the individual as constituting the only genuine version of reality." For one, the core of George Eliot's philosophic position is that the voracious ego must accommodate itself to the needs of others. For another, there is a stage in her novels in which, as she told Frederic Harrison, a general idea is more important than "the individual and idiosyncratic,"[13] (we remember that Henry James had observed that "she proceeds from the abstract to the concrete").[14] She aimed at a balance between the two forces, and had set aside *The Spanish Gypsy* because "it was in that stage of Creation or 'Werden,' in which the idea of the characters predominated over the incarnation."[15]

Despite my disagreement with Miss Brumm, it is she, however, who approaches the position I would like to develop when she writes on Ippolito Nievo's forgotten masterpiece of mid-nineteenth century, *Confessions of an Octogenarian*. She asserts that "the great nineteenth-century novel is not the product of an imagination working in symbolic terms. It is a representation of life, but not a symbolic representation."[16] Miss Brumm shows that, in fact, Nievo's novel cannot help becoming a symbolic representation of meaning. Details of the castle of Frata are "components in which the forms that shape" the empirical reality "concentrate and become visible. From this point of view they are seen to concretize the meaning sought in reality." That is, the castle comes close to being a symbol. As Miss Brumm admits, the castle is "the concrete and particular expression of the ideas and forces that shape the reality, and as such it can assume the functions of a symbol. The outstanding difference between such 'realistic' symbols and the symbols of modern literature is that, unlike the latter, the former are not compact images that make a

[13] 15 August 1866, *Letters*, IV, 301.
[14] Henry James, *Partial Portraits* (London, 1899), p. 51.
[15] 15 August 1866, *Letters*, IV, 301.
[16] "Symbolism and the Novel," p. 333.

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single sensual impact, but are often extensive and not easily delimitable segments of reality."

With George Eliot we have precisely the same case, but there are complications. She, for instance, extends the meaning of historical realism, not only in the direction of the incorporation of strictly accurate historical backgrounds, but by embodying the "mythopoeic aspect of history" which Miss Brumm claims Stendhal, Tolstoy, and other nineteenth-century masters did not concern themselves with. As Jerome Beaty has shown, the Reform movement makes its appearance in *Middlemarch* not only with the physical incidents and structures of the Reform Bill, but is a structural metaphor which symbolizes the efforts of the individuals in the novel to evolve, or reform themselves.[17] A symbol, then, need not only be a thing. It can also be an idea. The "medium" George Eliot strives to realize is not merely objective, but spiritual. Not only is there "no creature whose inward being is so strong that it is not greatly determined by what lies outside it,"[18] but this objective reality is never the simple entity Miss Brumm assumes reality to be. As early as *Adam Bede*, George Eliot had claimed the right to take as reality that which is *selected* by her consciousness. The mind is not merely a mirror, nor is reality simply objective verisimilitude. While denying the transcendentalism implicit and explicit in Carlyle, she would yet have agreed with him that "all visible things are emblems," and that "matter exists only spiritually." Since language is the body of thought, and "metaphors are her stuff," man everywhere "finds himself encompassed with symbols."[19]

Absolute realism in the novel can never exist, for, as José Ortega y Gasset observes, reality "in itself" is "anti-poetic"; its nature is "inert and insignificant." Reality, indeed, can never be the subject of art. Myth comes first, and reality comes from its destruction; reality becomes poetic and hence artistic by "destruction of the myth":

In this form reality, which is of an inert and insignificant nature, quiet and mute, acquires movement, is changed into an active power

[17] "History by Indirection: the Era of Reform in *Middlemarch*," *Victorian Studies*, 1 (September, 1957), 173-79.

[18] George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, ed. Gordon S. Haight (Cambridge, Mass., 1956), p. 612. Thoughout, all references are to this edition.

[19] Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus* (London, 1940), p. 54.

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of aggression against the crystalline orb of the ideal. The enchantment of the latter broken, it falls into fine, iridescent dust which gradually loses its colours until it becomes an earthy brown. We are present at this scene in every novel. So that strictly speaking, it is not reality that becomes poetic or enters into the work of art, but only that feature or movement of reality in which the ideal is reabsorbed.[20]

Such realism is best summarized for Ortega y Gasset in *Don Quixote* which, because it was written against chivalry, bears all the books of chivalry within it, and hence possesses a quality of poetry which complicates surface realism. One cannot call such a novel realistic. "This is what we call realism: to bring things to a distance, place them under a light, incline them in such a way that the stress falls upon the side which slopes down towards pure materiality." This is death, not art. The life of true realism is myth. "The myth is always the starting point of all poetry, including the realistic, except that in the latter we accompany the myth in its descent, in its fall. The theme of realistic poetry is the crumbling of poetry."[21]

George Eliot began her writing career with a translation of Feuerbach, the whole impetus of whose work was to destroy supernatural myth and place humanistic values on what had once been regarded as transcendental. *Scenes of Clerical Life* and *Adam Bede* are studies, in purely "provincial" terms, of sin (in these cases, not venal sin, but a kind of atrophy of the heart), punishment, repentance, and forgiveness. The religious or liturgical pattern is clear, but the significance has changed. In George Eliot the crumbling of the ideal is the construction of the real, but the tradition of the ideal is transformed and incorporated into a new reality. Christian teleology and epistemology are brought down to earth, and become truly "ideal" in Lewes' sense of the word.[22]

George Eliot's theory and practice of art moved from this "simple" realism, to a complex or true realism which comes close to Ortega y Gasset's position that true realism contains the

[20] José Ortega y Gasset, "The Nature of the Novel," *Hudson Review,* 10 (Spring, 1957), 28.

[21] Ortega y Gasset, "The Nature of the Novel," p. 30.

[22] "Art always aims at the representation of Reality, i.e., of Truth; and no departure from truth is permissible, except such as inevitably lies in the nature of the medium itself. Realism is thus the basis of all Art, and its antithesis is not Idealism but Falsism." From "Realism and Idealism," in *The Literary Criticism of George Henry Lewes,* ed. Alice Kaminsky (Lincoln, Nebrarska, 1964), p. 87.

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mythic or poetic. The mythic and poetic are both subsumed in the symbol, and in *Middlemarch,* George Eliot devotes no little space to discussions of the symbolic mode of perception. For instance, Mr. Brooke, who is in many ways a wise fool, a character who often voices dramatically George Eliot's own opinions, says at one point that in Naumann's painting, " Everything is symbolical you know—the higher style of art." Having decided this, he concludes his sentence with " I like that up to a certain point, but not too far—it's rather straining to keep up with, you know. But you are at home in that, Casaubon. And your painter's flesh is good—solidity, transparency, everything of that sort " (241). In a humorous way, George Eliot is indicating her own position. The " natural meaning " is in the " flesh," its " solidity, transparency." A man has been painted, and not an abstraction.

Of course, George Eliot is directing gentle irony at Mr. Brooke also, since we had learned previously of the way Will explained the symbolism of his painting of " Tamburlaine Drawing the Conquered Kings in his Chariot." Tamburlaine, says Will, symbolizes the " tremendous course of the world's physical history lashing on the harnessed dynasties " (158), as well as " earthquakes and volcanoes " and " migrations of races and clearings of forests—and America and the steam-engine." Will is also having fun, of course, but he does not seem to take symbolism seriously, George Eliot, however, regards an ability to respond to proper symbolism as important. Symbolism is concentrated indication of meaning, and we see how Dorothea is beginning to recover from " the gigantic broken revelations " (143) of Rome, when she realizes that the symbolic method is more than " a difficult kind of shorthand " (158). She begins to see meanings below the surface, to grow in aesthetic and intellectual power when she can see significance in " saints with architectural models in their hands, or knives accidentally wedged in their skulls. Some things which had seemed monstrous to her were gathering intelligibility and even a natural meaning " (159).

We can obtain a clearer idea of what George Eliot meant by symbolism as " the higher style of art " when we extend our view, if not as far as Mr. Brooke suggests, from " China to Peru " (370), then over and within the novel itself, and eventually to " Notes On Form In Art." George Eliot aimed at creating the complete image, for image-making is the prime function of

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the imagination.[23] "We are all of us imaginative in some form or other, for images are the brood of desire" (237). In his argument with Naumann, Will defends language against painting on these grounds: "Language gives the fuller image, which is all the better for being vague. After all, the true seeing is within; and painting stares at you with an insistent imperfection" (142). Knowledge passes into feeling "within." The complete image is a spiritually conditioned segment of reality. We have something like George Eliot's aesthetic ideal in the phrase describing "that distinctness which is no longer reflection but feeling—an idea wrought back to the directness of sense, like the solidity of objects" (157). A similar point is made in the later dialogue between Will and Dorothea. To be a poet, Will pontificates, is to have a soul "in which knowledge passes instantaneously into feeling, and feeling flashes back as a new organ of knowledge" (166).[24] Symbolic form is not the same as meddling with symbols, which is what Will does in his painting, and, to a lesser extent, what Naumann the Nazarene does also. Symbolic form is a whole habit of mind in which unity is the object—unity of the person as individual and symbol. Just as knowledge and feeling should be one, so for George Eliot an individual is only fully himself when he sees himself in relation to others. Every part of the organism, whether as idea, perception, or individual, should become what I would wish to term "symbolic" of all the others, by way of what Kenneth Burke calls "synecdoche."[25]

Ortega y Gasset describes the way in which reality becomes poetic (or symbolic) in terms which recall Will's statement of the way in which knowledge is wrought back to the directness of sense. He refers to "that gesture or movement of reality in which the idea is reabsorbed."[26] Kenneth Burke describes this mutuality, this "symbolic act," as "the dancing of an attitude."[27] Language and gesture coincide, and the whole artefact is constructed, in E. K. Brown's terms, of "rhythm,"[28] or as George

[23] Lewes, in *Principles of Success in Literature,* writes that Imagination is "simply the power of forming images," and "to imagine—to form an image—we must have the numerous relations of things present to the mind" (Kaminsky, pp. 14-15).

[24] In "George Eliot and the Unified Sensibility," *PMLA,* 79 (1964), 130-36, N. N. Feltes suggests that George Eliot obtained this ideal from Lewes' pioneer work *The Problems of Life and Mind.*

[25] *The Philosophy of Literary Form* (Louisiana State, 1941), pp. 26-28.

[26] "The Nature of the Novel," p. 28.

[27] *Philosophy of Literary Form,* p. 10.

[28] *Rhythm in the Novel* (Toronto, 1950).

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Eliot has it, "repetition with variation" (7). Reality, says Ortega y Gasset, is a "generic function";[29] that is, a cause and not an end. The way in which it takes its primary part in the evolution of a symbolic form gives it value.

In *Middlemarch,* George Eliot has created a new form of fiction which, with the remarks of Ortega y Gasset and Kenneth Burke in mind, might be called "symbolic realism." As far as organizing "natural everyday incidents" into a "strictly related"[30] whole is concerned, George Eliot did not have to move beyond *Scenes of Clerical Life* and its achievement. But in her first novel, symbolic technique is rudimentary and relatively unsophisticated. There may be a fervor in the bareness, but the event takes precedence and any symbolism is a bonus. Thus, in "Mr. Gilfil's Love Story," we are told explicitly that the remodelling of Cheveral Manor and the growing-up of Tina are meant to be brought together in our mind. In *Middlemarch,* George Eliot speaks occasionally as if a symbol were a kind of substitute for the real event. She can write, for example, that in droughty years, "baptism by immersion could only be performed symbolically" (46). At other times, in her letters, the symbolic seems superior to the empirical or mundane: "It seems to me that the soul of Christianity lies not at all in the facts of an individual life, but in the ideas of which that life was the meeting-point and the new starting-point. We can never have a satisfactory basis for the history of the man Jesus, but that negation does not affect the Idea of the Christ either in its historical influence or its great symbolic meaning."[31] Still again, George Eliot speaks of the symbolic as if it were an adjunct of the ideal (and hence an ambiguous ingredient of any realistic presentation). She explains what she considers the failure of *Romola*: "The various *strands* of thought I had to work out forced me into a more ideal treatment of Romola than I had foreseen at the outset—though the 'Drifting away' and the Village with the Plague belonged to my earliest version of the story and were by deliberate forecast adopted as romantic and symbolical elements."[32] The romantic element, these final scenes, is meant clearly to summarize and symbolize certain strands of the narrative by way of

[29] "The Nature of the Novel," p. 30.
[30] George Eliot to Anthony Trollope, 23 October 1863, *Letters,* IV, 110.
[31] George Eliot to Mrs. Alfred Taylor, 30 July 1863, *Letters,* IV, 95.
[32] George Eliot to Sara Sophia Hennell, 15 September 1864, *Letters,* IV, 103.

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colorful conclusion. The suggestion is that such incidents are climactic, unusual, and therefore a whole novel could not consist of such a symbolic technique. By the time George Eliot wrote *Middlemarch*, however, matters had become more complex.

A symbol is without meaning in itself (as George Eliot realized by having the final scenes in *Romola* gather all that had gone before). To complicate the matter, a symbol's "many-sidedness"[33] is hazardous to strict accuracy, and the meaning of a symbol is not ascertainable, since if it were there would be no need for the symbol. To read *Middlemarch* correctly, one must be able to hear nuances, reverberations of a word from context to context, for in this novel everything is part of symbolic form or action, down to the metaphors themselves. As Mark Schorer has demonstrated, George Eliot's metaphors "tend always to be, or to become, explicit symbols of psychological or moral conditions, and they actually function in such a way as to give symbolical value to much action, as Dorothea's pleasure in planning buildings ('a kind of work which she delighted in') and Casaubon's desire to construct a 'Key to all Mythologies.' Their significance lies, then, not so much in the area of choice (as 'commerce,' or 'natural elements' and 'animals') as in the choice of function, and one tests them not by their field, but by their conceptual portent."[34]

In a later essay, Mr. Schorer admits that his classification of verbs of unification and progressive movement which symbolize on a verbal level the movement of the plot ("endless vistas of unending good," "the religion of progress"), *is* a classification: "I am, of course, arranging the metaphorical material *in* that pattern."[35] Nevertheless, his essays are valuable in that they draw attention to a basic principle of construction which, anticipating *gestalt*, gives full value to the actual unit of construction, the autonomous yet related image or fact. For, in *gestalt* (which began as a theory of mind as a repudiation of older ideas imported into the philosophy of mind by analogy with atomic physics), "the elementary and irreducible units of experience are articulated and structured, though unitary, wholes akin rather to the

[33] George Eliot, "The Progress of the Intellect," in *The Essays of George Eliot*, ed. Thomas Pinney (London, 1963), p. 28.

[34] "Fiction and the Matrix of Aanalogy," *Kenyon Review*, 11 (Autumm, 1949), 550.

[35] "The Structure of the Novel," in *Middlemarch: Critical Approaches to the Novel*, ed. Barbara Hardy (Oxford, 1967), p. 20.

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modern atom with its internal pattern of structured forces."[36] George Eliot, in "Notes On Form In Art," states as one of the new aesthetic principles she was evolving, that "Form, as an element of human experience, must begin with the perception of separateness . . . & that things must be recognized as separate wholes before they can be recognized as wholes composed of parts, or before the wholes can be regarded as relatively parts of a larger whole." Because of the number of dynamic wholes that can make a unity, "fundamentally, form is unlikeness," and therefore "every difference is form."[37] Darrel Mansell, in an article on George Eliot's conception of form, states that for George Eliot "Form is not outward appearance but 'inward' relations."[38] The concept of symbolic form which George Eliot was working towards is one in which everything is related to everything else without sacrificing its own *quidditas*, the actuality of its present existence.

On a moral level (to show how George Eliot integrates theme, plot, language, and so on, within an encompassing form), we might note that the ideal outlined above entails the concept of self-sacrifice. George Eliot always insisted that self-sacrifice was far more viable if it emanated from a strict self-knowledge, from an integrated personality. Thus, in *Middlemarch*, Mr. Farebrother gives up Mary because he knows that she is in love with Fred and because he realizes his own shortcomings, that he is "only a decent makeshift" (130). By renunciation, he becomes more useful and achieves greater dignity. Similarly, Dorothea, who wishes to sacrifice her life on Casaubon's altar, finds not only that her desire stems from her incomplete personality, her ignorance, but that self-sacrifice is an exercise in self-knowledge involving the giving up of large and grandiose ideas, personal pride and dignity. When she is able to do this, she is able to give herself fully, able to break down the egotism of Rosamund and the reticent pride of Lydgate. George Eliot knew as well as Jung that the "intentional loss" in self-sacrifice is also a gain, "for if you can give yourself it proves that you possess yourself."[39] The *quidditas* of the self which sacrifices itself from a

[36] Harold Osborne, "Artistic Unity and Gestalt," *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 14 (July, 1956), 215.

[37] "Notes On Form In Art," in *Essays*, pp. 432-33.

[38] "George Eliot's Conception of Form," *SEL*, 5 (1965), 653.

[39] C. G. Jung, "Transformational Symbolism in the Mass," in *Pagan and Christian Mysteries*, ed. Joseph Campbell (New York, 1933), p. 131.

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position of strength, not of vague benevolence, is related to the *quidditas* of each part of the plot. Creating a true relation to others through self-sacrifice is only possible by a knowledge of the integral sense of self. The individual unit of the plot, in *gestalt* terminology, is "articulated and structured, though unitary."[40]

II *MIDDLEMARCH*: THE NOVEL ITSELF

(*i*) *Systole and Diastole: The Scene as Symbolic Center*

Apart from the exigencies of publishing, there seems to be no organic reason why *Middlemarch* is divided into eight books. What *is* intentional, though, is the principle of construction in each book, for there is always one scene in which issues are summarized and evaluated from the widest possible point of view. This scene is generally a scene bringing together more people than in other scenes, and is the larger movement in the dance of characters, a symbolic center of consciousness. Lydgate, who shares with his creator certain important artistic principles, gives us a metaphor by which to apprehend this device: "there must be a systole and diastole in all enquiry," he says. That is, "a man's mind must be continually expanding and shrinking between the whole human universe and the horizon of an object-glass" (468).

For George Eliot there is no private life that has not been influenced by public life. Each symbolic scene such as we are about to examine is a large beat in the life of the novel, when issues come to the fore in more dramatic or clearer ways. We shall deal only with the first of these scenes, Book 1, Chapter 10, but the principle holds for all the others.[41]

In Chapter 10 we have the point, Jerome Beaty informs us, at which the "Miss Brooke" portion of the novel ends, and where the main "Middlemarch" characters are introduced. The reason why George Eliot decided to fuse the earlier story which she had had

[40] Osborne, "Artistic Unity and Gestalt," p. 215.

[41] Other examples of such scenes are Chapter 18 in Book 2, Chapter 25 in Book 4, Chapter 32 in Book 3, Chapter 51 in Book 5, and Chapters 60 and 63. For a more complete, though different list of what he calls "conglomerate" scenes, see Neil D. Isaacs, "*Middlemarch*: Crescendo of Obligatory Drama," *NCF*, 18 (June, 1963), 21-34.

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in mind for some time, with the other story is that they have points in common, and George Eliot's syncretic imagination saw them as essentially parts of the same story. Both are about " high ideals which come to nothing or little more than nothing; in both cases an unwise and unhappy marriage plays a part in obstructing the realization of these ideals." [42] Moreover, the time element and scene of the two stories are similar. As the two stories are really one story, even the characters seem to be part of one character, parts of an ideal whole which exists in the narrator's consciousness (a point to be taken up again later).

Chapter 10 focusses initially on Will, but only to dismiss him in short space. To balance this introduction, Lydgate makes a brief first appearance at the end of the chapter, and is meant to contrast favorably with the ephemeral Will. Apart from Fred, these two are the only young men in the novel, and some readers as the navel appeared in serial form saw possibilities of a romance between Lydgate and Dorothea. But George Eliot had a more subtle effect in mind, and at this point carefully keeps Dorothea and Lydgate apart (though they seem to have met because Lydgate makes the fatuous judgment on page 69 that she is " a little too in earnest "). The Dorothea story is beginning to look further than Middlemarch. Will the exotic has already left the small stifling community to find his way in an area no " more precise than the entire area of Europe " (61), and we next see him in Rome, where he meets Dorothea. In Chapter 10 we begin to sense a kinship between Dorothea and Will, for Will's world of " possibilities " (61) contrasts strongly with Casaubon's " small taper of learned theory exploring the tossed ruins of the world " (61). Dorothea's dissatisfaction in this chapter is caused by Casaubon's insensitive remark that she had better take Celia with her, in order to give Casaubon more time for his serious work; the implication is that Dorothea cannot share his *esoterica*. Estrangement is already in the air.

Most of the men in the novel (except, perhaps, Will) are ignorant about the nature of women. This fact is used as a symbol of moral decay in the town and in the nation as a whole, for it traverses society from the local squire, Mr. Brooke, to " the Lydgate's of Northumberland " (69). It pervades the run-of-the-mill moral judgments of such men as Chichely who prefers what

[42] Jerome Beaty, *Middlemarch from Notebook to Novel* (Urbana, 1960), p. 9.

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he regards as a truly feminine woman, not Dorothea but Rosamund; someone with "a little filigree," "something of the coquette" (68). Lydgate will become the scapegoat for sharing such ideas. He will attain a kind of tragic dignity by seeing beyond the mask when it is too late, and having to make the best of it.

In this chapter, the "second-line characters," Vincys, Bulstrodes, and so on, anchor us firmly in the prosaic "medium" which Dorothea is trying to escape, which Will evades, and which Lydgate, ironically sharing so much with them, has come to try and improve. This party "before Reform had done its notable part" (65), symbolizes the sheer bulk and weight of the reality facing Dorothea, emphasizes that any reform which might come to Middlemarch will be dreadfully slow in succeeding.[43] This dumpy reality, the same which is testing Dorothea who tries to crusade for improved housing while her uncle runs the worst estate in the district, will test Lydgate and his brittle self-possession. Lydgate does not know how to deal with Middlemarch, and the scene is a masterly way of bringing the main characters together in order for us to see them in the context of their invidious environment.

(*ii*) *The Scene as Symbolic Embodiment*

Another vigorous ingredient of the symbolic form of *Middlemarch* is those scenes which George Eliot had always used, scenes which might be called symbolic embodiments, since they imbue naturalistic incidents with thematic or symbolic will to stature. In *Adam Bede,* for instance, Hetty before the mirror is a crude emblematic version of this princple, while in *Daniel Deronda* the first scene at the gambling casino symbolizes in beautifully controlled tones the abrogation of will and abandonment to chance which is Daniel's fate until he embraces the Zionist cause. The drifting of Daniel on the Thames is another embodiment of the same idea.

Middlemarch contains many such scenes, and the novel calls attention to the technique since, like *Daniel Deronda,* it opens with such a scene. The richness of Chapter 1 precludes analysis in depth, but the principle is clear. The "plain dressing" (5) of Dorothea is ironic, and a kind of humorous desperation hangs

[43] J. W. Beach, *The Twentieth-Century Novel* (New York, 1932), pp. 129-30, discusses what he calls these "second-line characters."

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over her efforts to suppress the "pagan sensuous" (7) strain to her character. The discussion with Celia about their mother's jewels symbolizes this dichotomy. "How very beautiful these gems are!" she exclaims, and then rationalizes her instinctive delight with, "It is strange how deeply colours seem to penetrate one, like scent. I suppose that is the reason why gems are used as spiritual emblems in the Revelation of St. John. They look like fragments of heaven" (10). She attempts to "merge" the sermon's sensuous pleasure "in her mystic religious joy." For Dorothea, spiritual emblem and physical fact never quite coincide, however. The marriage to Casaubon is meant to satisfy the spiritual, but at the expense of the physical. Will, like one of the "little fountains of pure colour" (10), is always associated with the play of light, and is meant to suggest that Dorothea at the end of the novel is well on the way to integrating the dual aspects of her personality, "sensuous force controlled by spiritual passion" (141).

Dorothea's honeymoon in Rome is another example of symbolic embodiment. All the verbal imagery of ruin and decay which have been associated with Casaubon in the early part of the novel finds physical expression in the Eternal City, city of "stupendous fragmentariness" (143). Rome corresponds to Dorothea's spiritual confusion as she discovers more about the man she has married; both city and husband are "broken revelations" (143). Rome undermines her "principles" with its "deep impression" (143), and its confusing sensuousness. "All this vast wreck of ambitious ideals" shocks her out of her English complacency, for she is "tumbled among incongruities" (144). In addition, Rome symbolizes the ruin in Casaubon's personality, where "the large vistas and wide fresh air" which Dorothea had hoped to discover in it "were replaced by anterooms and winding passages which seemed to lead nowhere" (145). Dorothea has to drive out to the Campagna "where she could feel alone with the earth and sky, away from the oppressive masquerade of ages" (143). Correspondingly, it is to Will she turns for freshness of response and open sympathy.

The last example of this sort to be examined differs from the previous two, in that it is what might be termed "symbolic parody": "It is a narrow mind which cannot look at a subject from various points of view" (49). Parody, including the narrator's self-parody, Mr. Brooke's parody of reform and his obsession

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with his documents which parallels Casaubon's method of compilation, and so on, is a larger element in *Middlemarch* than in any of the other novels. Chapter 23 consists entirely of a parody of one of the strands of the main action. On the narrative level, the purpose of the scene at the horse fair which Fred attends with Bambridge and Horrocks is clear. Fred trusts to his "luck" in having things turn out well, fashioning events "according to desire" (173). He feels that the universe will accommodate itself to his wishes, a characteristic attitude George Eliot regards as peculiarly egoistic. When his venture into horse-dealing turns out badly, Mr. Garth has to pay the penalty for trusting him, and a climax thus comes about in Fred's relations with Mary. On the symbolic level, the fact that Fred was sold a vicious animal which the owner had claimed was a docile beast parodies part of the larger Lydgate/Rosamund plot. The clue is in the sentence describing the horse's viciousness: "There was no more redress for this than for the discovery of bad temper after marriage—which of course old companions were aware of before the ceremony" (177). Fred egoistically chooses a horse by trusting to his "luck"; Lydgate chooses a wife, trusting to his knowledge of women. Just how much he has learned from experience with the fair sex we are meant to gauge from the Laure incident. Lydgate believes, conventionally and vulgarly, that women are for decoration. His choice of Fred's sister is rendered ludicrous when we see Rosamund and the vicious horse superimposed to form one image. One would have expected a reformer and humanitarian not to trust to appearances, and to have enquired closer into the qualities of his mate before marriage. But Lydgate has "spots of commonness" (111). In George Eliot's non-tragic world, these are equivalent to the tragic flaw.

With such scenes in mind, we should pause before agreeing wholeheartedly with Peter K. Garrett's contention that the "staple scene" in George Eliot does "not display a notable concentration of meaning." [44]

(*iii*) "*The Expanding Symbol*"

Some parts of *Middlemarch* are consciously symbolic, such as the well-known passage on page 578. Dorothea has come to the realization that she loves Will and that Lydgate has a strong

[44] *Scene and Symbol from George Eliot to James Joyce* (New Haven, 1969), p. 15.

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claim on her aid and sympathy. She regards both men as "objects of her rescue" (577), and "'What should I do—how should I act now . . . ?'":

> It had taken long for her to come to that question, and there was light piercing into the room. She opened her curtains, and looked out towards the bit of road that lay in view, with fields beyond, outside the entrance-gates. On the road there was a man with a bundle on his back and a woman carrying her baby; in the field she could see figures moving—perhaps the shepherd with his dog. Far off in the bending sky was the pearly light; and she felt the largeness of the world and the manifold wakings of men to labour and endurance. She was part of that involuntary, palpitating life, and could neither look out on it from her luxurious shelter as a mere spectator, nor hide her eyes in selfish complaining.

The passage seems to draw some of its power from memories of the Eden myth and one would not want to be much more specific. Yet the details of the man and the woman seem to refer to specific intentions. One could make analogies, and say Lydgate is the burdened man, but the method does not really work. The symbols are to be understood as expanding into the general consciousness we have of the novel at this point. Details point to the climactic moment. The fact that Dorothea looks out of the window and beyond the gates of her house is an involuntary altruistic gesture. Bundle and baby are the way of the world she is about to be inducted into. The "bending" sky is not only an accurate description, but suggests vastness, and, taking up the suggestion of the burdened man, extends the burden to an overarching principle of labor. Dorothea is about to leave Middlemarch and her "luxurious shelter."

The second kind of expanding symbol is easier to follow. In George Eliot there is generally a relationship between the natural detail and a psychic event or situation. The symbolic relationship is less emphasized in *Middlemarch* than the earlier novels, and does not expand or dilate as it does, for example, in *The Mill on the Floss* or *Adam Bede*. Landscape in *Middlemarch* is strangely muted, and effective mostly as delicate analogy. Thus, when Dorothea visits Casaubon for the first time, it was autumn and "a sparse remnant of yellow leaves" (54) was falling in the Lowick estate. Again, when she realizes what Lydgate's married life is, and that she might help, her insight is set against "the bright green buds which stood in relief against the dark evergreen" (557). In the juxtaposition, promise and tragedy are

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gently hinted. Finally, when Dorothea returns from her honeymoon, it is mid-January, and snow is falling. Generally, however, this device of nature as symbol is used sparingly. The scene in *Middlemarch* is not the arena of nature, so much as a "mental estate" (207). The point is well made by Quentin Anderson, that what George Eliot surveys "might be called a landscape of opinion, for it is not the natural landscape that is dominant here." The interest is not in "things seen but things felt and believed."[45]

The third kind of expanding symbol is subtler, less immediately apprehensible; a significance of tone, a certainty of nuance. Symbolic use of water in *Middlemarch* depends more on the sharpness of the unconscious mind for its effect than on conscious appreciation. In the novel, water or streams of water slowly come to symbolize sensibility. This verbal symbol does not acquire a physical manifestation as it does for example in *The Mill on the Floss* or *Daniel Deronda* (where Grandcourt drowns in his own egoism). Such phrases as "the living stream of fellowship" (4), "the stream of feeling" (46), and the "open-channels" of Dorothea's "ardent character" (565) indicate the symbolic area George Eliot is cultivating. The symbol is pervasive and seldom stressed. For example, when Dorothea is about to marry Casaubon, she thinks of his mind as an "ungauged reservoir" (17), or as "a lake compared to my little pool" (18). She finds, however, that her marriage in fact cuts her off from the great sea of sensibility. She finds that she is "exploring an enclosed basin" (145) where Casaubon's soul is "fluttering in the swampy ground" (206).

The symbol is also used ironically in the case of Lydgate, who, when his work is going well, exists "in that agreeable after-glow of excitement when thought lapses from examination of a specific object into a suffusive sense of its connections with all the rest of our existence—seems, as it were, to throw itself on its back after vigorous swimming and float with the repose of unexhausted strength" (122). This sense of connectedness, this unity of being which Lydgate possesses briefly, is soon to be dissipated in the division he creates between life and work. Further irony is provided by the dwindling of Lydgate's element from "I have the sea to swim in" (128) to practising at a Spa "bath" (128).

[45] "George Eliot in *Middlemarch*," in *From Dickens to Hardy*, ed. Boris Ford (Harmondsworth, 1960), p. 280.

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The final expanding symbol is a location. The library at Lowick is initially simply a place where Dorothea sets about learning from Casaubon the Latin, Greek, and Hebrew she craved. Thoughout, the library functions as charged background, keeping before us Dorothea's heroic desire for book-learning which will substitute for a "coherent social faith" (3). Gradually, as Dorothea substitutes fellow-feeling for book-knowledge, the library accretes other values.

Dorothea receives Lydgate in the library, the first time she has been there since Casaubon's sickness. The shutters are closed, "but there was enough light to read by from the narrow upper panes of the windows" (212). Even in absence, Casaubon's presence is felt, since "narrow" is one of the epithets habitually associated with him. We are reminded that it is through her suffering in her marriage that Dorothea is beginning to understand others. It is in his library, the "caticom" (353) as Tantripp calls it that the process of rebirth begins for Dorothea, and Lydgate begins to have his eyes opened, for "women just like Dorothea had not entered into his traditions" (213). "For years after Lydgate remembered the impression produced in him" by Dorothea's involuntary appeal for help (214).

This scene with Lydgate also prepares for the scene when Dorothea meets Will in the library. The chink of light that is enough "to read by" anticipates the metaphoric "lunette" which, symbolizing Will, "opened in the wall" of Dorothea's "prison" (265). Lydgate in the first scene allows Dorothea to open her soul to him, while Will in the second gives her "a glimpse of the sunny air" (265). The library then becomes an ironic setting because of its association of staleness and aridity. In addition, the meeting between the two takes place against a rising storm, which seems to herald ominously the growing involvement of Dorothea and Will, or, like the storm in "The Eve of St. Agnes," symbolizes the hostile world outside. When Dorothea makes a motion of revolt, however, beginning to allow her dissatisfaction with Casaubon to rise to the surface by acknowledging that great thoughts seem to have worn him out, the rain seems to stop soon after. Fairer weather is ahead as Dorothea begins to see truly. The influence or hold of the library seems likewise to be loosened, its restrictions giving way to freedom.

The movement from darkness into light is continued in Chapter

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48. Dorothea meets Casaubon in "that close library" (352), but he walks into "Yew-Tree Walk" where he expects Dorothea to come and tell him her decision about his proposition. Dorothea never gets the chance, however, to tell him that she will "bind herself" to him, immuring herself, effectively barring herself from the sunny presence, for Casaubon is found dead in the summer-house. After this death, "the air is milder" (394), and the library loses some more of its malignity, although "the dead hand" continues to exert an influence through the will. When Dorothea returns to Lowick after her sojourn with her uncle, however, the room she stops in longest is the library; but, in the June sun, "the shutters were all open . . . and the morning gazed calmly into the library" (392). She seals and closes the "Synoptical Tabulation" which Casaubon had left and writes within the envelope "I could not submit my soul to yours" (393). The morning that shone on the rows of notebooks is likened to the sun shining on megaliths, "the mute memorial of a forgotten faith" (393), and that is precisely what the library now represents for Dorothea. The sun which shines so brightly is also Will, who is soon after shown, not into the library, but into the neutral drawing-room with its "two tall mirrors and tables with nothing on them" (394), and an open window. A new start seems possible. This "little room," in the words of the Donne poem George Eliot uses as a motto for Chapter 83, the last chapter but three in the novel, has a chance to become "an everywhere" for their "walking souls" (589).

The next time Will and Dorothea meet is in Mr. Brooke's library (Chapter 62). The context is not ominous with the weight of books but lightened by Will's presence. This second parting is in auspicious circumstances, with clear weather. Moreover, the play of irony over the whole scene is welcome release from the heavy serious atmosphere pervading the library at Lowick. But the dead hand is not so easily evaded, and the meeting in Chapter 83 takes place in the Lowick library again; and again there is a storm in the background. Their declaration of love is thus set against the forces of the past and the "wild stupidity of the elements."[46] Will is entering into "the thick of a struggle" (611), and both he and Dorothea are about to enter

[46] Jean Giraudoux, *Tiger at the Gates*, trans. Christopher Fry (New York, 1955), p. 1.

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the adult world, " the drear outer world " (594). The influence of the library is compromised by love. The world, however, is waiting for the fray which will not be spectacular, but part of a whole series of " unhistoric " acts (613).

(*iv*) *The Symbolic Act and Gesture*

In the Prelude to *Middlemarch,* the narrator remarks ironically on the " inconvenient indefiniteness " (3) with which the Supreme Power has fashioned the natures of women. Their variety prevents then from being treated with " scientific certitude " (4). Despite scientific investigation, " the indefiniteness remains, and the limits of variation are really much wider than anyone would imagine from the sameness of women's coiffeur " (4). The same is true of the variations George Eliot plays on certain ordinary gestures and acts to heighten the *armoniche.* By such means she enrichens the truly poetic texture of the novel.

In the wealth of gestures, even the smallest act becomes symbolic in its context, and summarizes the whole thrust of a character or situation at that particular time. Quentin Anderson suggests that, after the loss of God, George Eliot, aided by her reading in Comte, saw human behavior " as a set of symbolic gestures expressive of individual needs and desires."[47] Only in *Middlemarch,* however, is this symbolic technique used so delicately and expressively. In exemplification of this argument, Hilda Hulme writes copiously on such a simple detail as the act of Dorothea in looking out of a window: Dorothea, " instead of setting down with her usual diligent interest to some occupation, simply leaned her elbow on an open book and looked out of the window at the great cedar silvered with the damp " (35). Miss Hulme points out that the mention of the cedar is a later manuscript addition referring to Dorothea's emotional situation, since Casaubon is a Biblical scholar and the cedar has Biblical associations. Dorothea is looking at the new opportunity of life with Casaubon, and the idealism of her virgin judgment is suggested by the word " silvered." (" Damp " is, of course, another word with Casaubonian links.) One cannot know, says Miss Hulme, whether Dorothea shares Celia's notion that learning may come from mere physical contact (symbolized by the elbow on the open book): " Yet in a novel where physical posture and physical

[47] " George Eliot in *Middlemarch,*" p. 289.

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movement so often represent mental state and emotional change, it is hard to know what limits the author would have us set to our readiness in picking up such significances." [48]

A simpler example of the same technique is the occasion when old Featherstone, sick in bed, is visited by his repulsive relatives. He starts to rub "the gold knob of his stick" (78), a gesture we translate into emotional terms, since all his power and the brutal games he plays with it depend on his wealth. All his belligerent triumph is expressed by this unconscious gesture. Mary Garth ('Dove' in the original), supplies him with soothing syrup, and it is Mary who is the only character Featherstone cannot buy. It is this very gold-knobbed stick that he hurls at Mary in frustration when she refuses to obey his machinations and accept a bribe.

Gestures as well as acts and objects can be ideas "wrought back to the directness of sense" (157). Similarly, a gesture can make a narrative point concretely. When Rosamund asks Lydgate to fasten up her hair, "he swept up the soft festoons of plaits and fastened in the tall comb" (426). The husbandly act seems surprisingly degrading. The way the comb is described as "tall" makes the action complete and creates a sense of Rosamund inviolate in her pristine ego. Lydgate is Heracles among the women, his masculinity debilitated, ("to such uses do men come"), ensnared in the physical charms of his wife with her Lamia-like "long neck" (426). Again, before the marriage, Rosamund had dropped the "chain" (222), she was knitting when Lydgate had come to put an end to the flirtation. He "instantaneously stooped to pick up the chain" (222), and, on the way up, seeing the first natural look of distress he had ever seen on Rosamund's face, is as truly captured as if the chain he had retrieved were made of steel. The fact that Lydgate picked it up symbolizes his own responsibility for his fate. This symbol depends as much as anything on a pun. Later, the pun changes to metaphor when we learn that for Lydgate, Rosamund is "another weight of chain to drag" (543).

Sometimes, one is not sure of the exact significance of a gesture which nevertheless strikes us as moving or mysterious. For example, when Mr. Brooke returns from Lowick one day, he has

[48] Hilda Hulme, "The Language of the Novel," in *Middlemarch: Critical Approaches to the Novel,* p. 90.

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a commission from Casaubon; to deliver the marriage proposal. Dorothea, we are told, sits by the fire as Mr. Brooke begins his preamble, and has just been reading a pamphlet on the early church which Casaubon has sent: "She threw off her mantle and bonnet, and sat down opposite to him, enjoying the glow, but lifting up her beautiful hands for a screen. They were not thin hands, or small hands, but powerful, feminine, material hands. She seemed to be holding them up in propiation for her passionate desire to know and to think, which in the unfriendly mediums of Tipton and Fresshit had issued in crying and red eyelids" (28). That which protects Dorothea is her essential femininity which makes for "a special moral influence."[49] In time to come it will be most needed. Presumably, she is lifting these hands to Casaubon's flame, but, as we see, he is unable to appreciate what she is, because of his vulgar idea that Dorothea is a reward for his celibacy, and because of his jealous pride and fear of being found out. Thus there is irony inherent in this gesture. Casaubon is never associated with light or heat, always with damp or dark. The "ardent" Dorothea is herself more a source of life-giving heat than the man she is lifting her hands to. But it will be noticed that she holds her hands up as a screen, which suggests that George Eliot wished us to note some cross-current of negative thought in the gesture which Dorothea herself is unaware of. Only the reader wiser after the event realizes that the gesture is not a wholly positive commitment. We know, for example, that Dorothea's flame is "fed from within" (3), that Casaubon acknowledges, "I feed too much on the inward sources" (13), and that Will's smile is "a gush of inward light" (152).

(*v*) *Character as Symbol*

Finally, one ought not to overlook the role played in the symbolic action by a cast of characters who are so intimately related by blood or theme that, as Mark Schorer puts it, "the major characterizations depend on a single value, or perhaps we should say, a single contrast: the quality and kind of social idealism as opposed to self-absorption."[50] The way Mr. Schorer phrases the fact, however, does not distinguish the characters in

[49] George Eliot to Emily Davies, 8 August 1868, *Letters*, IV, 468.
[50] "The Structure of the Novel," p. 13.

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Middlemarch from those in the early novels: the issues in all of them can be resolved into such a division. What distinguishes *Middlemarch* is the " sense of expanding life " [51] in its characters; how they all seem splittings-off from an archetypal stock, symbolizations of a larger consciousness, " reflected light of correspondence " (18), " irradiations." [52] In many cases, the characters seem to be composed all of the same flesh, an aboriginal tissue.

Freud, in *The Interpretation of Dreams,* talks about the way in which the dream-image of a person can be created by " identification " of a number of disparate elements. Such identification " consists in giving representation in the dream-content to only one or more persons who are related by some common feature." The other way in which the dream-image works is by " composition," that is, " when persons are combined, there are already present in the dream-image features which are characteristic of, but not common to, the persons in question, so that a new unity, a composite person, appears as the result of the union of these features." The two ways do not seem vitally different, and what happens in each is that the ego is given " multiple representation " in the dream. " By means of several such identifications an extraordinary amount of thought material may be condensed." [53] Without wishing in any way to sound as if I were psychoanalysing George Eliot, I think it is possible to see a similarity between the dream structure Freud describes here with its composite symbol for the ego, and the curious way in which the characters of *Middlemarch* interact with each other, autonomously, yet within the overarching consciousness of the narrator, the " collective mind," [54] the " ego " who creates them all and is a part of them.

From George Eliot's conscious point of view, the narrator's aim is to show " the stealthy convergence of human lots " in which we see " a slow preparation of effects from one life on another "

[51] Barbara Hardy, *The Novels of George Eliot,* p. 93.

[52] Brown, *Rhythm in the Novel,* p. 27, is the source of this term.

[53] *The Interpretation of Dreams,* trans. A. A. Brill (New York, 1950), pp. 306-08.

[54] J. Hillis Miller, in *The Form of Victorian Fiction* (Notre Dame, 1968), p. 81, writes that the characteristic work of George Eliot, Dickens, Meredith, Trollope, Thackeray, " comes into existence " when the novelist " choses to play the role not of a first person narrator who is an actor in the drama, and not even the role of an anonymous storyteller who may be identified with an individual consciousness, but in the role of a *collective mind* " (my italics).

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(70). Even "inconsistency" and, with the Raffles plot in mind, coincidence are part of the "living myriad" (380), where each and all are related, as George Eliot put it in *Adam Bede*, "in my mind."[55] Thus, it is curious that many of the characters in *Middlemarch* are orphans (Celia, Dorothea, Will, Bulstrode, Lydgate), and that there is not one "interloper" (554), but two, Bulstrode and Lydgate. To stress that her main characters are orphans means that George Eliot can symbolize man's existential situation in more dramatic fashion. Orphans in the universe, men have to turn to other men; "to mercy, pity, peace, and love / All pray in their distress" (556).

In an 1861 letter to Sara Sophia Hennell, George Eliot expressed the desire for "a temple besides the outdoor temple—a place where human beings do not ramble apart, but *meet* with a common impulse."[56] From her "quarry" for *Middlemarch*, we can see how George Eliot attempted to meet this need in her novel, with her lists of character inter-connections under the rubric, "Relations to be developed."[57] In the novel's multiform connective tissue, all parts linked by the symbol of reform, each character possesses something of each of the others. They are "various small mirrors" (62) reflecting each other, and "one life."

Dorothea and Will are kept in conjunction down to the smallest verbal unit, Will's "inner light" (152) complementing Dorothea's "inward fire" (10). To find Casaubon and Bulstrode linked in this way however is somewhat of a surprise, since on the narrative level they have virtually no connection. Nevertheless, we find that Casaubon has the desire for Dorothea to "irradiate the gloom which fatigue was apt to hang over him" (46), and then we learn that Bulstrode kept "a kind of moral lantern" (91) over the lives of Middlemarchers. Casaubon wants Dorothea to be a diversion, something of an amusement not to be taken over-seriously after he has been wandering around in mental gloom with "his taper" (147). Bulstrode is a false light to his people, driven by that religious egoism which George Eliot had condemned in her essay on the poet Young. Casaubon's pride, egoism, and blindness are equal to Bulstrode's, and both men

[55] *Adam Bede*, ed. Gordon S. Haight (New York, 1960), p. 178.
[56] 18 September 1861, *Letters*, III, 452.
[57] Anna Theresa Kitchel, *Quarry for Middlemarch* (Berkeley, 1950), p. 45.

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are essentially of the same kind. Each uses people to feed his own selfish needs.

Will enjoys "the very miscellaneousness of Rome," because it makes "the mind flexible with constant comparison" (157). Such a mind is needed to read *Middlemarch* adequately, and one despairs of ever picking up all the structural *nuances*. The most abstruse comparisons, almost bizarre comparisons, result from placing the candle of our attention to the scratches of events on the pier-glass (194-95). Just one example, and this section must be concluded. George Eliot had difficulty in connecting the story of Fred and his troubles with the other important plots. Yet she clearly intended Fred as a kind of foil to Will. Both are unsteady, go through a period of trial and apprenticeship for the hand of the woman they love, and finally marry her. George Eliot intends us to keep the comparison constantly in mind, and summarizes the theme: "to Will, a creature who cared little for what are called the solid things of life and greatly for its subtler influences, to have within him such a feeling as he had towards Dorothea, was like the inheritance of a fortune" (344). Will had been disinherited because of his mother's imprudent marriage. Similarly, Fred's chances of inheriting old Featherstone's fortune had been lost, and he sets about making his own fortune with the help of Mary and Caleb.

(*vi*) *Form: Some Conclusions*

By the time George Eliot wrote *Middlemarch,* Darrel Mansell says: "The diversity which her kind of fiction can include is only limited by what she herself thinks she is able to find together in a wholeness in her own mind." Hence, "The more varied the relations she can present in her fiction, the higher the degree of form she can attain if she is successful in binding everything together in a wholeness." As Mr. Brooke sagaciously points out, "Life isn't cast into a mould—not cut out by rule and line, and that sort of thing" (30). George Eliot intends to refract life in all its multiplicity; but, since the human mind will no more accept an artistic chaos any more than a "moral chaos" (80), a tension is created in the novel between refraction and selection. Resolution depends not on "explicit relations" (the kind found more frequently in the earlier novels), but on "obscure implicit ones."[58] The structure thus approaches multiplicity and verges

[58] "George Eliot's Conception of Form," pp. 656-58.

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on inconsequence (as James hinted). But the symbolic action provides a complicated and unifying dance of motifs. George Eliot's own metaphor of the web to describe the structure of society and the structure of the novel is slightly misleading as a definition of the aesthetic principle because it evokes, in fact, a structure "cut out by rule and line." The metaphor of the connective thread (153) is better, but the critic is safer if he duplicates the methods of Lydgate's enquiry, as he looks for "new connections and hitherto hidden facts of structure" (110). George Eliot may be "enamoured of arduous invention" (122), but her triumph is that the result appears completely spontaneous. In Caleb Garth's words describing something well-made, "Things hang together" (297).

Middlemarch also enacts in its structure a truth it preaches. "Our good depends on the quality and breadth of the emotion" (345), she writes; a phrase which sounds as though it could have come from "Notes On Form In Art." George Eliot's perfect reader will force himself, like Dorothea after her interview with Ladislaw, "to dwell on every detail and its possible meaning" (577). Signs, however, "are small measurable things, but interpretations are illimitable" (18). That is one barrier to a perfect reading. Another is that all of us, attempting to describe a "sign" "get our thoughts tangled in metaphors, and act fatally on the strength of them" (63). Fully to understand how the concept of symbolic action works in *Middlemarch* we must pay strict attention to the individual detail and then evaluate its "quality and breadth." Details mean more than themselves. In symbolic action, a structure vibrates with significance.

If, as I said earlier, George Eliot was writing beyond the capacities of contemporary critical acumen, and their critical vocabulary was inadequate to deal with *Middlemarch,* today, when *Middlemarch* is at last appreciated as the masterpiece it is, we might have such a vocabulary. Unfortunately, however, even on the question of plot there is widespread disagreement, not to say confusion. The followers of Northrop Frye, for example, regard the novel as a long poem, and attempt to see "the whole design of the work as a unity. It is now a simultaneous pattern radiating out from a center, not a narrative moving in time." [59]

[59] Northrop Frye, "Literary Criticism," in *The Aims and Methods of Scholarship in Modern Languages and Literatures,* ed. James Thorp (New York, 1963), pp. 63-65.

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Neo-Aristotelian critics, on the other hand, following the lead of R. S. Crane, while not denying that plot is no simple matter, prefer not to give undue emphasis to what Norman Friedman calls "the images"[60] (which, in fiction, can be characters). Mr. Friedman finds unfortunate "the failure of many critics today to take seriously, on a material level, the various unifying principles which may shape in a novel action and the way it is handled."[61] The trouble is that we have "no commonly accepted body of terms, principles, and distinctions for grasping satisfactorily the literal action of a novel as it functions in the whole of which it is a palpable part."[62] In this essay, I have attempted to reconcile both schools of criticism, by stressing the fact that literal and symbolic are not exclusive; that the "literal action" *can* possess the qualities of a long poem. In my discussion on *Middlemarch* I have tried to show, in fact, that George Eliot's style transmutes the literal plot, which nevertheless exists fully in its own right. Mr. Friedman demonstrates a looseness of critical vocabulary when he bluntly opposes "the facts of the case" to "symbolic interpretation,"[63] and "what happens in the literal action" to "a critic searching for subtleties."[64] Apart from anything else, who is to say that the "subtleties" a sensitive critic finds are, in fact, not there?

One has to ask oneself if there is any *real* insurmountable difference between the neo-Aristotelian critic and the symbolic critic. When, for instance, we note in *Middlemacrh* the "meticulously counterpointed"[65] stories of Lydgate and Dorothea, each an orphan with a Continental education, each well-born but disregarding rank, each a reformer, are we falsifying our reaction to say that literal plot pattern becomes symbolic of some ideal George Eliot had in mind? How else can we suggest that the double pattern is more than mere coincidence? Again, when we note the Aristotelian *peripeteia*, as the roles of Dorothea and Lydgate are reversed, he becoming the patient, and she the doctor; when we see this inversion of roles repeated in various

[60] "Imagery: From Sensation to Symbol," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 12 (September, 1953), 31.

[61] "Criticism and the Novel," *Antioch Review*, 18 (1958), 344.

[62] "Criticism and the Novel," p. 345.

[63] "Criticism and the Novel," p. 347.

[64] "Criticism and the Novel," p. 370.

[65] U. C. Knoepflmacher, *Religious Humanism and the Victorian Novel* (Princeton, 1965), p. 76.

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ways with other characters, with Will and Bulstrode, for instance, we need a terminology which will *distinguish* literal or traditional plot from the way George Eliot uses it in *Middlemarch*. There is a sense, even, in which plot turns out to be what Walter Naumann terms a "pseudo-structure": "George Eliot has an incredibly easy effortless manner, the manner of the spinner of tales who passes from one chapter to the next, from one object to another even when remote, without the slightest difficulty."[66] Such a technique, he claims, does not use plot as structure; the novel works because of its slow-moving "orchestrated" themes. Or again, along similar lines, Richard S. Lyons has remarked, in an intensive study of only one chapter of *Middlemarch*, that at a certain point, "plot and character become inseparable, for plot becomes the growth in consciousness by which character is defined."[67] Clearly, then, plot is no simple matter. And by now, it should be obvious that the symbolic approach to plot and texture is not a game of symbol-hunting. Since in *Middlemarch* there is a complicated "correspondence of one plot with another. They are not tenuously related parts, but different versions of the same story,"[68] it is not stretching the concept of symbolic action to call each plot a symbolic representation of the other, and all four symbolic of an overall consciousness.

Mr. Friedman himself gives us a clue to the full meaning of a form which becomes symbolic, while retaining the appearance of a plot-outline. He asks, "What, then, is a symbol? An image alive with an idea; a fact saturated in value."[69] The surface or "superficial" approach is then a vital part of any critical evaluation which stresses symbolism, since we must emphasize "the dependence of symbol on particular sensation and feeling."[70] Of course, we run the risk of hardening a scene or gesture when we abstract it from its field of expressive meaning, but so we do when we abstract the plot element. The critic's job, however, is made slightly easier in George Eliot's case because of the happy tendency of places and people "quietly and easily" to "gather emotional value and meaning, become charged with natural

[66] "The Architecture of George Eliot's Novels," *Modern Language Quarterly*, 9 (1948), 38.

[67] "The Method of *Middlemarch*," *NCF*, 21 (June, 1966), 38.

[68] Barbara Hardy, *The Novels of George Eliot*, p. 99.

[69] "Imagery: From Sensation to Symbol," p. 40.

[70] Barbara Hardy, "The Surface of the Novel," in *Middlemarch: Critical Approaches to the Novel*, p. 152.

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piety,"[71] when "a given poet's preoccupation with certain settings, situations, and characters will be seen, when viewed in the perspective of his total achievement to act as a symbolic key to his ultimate vision in life, just as his recurrent metaphors, when systematically inspected, will do."[72]

Without wanting to claim that *everything* in *Middlemarch* is symbolic (i. e., not itself), I would like to insist that everything is part of a symbolic action, for "there are *practical* acts, and there are symbolic acts," and "the symbolic act is the dancing of an attitude."[73] Symbolic acts are "representative acts"[74] which only receive their full and most potent force from other acts. George Eliot's symbolic method in *Middlemarch* does more than "reinforce and lend emotional values to other kinds of meaning,"[75] a critical judgment that has become commonplace though none the less popular. Symbolic imagery, in fact, is only part of the total effect which includes plot, character, and so on, and transmutes them into something rich and strange. This totality is so rich, in fact, that one comes away from the novel with a feeling of dangerous frustration; "dangerous" because frustration leads to dogmatism, and the discoveries one had set out to "whisper" freeze into assertions, lose their elastic tentativeness, and thus distort. One retains a sense of the tough delicacy of *Middlemarch* by not shouting; by being satisfied with thoughts and observations which provide, in Frost's definition of poetry, "a temporary stay against confusion."[76]

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[71] Jerome Thale, *The Novels of George Eliot* (New York, 1959), p. 158.
[72] Friedman, "Imagery: From Sensation to Symbol," p. 31.
[73] Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form,* p. 10.
[74] Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form,* p. 25.
[75] Thale, *The Novels of George Eliot,* p. 158.
[76] Mention of poetry reminds me of Charles Olsen's revolutionary program for "Projective Verse," one of the prescriptions for which concerns "the Kinetics of the thing." That is, "the poem must, at all points, be a high-energy construct and, at all points an energy discharge." Stressing "FIELD COMPOSITION," Olsen comes to the conclusion (not unlike the conclusion Darrel Mansell comes to about *Middlemarch*), that "FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT." In other words, form is anything the poem will hold within its field of force. In these essential aesthetic points, *Middlemarch* anticipates an important aesthetic movement of twentieth-century American poetry! See "Projective Verse," in *The New American Poetry,* ed. Donald M. Allen (New York, 1960), pp. 386-97.

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