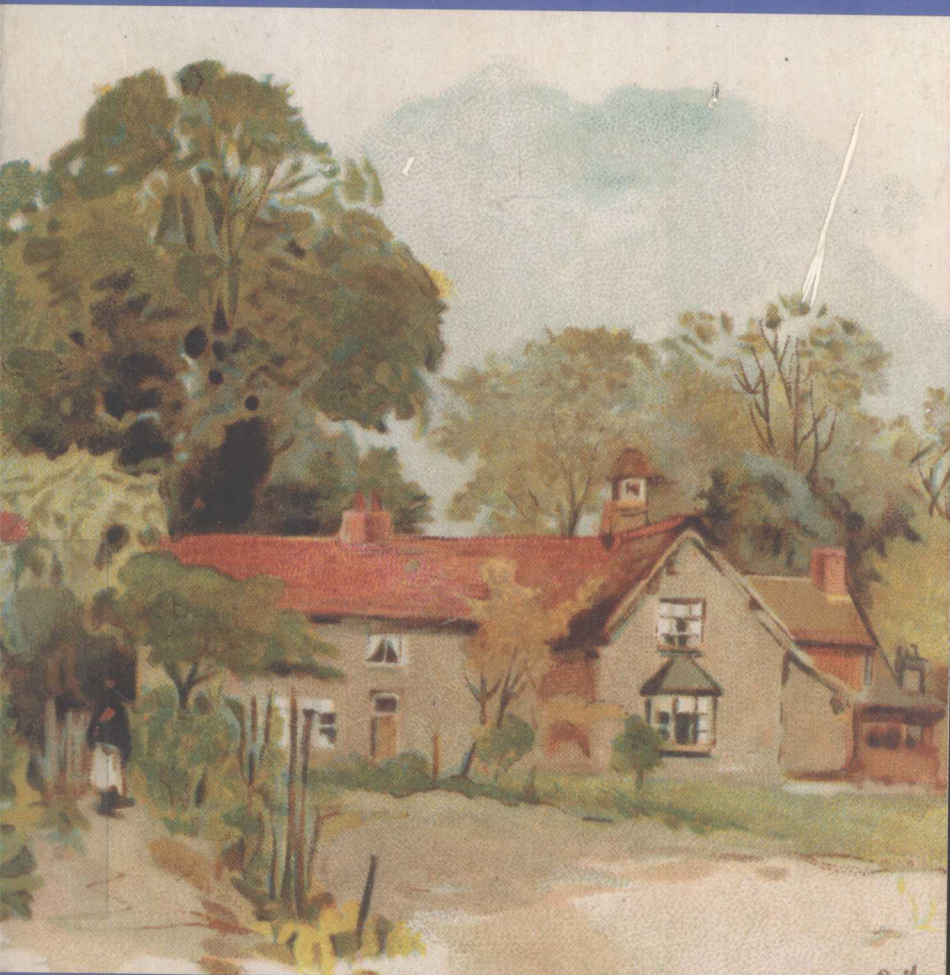


WORDSWORTH CLASSICS

Middlemarch

GEORGE ELIOT



COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED

MIDDLEMARCH

◆

George Eliot

Introduction and Notes by

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WORDS WORTH CLASSICS

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Wordsworth Classics are inexpensive editions designed to appeal to the general reader and students. We commissioned teachers and specialists to write wide ranging, jargon-free introductions and to provide notes that would assist the understanding of our readers rather than interpret the stories for them. In the same spirit, because the pleasures of reading are inseparable from the surprises, secrets and revelations that all narratives contain, we strongly advise you to enjoy this book before turning to the Introduction.

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INTRODUCTION

Among the most impressive achievements of Victorian literature is the large-scale social-anatomy novel, whose main features are a panoramic sweep, from the rich and patrician to the poor and obscure, a set of interwoven plots which connect a variety of socially diverse figures, a keen interest in the subtleties and shifting balances of class relations, a concern with social history, especially the collision between forces of change and of conservatism, and an omniscient narration which combines a critically evaluative overview with intensive focus on selected individual lives. *Middlemarch* is a distinguished instance in a group that includes Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, Dickens's *Bleak House*, Mrs Gaskell's *Wives and Daughters* and Trollope's *The Way We Live Now*.

Middlemarch was not initially so ambitious a conception as the work we now know. Early in 1869 George Eliot began a novel centring on the arrival of an innovative young doctor in a provincial community in the Reform Bill era, but she progressed so slowly with it that six months

later she had got only as far as introducing Lydgate and the Vincy-Featherstone group, especially Fred. This is the matter that was subsequently reworked as Chapters 11-16 of the published novel. By December 1870 she had (in a reprise of her experience in writing *Romola*) become bogged down in her accumulation of research material. Instead of persevering with the 'Middlemarch' story, she began another, called 'Miss Brooke'. This went forward so smoothly that by the end of the year she already had a hundred pages of manuscript, later to form the opening ten chapters of *Middlemarch*, though it was not until some point early in 1871 that she decided to unite the two stories, probably because she saw parallels between the reformist aspirations and marital disappointments of Dorothea and Lydgate. Thereafter, the writing proceeded briskly. In view of the detail and unhurried pace of the 'Miss Brooke' chapters, it is surprising that the author originally envisaged this story as fairly short. However, given that she placed this material at the front of the expanded novel, and that her 'Prelude' alludes much more obviously to Dorothea than to Lydgate, it seems clear that Dorothea had become the central reference point for the whole social analysis.

In May 1871, while the now-enlarged novel was still in progress, G. H. Lewes, with whom George Eliot lived, suggested issuing it not in volumes, since it promised to require more than the customary three, but in parts, into which the fictional matter was now divided, and in accordance with which the material after Book II was more deliberately designed. Between December 1871 (when she was still working on the fourth part) and December 1872 the novel appeared serially in eight separate five-shilling parts, at intervals of two months for the first five and one month for the last three, and a four-volume complete edition followed immediately. The existing 'Books' still correspond to the original parts.¹

Middlemarch was widely reviewed and, though non-professional readers really yearned for a return to the *Adam Bede* pastoral mode, the reception was generally favourable. Frequently praised were the intellectual grasp, the cultural density, the detailed rendering of the social medium, the psychological insight into the major characters and the vivid portraiture of the minor ones.

But there was disagreement over the book's structure and tone: George Eliot's admirer Edith Simcox, writing as 'H. Lawrenny', pointed out thematic links between the careers of Dorothea and

1 Full accounts of the novel's compositional history are given by Beaty and by David Carroll in the Clarendon edition of *Middlemarch*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1986.

Lydgate, whereas Henry James found *Middlemarch* 'a treasure-house of detail but . . . an indifferent whole'. He was, however, impressed by the author's achievement in presenting so unloveable a figure as Casaubon 'with so little of narrow sarcasm and so much of philosophical sympathy', whereas for R. H. Hutton the novel's undoubted greatness was marred by a strain of pessimistic 'melancholy' often sounding 'almost cynical'. Writing while the novel was still appearing serially, he was not referring to its ending (or even its 'Prelude'), but to the authorial commentary, which seemed to him to insist – sometimes almost sneeringly – on the ignoble elements in human nature and on the general hopelessness of life, and also on a supposed correlation between spiritual nobility and unhappiness. Hutton also responded less favourably to what he called the 'parade of scientific and especially physiological knowledge' in *Middlemarch* than did Sidney Colvin, who was more alive both to its thematic appositeness and to its figurative functions. Colvin saw not only that one of the novel's major themes is the impact of modern ideas on a world to which they are still new and alien, but also that the medical terms yield explanatory, illustrative and diagnostic metaphors for 'the spiritual processes of her personages'.²

That *Middlemarch* is indeed a historical novel is of crucial importance for its interpretation. The dramatised action opens on the last day of September 1829 (when George Eliot herself would have been a little under ten), and closes in May 1832, about a month before the final passage of the Reform Bill. It is thus set about forty years back from the actual time of writing, and its context is much more a reconstruction than a product of memory. But why a historical novel, and why focusing on the Reform Bill period?

There are several reasons why a novelist might wish to write a historical novel: for example, to assess the degree and quality of change between 'then' and 'now'. Thus, the sub-title of Scott's *Waverley* was ' 'Tis Sixty Years Since'.³ Again, the setting back of the action can be a way of tracing the beginnings of changes that have now become fully operative and evident to consciousness. Or the novelist might perceive illuminating analogies between two periods, for instance, here, between the first Reform Bill and that of 1868, which had only recently been passed when *Middlemarch* was begun, or between the 'long-haired

2 These reviews are, respectively, from *Academy*, IV, 1 January 1873; *Galaxy*, XV, March 1873; *Spectator*, XLV, 1 June 1872; and *Fortnightly Review*, XIII, 19 January 1873. They are reprinted in Carroll's *Critical Heritage* and also in Hutchinson.

3 That is, since the 1745 Jacobite rebellion – though Scott took so long to complete his novel that it in fact appeared nearly seventy years 'since', in 1814.

artists' (the Nazarenes) of the 1830s and the Pre-Raphaelites of the 1860s. Then there were the successive religious crises of the nineteenth century, the first provoked by the startling geological discoveries announced in the 1830s and 1840s, and by the new German Higher Criticism of the Bible, and the second by Darwinism, which further undermined belief in the literal truth of the scriptures.⁴

The main point is that George Eliot's historical allusions are not a mere case of meticulousness with inert 'background'. The careers of the chief characters, as well as the 'Prelude', suggest that the period is being identified as inaugurating the doubt and religious anxiety that became so notable a feature of the mid-Victorian scene. George Eliot herself strikingly represented its strain of agonised, high-minded agnosticism. A strenuous effort to secularise Christianity and retrieve from it what was still ethically usable is characteristic equally of the works of Thomas Carlyle and of Eliot. The fear was that society would come unglued once it lost not only the assurance of supernatural sanction for moral behaviour (an anxiety which oppresses Maggie Tulliver in *The Mill on the Floss*), but also the communal religious symbols, rituals and traditions that had bound together such communities as the Hayslope of *Adam Bede* or the Raveloe of *Silas Marner*. Readers of George Eliot's earlier fictions had found such 'organic' communities deeply reassuring.

The nineteenth century devoted itself to inventing substitutes for orthodox religion, for fear that society might otherwise disintegrate into materialism, amoralism and selfish individualism – anticipated in the career of Eliot's Tito Melema in *Romola* (1862–3). One proposed substitute was Matthew Arnold's 'Culture', which he defined in *Culture and Anarchy* (1859) as cultivation of the 'best self' through disinterested study of the great literature that constituted 'the best that has been known and thought in the world'. A more popular substitute, vigorously promoted by Carlyle, was the ideal of work, which has various incarnations in George Eliot's fiction, from Adam Bede and Felix Holt to

4 As regards the Higher Criticism, George Eliot is, to a certain extent, anticipating somewhat later developments, as David Strauss's *Das Leben Jesu* appeared in 1835 and George Eliot's translation, *The Life of Jesus*, not until 1846, while Ludwig Feuerbach's *Das Wesen des Christentums* was published in 1841 and George Eliot's translation, *The Essence of Christianity*, in 1854. However, for intellectuals at least, the Higher Criticism was in the air before the major publications, and George Eliot's friend Charles Hennell arrived independently at conclusions similar to those of the German scholars in his *Inquiry Concerning the Origin of Christianity* (1838), which also significantly influenced her. Casaubon's approach is, beside these, archaic.

Caleb Garth in *Middlemarch*. An illuminating source to consult here would be Ford Madox Brown's picture 'Work', exhibited in 1865, for which Brown wrote a commentary which encapsulates the 'work' gospel. Work is elevated as a quasi-spiritual calling and a fulfilment of the whole person. It involves the idea of duty and of appropriate use of (unequal) talents. The ideology was powerful in mid-Victorian England because it offered a validation of class-duties, as opposed to class-rights, and seemed to justify even the most arduous physical labour as a contribution to the social whole. Division of labour was (in principle) an aspect of organicism because it replicated that simultaneous specialisation and interdependence of parts that constituted the individual body (cf. the account in Chapter 15 of Lydgate's researches into the 'primitive tissue' from which, he hypothesises, the different organs co-operatively evolve). However, it was not easy to see the positive side of a fourteen-hour day of low-paid factory labour; and women were a problem: should they be regarded as exempted from work, or as having a special gender-function (both lesser and greater than 'work') centring on motherhood and selfless nurturing charity? In any case, girls and women of the poorer classes were, more often than not, wage workers.

There were several endeavours to invent full-blown, God-free, socialistic 'religions': Lydgate himself, we learn in Chapter 15, has been unimpressed in Paris by the Saint Simonians (followers of the Comte de Saint Simon, who died in 1825), but George Eliot was herself interested in a similar movement founded by another Frenchman, Auguste Comte (1798-1857).⁵ Such influences helped to forge her own humanistic creed of duty and sympathy, towards which so many of her heroines finally gravitate.

In *Middlemarch*, Dorothea, Ladislaw and Casaubon conspicuously lack a belief-system, though only Dorothea is actively in quest of one. Ladislaw is born too late to subscribe to any of the Romantic 'religions', whether Wordsworthian nature worship or Blake's or Keats's religion of art. By 1830 all the second-generation Romantics were dead, and Wordsworth survived as a man of sixty, long since converted from his early unorthodoxy and revolutionary ardour. ('Ardour' is a key term in the presentation of both Dorothea and Lydgate.) Unable to devote himself singlemindedly to art, Will reveals a strong tendency to make Dorothea herself the focus of a private cult. (Chapters 19 and 22 suggest its lineaments and perhaps it is only the softer side of that nineteenth-century Madonna-worship, also promulgated by Comte, which put women on a pedestal, out of the way.)

5 A useful introduction to Comte's ideas can be found in Willey.

The significantly named Farebrother, for want of a more urgent faith, has turned his vocation, in a very modern way, into a role as friendly parish adviser and informal social worker, while Casaubon, lacking even this, has retreated into comparative mythology. George Eliot is, of course, far from suggesting that this is *per se* an arid study: the problem is that Casaubon has neither a living literal faith, nor the kind of comprehensive imagination and 'scientific' understanding of signs and codes to enable him to apprehend Christianity as a symbol-system still capable of offering powerful spiritual and psychological truths. That, for George Eliot, was the great if melancholy achievement of Strauss and Feuerbach. In the 1830s the Higher Criticism is just about to set about demolishing the Hebreo-Christian tradition as a literal creed, whilst defending it as a body of figurative insights. Briefly, Feuerbach's 'God' is a symbolic projection (though not recognised as such by his worshippers) of what is most admirable in humanity. This is a conclusion partly anticipated by Blake ('Thou art a man, God is no more, / Thine own humanity learn to adore') and indeed by George Eliot's friend Charles Hennell. But Casaubon clings to his unhistorical notion of the dependence of pagan myth on Hebraic.

It is, significantly, the Romantics, European and English, whom George Eliot credits with laying the groundwork for decoding religious symbol-systems. This is part of the force of her remarks in the opening paragraph of Chapter 19 on the interpretative errors made by certain earlier critics of Christian art, and on the 'leavening' influence of Romanticism.

Only the young Lydgate has a satisfactory substitute for religion in his medical vocation, and he could be seen as suggesting the beginnings of a new age of 'knowledge' which might (the 'Prelude' would like to think) ultimately serve some of the same functions as the dying religious belief. Ideally, such an age would absorb and implement, if at a much lower spiritual level, some of the visions of Romanticism. What was best in Romanticism would doubtless be the idea of human brotherhood, but implementable in a scientific and positivistic way in efforts to improve the lot of the lowly through practical advances in sanitation, medicine and all the other sciences that medicine represents in *Middlemarch*. Equally importantly, there is the Romantic respect for childhood (not least as the seed-time of adulthood), and Romanticism's high valuation of that imagination which begets both a penetrative sympathy for others and an insight into the symbols and rituals through which individuals and societies express their spiritual being. But a progress from egoism to empathy (and Romantics were hardly exempt from egoism) is achieved only by the few in *Middlemarch*.

Of course Lydgate, with his 'spots of commonness', cannot represent all this. Nevertheless his medical vocation in some important respects meets the sort of desire felt by Dorothea for 'a binding theory which could . . . give the remotest sources of knowledge some bearing on her actions' – actions that will be 'at once rational and ardent' (Chapter 10, p. 71). Medicine unites a theoretical element (represented by Lydgate's research) and an applied, practical element (his activities as a doctor). It thus, in its way, brings together the abstract and the concrete, the general and the individual, the whole and the parts, reason and feeling. Such a union had been precisely the aspiration of the Romantics, especially in their theories of the symbol. It is, of course, the lack of the 'feeling' element that makes Bulstrode's Providentialist theory so sterile and damaging, for 'there is no general doctrine which is not capable of eating out our morality if unchecked by the deep-seated habit of direct fellow-feeling with individual fellow-men' (Chapter 61, p. 510).

It is just this combination of comprehensive abstractive grasp with respect for 'the Minute Particulars' (Blake's phrase) which Casaubon lacks in his tendency to be overwhelmed by disparate details, but which George Eliot praised in the philosophers, scientists and social scientists whom she most admired and which she aimed for in her own narration. It constantly shifts between the wider scene and the individual experience; it is full of metaphors, similes, allusions, aphorisms, witticisms and personal appeals designed to persuade the reader to think laterally about topics and fields that might initially seem unconnected, to hold them in multiple perspective, and to find a general significance in the individual case. Consider, for instance, the discussion of Mrs Cadwallader in Chapter 6 (pp. 48–9).

But Dorothea, when the novel opens, is still in quest of 'some lofty conception of the world which might frankly include the parish of Tipton and her own rule of conduct there' (Chapter 1, p. 6). And the tone suggests the potentiality for bathos in the descent from the universal to the particular. Her disappointment with her husband as a source of illumination expresses itself in Rome in the diffuse emotional and spiritual crisis described in Chapter 20 (especially pp. 160–1). The old religious symbols are nearly as unreadable to her as to Casaubon, and she is forced to confront Christianity as possibly just another dead religion, like the religions of Greece or Egypt. She has a dismayed sense of the gap between her own Protestantism (puritan and ascetic as it is) and a more sensuous Catholicism which equally claims to be the essential Christianity. The Holy City, cradle of Christianity, forces on her violently puzzling historical questions: what can be the relation between Michelangelo's Rome and modern Rome? Is there any

continuity between past and present, flesh and spirit? The phantasmagoric imagery and key terms like 'quickenings', 'breathes', 'growing' and 'quick' not only suggest the problem of the relation of knowledge to living feeling, including sexual feeling, but mark this as a kind of spiritual crisis such as Wordsworth had called 'a spot of time' in his own *Prelude*.⁶

The novel must perforce tread carefully in the matter of conveying Dorothea's sexual unfulfilment, but perhaps it is excessively disingenuous about her agnosticism. It never admits that she is not really a Christian, though she would hardly be seeking a 'theory' if she were. Certainly, coming after her statement to Will in Chapter 39 (p. 323), her statement to Lydgate (Ch. 40, p. 409) that the 'truest' Christianity is 'that which takes in the most good of all kinds, and brings in the most people as sharers in it' seems to suggest that she now sees it as a kind of rarefied moral Utilitarianism ('the greatest happiness of the greatest number'). It is, incidentally, one of the many ironies of the book that, as Casaubon's widow, Dorothea now has an Anglican rectorship in her gift.

Evidently, then, it would be mistaken to pass over the historical elements in *Middlemarch* as mere 'background'. The novel is raising immense questions, already broached in its 'Prelude', about the individual's power of choice and self-direction in the face of defining and constraining socio-historical circumstances. On the immediate and personal level, the ineffectuality of Lydgate and Dorothea is partly a result of their misguided marriages, but the 'Prelude' also speculates that they were born out of their time: Dorothea too late for the age of faith, Lydgate at too early a stage of the age of science. And Dorothea is constrained by her sex and class rather as is Lydgate by his position as 'gentleman'. Both are social anomalies. Further, Lydgate is of an 'old' family while Fred Vincy is a first-generation gentleman, but both men are trammelled by the still-powerful convention that gentlemen don't work and don't demean themselves by cultivating specialist enthusiasms, but do live in a certain style, without concerning themselves about its economic basis. (Madox Brown's commentary on his 'Work' painting had felt it necessary to get it across that brainwork, not mere idleness, is the appropriate sphere of the upper orders.) But the Middlemarchers are baffled and offended by Lydgate's combination of patrician manner

6 Wordsworth's *The Prelude* was a long autobiographical poem first published in 1850, though written half a century earlier. George Eliot's phrase 'The weight of unintelligible Rome' (p. 161) echoes lines in another of Wordsworth's poems, 'Tintern Abbey' (40-1).

and hardworking professionalism, and his motives for refusing to sell the drugs he prescribes are misinterpreted largely for class reasons. Lydgate's money troubles stem not only from Rosamond's social expectations but also from his own unreflecting attitude to his class position.

The historical dimension relates readily to George Eliot's abiding concern with causation, motivation and the nature of choice. All through *Middlemarch*, characters are confronted with choices whose full significance they cannot foresee, or to whose possible reverberations and ramifications they are insufficiently attentive. Lydgate's career, especially, is marked by what prove to be turning-point actions. When he enters the meeting of the Infirmary Board, which is to select the chaplain for the old hospital, neither he nor the reader knows whether he will vote for Tyke or Farebrother (see Chapter 18, especially pp. 148-50). The conflicting motives for supporting one candidate or the other are multifarious and subtle, and among them is Lydgate's anxiety about being misconstrued if he votes for Bulstrode's candidate, Tyke. He does want to remain on good terms with Bulstrode as the chief instrument for realising his project for the new fever hospital, but fears that this may be seen merely as currying favour for the sake of self-advancement. In the end a 'chance' remark determines him: one of the rival GPs sneeringly anticipates that Lydgate will vote as his patron Bulstrode wishes; whereupon Lydgate, instead of taking the more obvious course to demonstrate his independence, promptly votes for Tyke, as a gesture of proud defiance.

An even more superbly handled scene is the one in Chapter 31 (especially pp. 248-50) leading to Lydgate's engagement. He has been warned away from Rosamond by her aunt Bulstrode, and has been avoiding her for ten days. On the eleventh, however, he happens to be given a message from Mrs Vincy at Stone Court to her husband in Middlemarch. As he could have delivered it without calling at the Vincys' house, we can infer that his subconscious motive for going there is a not very attractive curiosity to see how much Rosamond is missing him. In a mixture of arrogance and naïvety, he plans to flirt gracefully with her in such a way as to convey his lack of serious interest in her, but he has not considered how this might affect a woman who may have been expecting a marriage proposal. Rosamond is uncharacteristically discomposed, and drops the 'trivial chain-work' on which she has been feigning to concentrate. As he rises from retrieving it, he sees that she is in tears, and his efforts to comfort her end in engagement. The events are both unpredictable and brilliantly ironic. Rosamond has not intentionally dropped the chain-work, and is

in fact struggling to conceal her discomposure, but the accident is a precipitating circumstance, and she wins him precisely because her tears are (unknown to him) the only piece of spontaneous behaviour she has ever manifested towards him. Nor does he realise that they are a product of mortification and thwarted social ambition, not frustrated love. However, they are more effective than all her most calculated tactics, because they trigger both his remorse and his medical instinct to aid and protect, as well as his stereotyped notions of the ornamental prettiness and compliant weakness of the ideal mate. (He perceives her tearful blue eyes as 'forget-me-nots under the water', an image that might remind us of Mr Casaubon's consultation of the Elizabethan sonneteers as guides to the nature of love and appropriate courtship behaviour.)

In fact this moment of weakness is to be the only one to which Rosamond succumbs in their relationship. Henceforth the woman who figured in his mind no more importantly than 'slight clinging hairs' in 'the more substantial web of his thoughts' will bind him with her 'chain-work' and bend him to her 'yoke', and the 'web' which connects one life with others proves also to be a web that can ensnare and paralyse. Characteristically, in George Eliot's work, it is the noble spirits who are vulnerable and the ignoble who are strong because incapable of imagining the needs and inner life of others. (This may be part of what worried R. H. Hutton in his review.) In this whole 'chain' of events, it is impossible to identify a single decisive factor, or determine the precise contribution of externally determined circumstance, accident, chance, contingency and character. It is equally hard to say whether it is Lydgate's decency or his 'spots of commonness' which are more responsible for his fate.

But wider circumstance and individual lives are also linked more obviously than this in *Middlemarch*, and again it is necessary to return to the historical context. Undoubtedly, George Eliot is trying to link microcosmic provincial politics to national. The vote over the chaplaincy and politicking over the new fever hospital are relatable to national Reform politics. We could refer to Chapter 46, where Lydgate and Ladislaw engage in a political argument turning on men versus measures. Lydgate, perhaps unconsciously riled on returning from a hard day's work to find Will lolling comfortably on his hearthrug, attacks him for promoting the parliamentary candidacy of a man like Brooke. But Lydgate is inconsistent: he seems to want simon-pure statesmen, yet is prepared to accept Bulstrode as an instrument to secure the new fever hospital. And whereas he is sceptical about the 'crying up' of a single or partial reform at the national level as a

'universal cure' (and his choice of metaphor should be noted), he does not seem to feel that the fever hospital will be useless because it cannot cure everything. This is, incidentally, not only a well-engineered dialogue but a rather disinterested inclusion, as we know from *Felix Holt* and numerous other sources that George Eliot held the Lydgate rather than the Ladislaw view of national politics. She seems to have regarded it as a limitation on democracy (or at least on universal suffrage) that it proposed to extend beyond the select few to the many the right to vote in their own interest. She thought political reform inefficacious without personal reform, and was inclined to judge political programmes rather reductively in the light of their proponents' personal characters.

Certainly Brooke is a problematic instrument: he is in significant ways worse than Bulstrode, who at least has a reliable notion of medical reform along with his personal and religious agendas, whereas Brooke is a political idiot. He canvasses as a Reform candidate without actually wanting the Reform Bill, though he seems not altogether to grasp that its purpose is to attack men like him. He admires Burke, the arch-reactionary of the French Revolution era, and wishes, apparently seriously, that Ladislaw could have a pocket borough. Does George Eliot let him off too lightly in adopting a presentational mode close to caricature? Brooke is, after all, not merely a buffoon but a rich landowning member of the ruling class, and his irresponsibility as a landlord is glimpsed in the scene in Chapter 39 in which he visits his wretched tenant Dagley.

The Reform Bill agitation is, beyond this, an active plot agency. It creates, for instance, the unlikely combination of Brooke, Ladislaw, Farebrother and Bulstrode. It was, in fact, the Dissenting and Low-Church commercial interest represented by Bulstrode (and ridiculed as the 'Philistine' class by Matthew Arnold) that most actively promoted the Bill, because it had the most to gain: increased political representation, and a weakening of the Anglican Establishment, represented in this novel by Cadwallader and Casaubon. The latter, indeed, combines the roles of landowning patron of a living, and incumbent of it. Further than this, we might note the train of circumstances whereby the recently bankrupted Caleb Garth gets the stewardship of Freshitt and Tipton because Brooke's parliamentary candidacy begets a need to improve his record as a landlord. This, in turn, after Bulstrode's disgrace, leads to the final settling of Fred at Stone Court after all. Garth is now busy enough to need to delegate its management, and Bulstrode (the purchaser of the estate after Featherstone's death) thus indirectly and incompletely atones for the damage that he has done to his wife's niece's husband by making it

possible for the nephew to redeem himself. Consider, again, the circumstances whereby Farebrother gets the rectorship vacated by Casaubon's death, partly on the recommendation of Lydgate, who has always had a bad conscience over giving his casting vote for Tyke.

Such dynamic interweaving of the Middlemarchers' lives is a remarkable feature of the book, and an aspect of that 'stealthy convergence of human lots' (Chapter 11, p. 78) which is illustrated the most lumberingly in the Raffles part of the plot (interesting as it is in indicating the nature of Bulstrode's secret consciousness), and the most subtly in the more quotidian effects that one character may have upon another. Thus, ironically, it is her husband's egotism rather than his fancied eminence that begins the change in Dorothea.

The Fred and Farebrother developments are hopeful ones, but they cannot counteract the sense of defeat and disappointment generated by the 'Prelude' and, to a lesser extent, the 'Finale'. Dorothea and Lydgate are the obvious cases, but the reformist 'hopefulness' of Ladislaw, too, is to be 'much checked' by the event. Why, when the context so strongly suggests change imminent or accomplished – the railways are coming, the Reform Bill does pass, Jews and Catholics have already been given access to Parliament – does the book seem to insist on ineffectuality? Why, in the century of Wilberforce, Shaftesbury and Florence Nightingale, is the book so sceptical about the possibility of 'heroism' in the modern age?⁷ George Eliot does seem very ambivalent about 'progress': at work in the book are a simultaneous cautious meliorism (belief in the general tendency of things to improve over time) and a sardonically critical attitude towards those shallow moderns who assume that the passage of time has brought only improvement. (See, for instance, the opening of Chapter 19.) Part of the explanation for this ambivalence might lie in George Eliot's particular sort of quasi-zoological social evolutionism, perhaps best elaborated in her 1856 review of W. H. von Riehl's sociological studies of German life.⁸ In this essay, the downside of 'organicism' sounds like an analogue of the political deadlock whereby positive general social change cannot work without individual reform, which in turn is dependent on general social reform. If the medium and the

7 In *Daniel Deronda* (1876), George Eliot was to reconsider the possibility of a modern 'heroic' life, and of an 'organic' society.

8 This review, entitled 'The Natural History of German Life', along with her review of Ruskin's *Modern Painters*, is reprinted in both Ashton and Byatt & Warren. Both essays are vital sources of information on George Eliot's concept of realism, though she only rarely used that term.

individual must evolve together, and the latter must adapt itself to the former, then it is difficult to see where purposive transformative action can be initiated.

This ambivalence is not unconnected with the author's ambivalence over what in the 1850s was to become 'The Woman Question', when the vaguer discontent of a Dorothea had, among early feminists, set into a more specific sense of the social, political, legal, educational and occupational disabilities placed upon women. There are stirrings of active discontent in Mary Garth's younger sister Hetty, but Rosamond is simultaneously defended as the logical product of a particular, historically definable type of education that teaches women to see themselves as dependent and ornamental, and condemned for not absorbing enough of its spirit to dedicate herself uncritically to her husband. And Dorothea is gently mocked for seeing a spouse in the light of a mentor, and then compassionated because Casaubon is an insufficiently awesome object of wifely devotion. It is as if, despite the examples of Farebrother and the later Lydgate, and all the acidulous comments George Eliot makes on men who rely 'on the innate submissiveness of the goose as beautifully corresponding to the strength of the gander' (Chapter 36, p. 293), she continued to associate empathetic unselfishness primarily with women's traditional domestically supportive function.

Perhaps the third area of ambivalence presents a theoretic more than a practical problem. The novel is laden with warnings about the distortive power of individual subjectivity, yet it is related by a narrator whose vision apparently transcends the perceptual and cognitive limitations against which she warns. The famous pier-glass 'parable' that opens Chapter 27 is a comment on the subjective consciousness not only of Rosamond in particular, but also of human beings more generally, who of necessity, it seems, interpret external events in a way that is conditioned by their own angle of vision. This is followed in Chapter 39 by a comment, in connection with Mr Brooke, on how 'even our own persons in the glass are apt to change their aspect for us after we have heard some frank remark on their less admirable points' (pp. 324-5). These comments pursue a line of thought already begun in Chapter 6, apropos Mrs Cadwallader, when it is emphasised that the perceived nature of any object of observation seems to depend on the strength of the lens through which it is viewed. (Such an idea had already been crucial to Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*.) And the quality of the viewing medium depends not only on individual subjectivity but on the cultural codes through which the individual's perceptions are organised and interpreted. As early as *The Mill on the Floss*, George Eliot had

commented on this, in her discussion of the tendency of Tom Tulliver's tutor, Mr Stelling, to see teaching in agricultural terms as a kind of ploughing and harrowing:

. . . it was his favourite metaphor, that the classics and geometry constituted that culture of the mind which prepared it for any subsequent crop . . . I only know it turned out as uncomfortably for Tom as if he had been plied with cheese in order to remedy a gastric weakness which prevented him from digesting it. It is astonishing what a different result one gets by changing the metaphor! Once call the brain an intellectual stomach, and one's ingenious conception of the classics and geometry as ploughs and harrows seems to settle nothing. But then it is open to someone else to follow great authorities, and call the mind a sheet of white paper or a mirror, in which case one's knowledge of the digestive processes becomes quite irrelevant.

A modern George Eliot would doubtless seize on the new dominant analogy of the computer.

All this seems to suggest that the omniscient narrator's function is itself anomalous because objectivity is unattainable and individual viewpoints, like the ideologies of different eras, are relative, not authoritative or definitive. But the book itself is continually reminding the reader that living through the 1830s (or indeed the 1860s) is a quite different experience from surveying them from the hindsight of forty years, and the narrator's own awareness of the limits of vision – she even uses analogy to question the role of analogy – is itself a reassurance that some 'centres of self' are less limiting and more capacious than others. It is, moreover, precisely the possession of a subjectivity which is both introspective and self-critical which makes possible the narrator's exploration of the secret places of her characters' psyches.

In this connection, it is easy to agree with Henry James's high assessment of George Eliot's achievement with unhappy figures such as Casaubon. The opening of Chapter 29 is a particularly brilliant example of a method of analysis which George Eliot made distinctively her own. It is an extensive inside presentation of Casaubon, consisting of an alternation between her own more comprehensive perspective and the subject's narrower one, the latter rendered in a kind of parody of his characteristic idiom. The narrator edits, as it were, Casaubon's scattered and sometimes incompletely formulated thoughts over a period of time, so as to reveal certain patterns of association and anxiety underlying them. At the same time as his ideas of marriage are thereby made to seem funny – he had, for instance, always intended to 'neglect