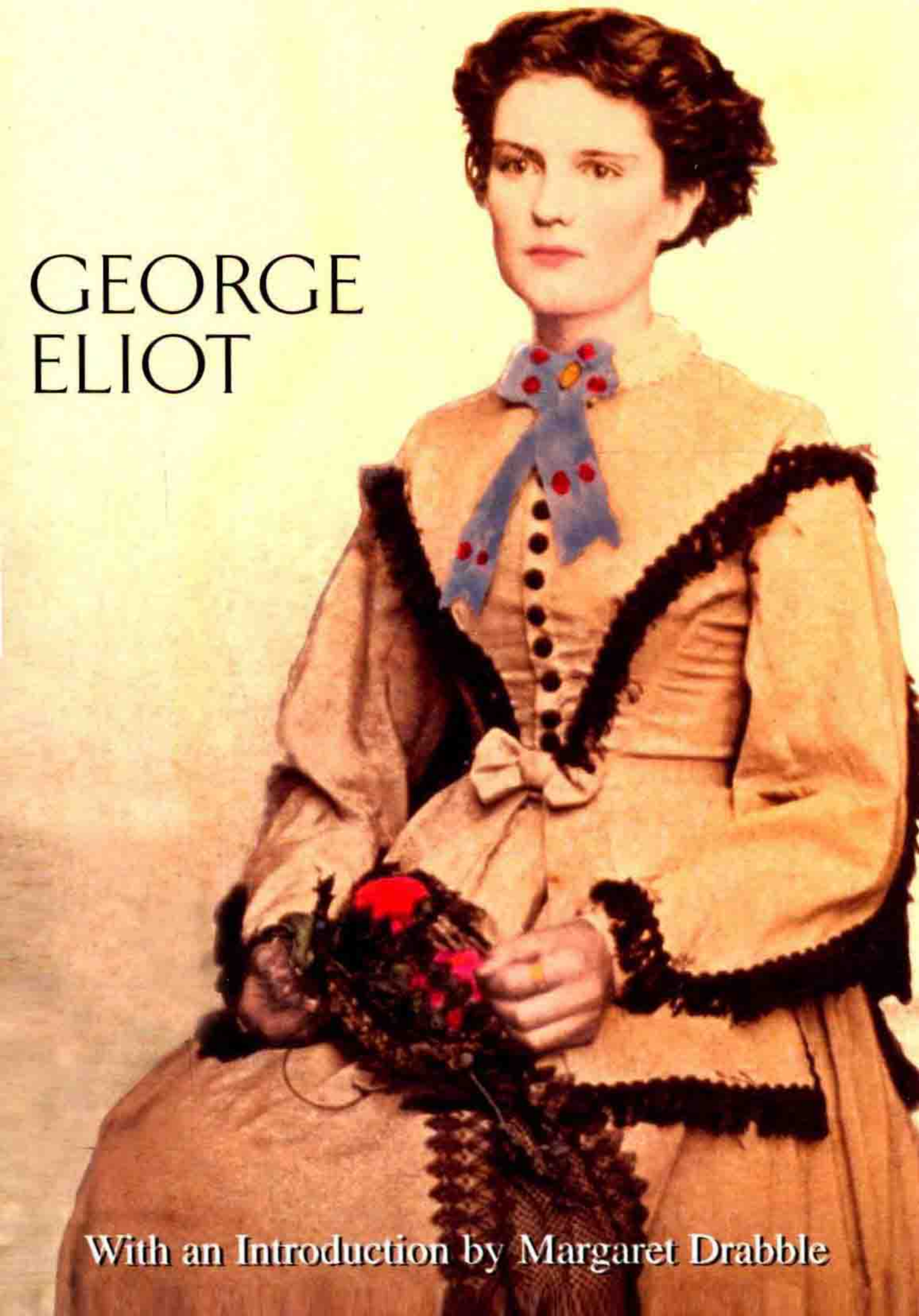
BANTAM CLASSIC

Middlemarch



GEORGE ELIOT

With an Introduction by Margaret Drabble

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and an Afterword and Notes by Jerome Beaty

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A Bantam Book

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GEORGE ELIOT was the pseudonym of Mary Ann Evans, who was born on November 22, 1819, at Chilvers Coton, Warwickshire, England, the last child of an estate agent. During her girlhood and early youth she was piously Evangelical, but her friendship with religious freethinkers in Coventry in the early 1840s reinforced her own growing doubts and led to a break with orthodox religion. She then spent two years translating D. F. Strauss's *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined* (1846), a work that had a profound effect on English rationalism.

Her father died in 1849, and after several months in Geneva, she settled in London. From 1851 to 1854 she served as a writer and editor for the *Westminster Review,* the organ of the radical party, and in 1854, published her translation of Ludwig Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity,* the only one of her books to appear with her own name on the title page. In 1854, too, she began to live with George Henry Lewes, an extraordinary man of letters who wrote on philosophy, science, fiction, and drama, among other things. Though separated from his wife, who had had two sons by another man, Lewes had been unable to obtain a divorce. Evans and Lewes, however, considered their union a permanent commitment; indeed, it lasted until Lewes's death in 1878.

With Lewes's encouragement, Mary Ann Evans wrote her first fictional work, "The Sad Fortunes of Reverend Amos Barton," published in *Blackwood's Magazine* in 1857. It was followed by two more short novels, and the three were published together in 1858 under the pseudonym George Eliot. *Scenes of Clerical Life* was a success, but nothing like the critical and popular success of her first full-length novel, *Adam Bede,* published the next year. This was followed in rapid succession by two more novels set in provincial settings, *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) and *Silas Marner* (1861). The more cosmopolitan historical novel *Romola* appeared in 1863, followed by a political novel, *Felix Holt, the Radical* (1866). Then came her masterpiece, *Middlemarch* (1871–72), followed by her last novel, *Daniel Deronda* (1876).

In 1880 Mary Ann Evans married John Walter Cross. He was forty; she was sixty. Her brother Isaac, who had refused to communicate with her while Lewes was alive, wrote; she was overjoyed. A few months later, on December 22, 1880, she died. Her greatness was recognized by her contemporaries and has been reconfirmed in our time.

INTRODUCTION

by Margaret Drabble

SINCE THE date of its first publication, in 1871–72, *Middlemarch* has been recognized as one of the great English novels, written in what was later to be called "the Great Tradition." Its very title has a confident centrality. *Middlemarch*—there it stands, in the middle of the mainstream of English fiction (yet not without a hint of progress in its second syllable), as the provincial town it portrays stands in the middle of England and English history, in the Midlands that George Eliot had "learned by heart standing between [her] father's knees while he drove leisurely" (page 125). It has a breadth and spaciousness remarkable even for an age of long novels, and its panoramic view of social life remains unsurpassed. It is widely regarded as George Eliot's finest achievement, written when she was at the height of her powers. And if this reputation seems somewhat formidable, one can also remember that a contemporary critic, speaking for those thousands of readers who had eagerly awaited each bimonthly installment in *Blackwood's Magazine*, described it as "a book which may be said, almost without exaggeration, to have made for many persons the chief happiness and interest of the last year" (A. V. Dicey, *The Nation*, January 1873). More than a century later, it is easy to echo this warm recommendation: it is a book one can read, and reread, with no fear of exhausting its riches.

It was the sixth novel of a writer whose career in fiction began relatively late, when she was in her late thirties. George Eliot was born Mary Ann (or Marian) Evans, in 1819, the youngest surviving child of Robert Evans, agent to an estate in Warwickshire, whose profession provided much of the detail for the character of Caleb Garth, the land agent in *Middlemarch*. She was brought up at Griff House, a red brick farmhouse in the village of Chilvers Coton, just outside the small town of Nuneaton, which was itself a few miles from the thriving manufacturing city of Coventry. The whole region is now heavily industrialized and carved up by motorways, but it was then the heart of pastoral England: Henry James was to describe Warwickshire as "the core and centre of the English world; midmost England, unmitigated England . . . the genius of pastoral Britain" (*English Hours*). It was a county of fine trees, fine hedgerows, rich pastures, and vast skies; neither romantic nor dramatic, but, like *Middlemarch* itself, profoundly English.

In several of her novels George Eliot pays tribute to her childhood love for the landscape, which mingled with her devotion to her brother Isaac: *The Mill on the Floss* in particular records her passionate attachment to the immediate neighborhood of Griff House, to the pond where she and Isaac used to fish, to the woods where they played. "We could never have loved the earth so well if we had had no childhood in it. . . . What novelty is worth that sweet monotony where everything is known, and *loved* because it is known? . . . These familiar flowers, these well-remembered bird-notes, this sky with its fitful brightness, these furrowed and grassy fields, each with a sort of personality given to it by the capricious hedgerows—such things as these are the mother tongue of our imagination, the language that is laden with all the subtle associations the fleeting hours of our childhood left behind them" (chapter 5). She also

learned about the land in a more practical sense, for she would accompany her father on his rounds, visiting tenant farmers, chatting to the servants in the big houses on the estate, overhearing tales of mismanagement, gaining even as a child the informed, practical grasp of rural economy so marked in her mature work. Her father, one might note, was neither landowner nor laborer—he was a middleman, a mediator, with access to all classes of rural society, ideally placed to observe the subtle changes of an apparently static community.

It was not, however, a community in which George Eliot chose to remain, although her imagination was to feed upon it, to reexamine it, to reinterpret and re-create it. The imagined idyll of childhood gave way to the disturbances of adolescence, to Evangelical religious fervor followed by a freethinking radicalism, to an intellectual passion and ambition that devoured tomes of theology and philosophy. She studied, after leaving school, to much greater effect than Dorothea Brooke in *Middlemarch*, and in 1846 there appeared (anonymously) her translation from the German of Strauss's highly controversial *The Life of Jesus*. In 1851—both of her parents were dead by this time—she moved to London, where she became a contributor to, then assistant editor of, the much-respected quarterly the *Westminster Review*, and in 1854 she published a translation of another controversial and unorthodox work, Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity*. She moved in progressive intellectual circles, and fell unprogressively in love, first with the flamboyant, handsome philanderer John Chapman, editor of the *Westminster* (who already had a wife and mistress), then with Herbert Spencer, a confirmed bachelor who later hinted that he had not married her because she was not physically attractive enough for him. (The beautiful Beatrice Webb was to make fun of him for this, writing in

her diary (December 27, 1884) that he told her George Eliot's weak point was "physique": " 'I could not have married a woman who had not great physical attraction,' added the withered old philosopher, stretching his bony limbs out . . . his upper lip appearing preternaturally long and his eyes preternaturally small.") Clearly, like Dorothea, George Eliot herself had a certain lack of common sense in the area of emotional attachment: equally clearly, she needed attachment, being as passionately emotional as she was intellectual. In 1854 or thereabouts she fell in love with another married man, the scholar and critic George Henry Lewes, and this time her feelings were returned: she and Lewes were unable to marry, as Lewes had condoned his wife's adultery with journalist Thornton Leigh Hunt, but they set up house together and remained together until Lewes's death in 1878. Lewes was hardly a romantic hero—he was small, pockmarked, "of immense ugliness," according to sharp-tongued Jane Carlyle—but he was highly intelligent, sensitive, witty, good-natured, and patient, and he provided Marian (whom he called Polly, it is cheering to learn) with security, love, and encouragement throughout her creative life. Without him, it is possible that she would never have had the confidence or the time to write as she did: he protected her from intrusion and criticism, he helped with her researches, he negotiated with her publishers, he supported her through periods of depression. It is at least in part thanks to him that Marian Evans became George Eliot. She was not the only successful woman writer of her day, but the particular nature of her achievement—its broad perspectives, its knowledge of the world, its accuracy of detail, its historical sweep—depended on a freedom to concentrate, a freedom to move, and a freedom from domestic obligation that her female contemporaries were denied. Through him, she was

freed from the traditional handicaps of womanhood, and she rose to the challenge of her exceptional opportunity.

Her first work of fiction, three stories collected as *Scenes of Clerical Life*, appeared in 1857, and her first novel, *Adam Bede*, established her, in 1859, as a leading novelist, admired for her realistic portrayal of rural domestic life and for her broad human sympathy. *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), *Silas Marner* (1861), *Romola* (1862–63), and *Felix Holt, the Radical* (1866) followed, and in 1869 she began work on the novel that was to be *Middlemarch*. The section of the plot that concerns Dorothea Brooke was not part of her original plan: Lydgate was to be her central character, in a "Study of Provincial Life" peopled by Vincys, Featherstones, Garths, and other people of the middle walks of life. The work went slowly: she interrupted the flow to study, with characteristic attention to detail, medical encyclopedias and lives of doctors to create an appropriate curriculum vitae for Lydgate, then resumed, then broke off, and towards the end of 1870 broke off completely to start a completely different project—a story called "Miss Brooke." It was not until it occurred to her that the two projects could be combined that she began work on *Middlemarch* again, and then she returned to it with renewed energy. The decision to add the upper reaches of society, in the form of the Brookes, the Chettams, and Casaubon, gave her work an even greater scope, enabling her to cover an extremely wide social range, from bluff Sir James down to Fred Vincy's drinking companions, from highborn, epigrammatic, cheese-paring Mrs. Cadwallader to lowborn, fond, hospitable, handsome Mrs. Vincy, with her pink ribbons flying.

The novel opens in 1829 and covers the years immediately preceding the first Reform Bill of 1832. It is a comprehensive chronicle of a way of life, observed with scientific precision but also with considerable wit. One

does not think of George Eliot primarily as a writer of the comedy of manners, but, like Jane Austen and Rosamond Vincy, she can discern "the faintest aroma of rank," and her eye for social distinctions and social interaction is superb. Take, for example, the somewhat "miscellaneous" dinner party described in chapter 10, in which Mr. Brooke invites to the Grange (and thus introduces to the reader) figures who are to play a large part in the novel—Mayor Vincy, his brother-in-law Bulstrode, the doctor Lydgate. We learn that "Miss Vincy . . . was not of course present; for Mr. Brooke, always objecting to go too far, would not have chosen that his nieces should meet the daughter of a Middlemarch manufacturer, unless it were on a public occasion." A nice distinction to be made by an uncle who, we already know, is not always overprotective to those nieces. We learn that Lydgate is of good family, and that Lady Chettam considers this unnecessary—" 'One does not expect it in a practitioner of that kind. For my own part, I like a medical man more on a footing with the servants.' " (page 110)—an observation that reveals more about the changing social role of the doctor in Victorian society than pages of exposition. We learn that Lydgate hardly glances at Miss Brooke, considering her "too earnest," for he is already captivated by the absent beauty, Miss Vincy.

And thus the plot is laid. Rosamond Vincy's social inferiority, which prevents her from meeting Miss Brooke at a dinner, is precisely what attaches her to Lydgate—whose own interests, had he known it, were much closer to Miss Brooke's, but who, like Miss Brooke, fatally lacks the art of discrimination when it comes to choosing a partner fit to further those interests. Rosamond, granddaughter of a publican, knows that she must marry well to secure the social position that a good education has purchased her, knows it by some deep biological instinct: "a stranger was ab-

solutely necessary to Rosamond's social romance, which had always turned on a lover and bridegroom who was not a Middlemarcher, and who had no connections at all like her own" (page 143). Rosamond is shrewd and observant, and knows enough of the world to envy the Miss Brookes when she sees them in public, "notwithstanding their plainness of dress," but the plainness of that dress is something that, good student of manners though she is, she cannot imitate: there is a telling contrast between Dorothea and Rosamond in chapter 43, when Dorothea calls wearing a simple out-of-fashion pelisse of some "thin white woollen stuff" and finds Rosamond in a "pale-blue dress of a fit and fashion so perfect that no dressmaker could look at it without emotion," and wearing also "a controlled self-consciousness of manner which is the expensive substitute for simplicity." The social romance is a deadly game and chooses its own victims: Lydgate is marked down on his first appearance, as the only stranger of fitting rank in Middlemarch to play the role that Rosamond has allotted him.

In designing so large a canvas, George Eliot permits herself a multiplicity of contrasts and combinations, placing each individual in relation to its own group, each group in relation to every other group. Unlike Dickens, she rarely relies on startling conjunctions and coincidences. The main strands of her plot are interwoven with such narrative control that her characters move from one section to another with a natural ease, sustaining the reader's interest by the overlap of their own interests. Not all her principal characters know one another or have cause to meet, but none of the worlds they inhabit is self-contained, and the author, from the superior vantage point of omniscience, can observe points of interaction that the participants themselves may not know. Dorothea, who is unhappily conscious of a sense of isolation from her fellow men, may mix with her

social equals and with her cottagers, but she may not move in the middle ranks of Middlemarch society: she may, however, meet Lydgate, both socially and professionally. Lydgate is married to Rosamond, who may not meet Miss Brooke at dinner. Lydgate moves from his own domestic drama into the drama of his patron Bulstrode, with whom Dorothea's only connection is, as benefactress of the Fever Hospital, financial. Bulstrode, we learn, is mysteriously connected with the socially anomalous young relative of Casaubon, Will Ladislaw. Lydgate is a friend of Farebrother, who admires Mary Garth, who loves Fred Vincy, who is Lydgate's brother-in-law: Mary Garth's father is the agent for Dorothea's land, but Dorothea and Mary do not know one another.

The articulation of the plot, at so many points, through so many possible relationships, is like the web of social life itself (an image that the author herself repeatedly invokes). Several of the characters—Farebrother, Garth, Lydgate—are permitted a kind of professional mobility through the network (Farebrother indeed claims "the clergyman's privilege of disregarding the Middlemarch discrimination of ranks" to defend his own somewhat miscellaneous visiting habits), but others, including, eventually, Lydgate himself, are trapped like flies. No group can afford to ignore any other group. As George Eliot points out, "In watching effects, if only of an electric battery, it is often necessary to change our place and examine a particular mixture or group at some distance from the point where the movement we are interested in was set up." She continues, "The group I am moving towards is Caleb Garth's breakfast-table . . ." (pages 488–89). Despite the fact that her intentions here, as omniscient observer, are benevolent, for she is about to present a few hundred pounds a year to Caleb, as an indirect result of Mr. Brooke's having got himself mixed up in politics, one

nevertheless as a reader feels a certain chill at the inexorable, unobserved power of her approach on the unsuspecting Garths: must a web house a spider? Can a narrator merely observe?

On one or two occasions, George Eliot chooses to shock us by displaying the rents in the social fabric. One such occasion occurs in chapter 34, when many of the strands are brought together, but only to emphasize the distances that separate them. Old Featherstone, who had held together the first half of the Fred Vincy–Mary Garth story, has died, and Mrs. Cadwallader summons Dorothea to watch the funeral (at which her own husband is officiating) from an upper window at Lowick. Mrs. Cadwallader is motivated by curiosity: she sees the local people as "collections of strange animals . . . 'Your rich Lowick farmers are as curious as any buffaloes or bisons. . . .' " It comes as something of a surprise to learn that, although she recognizes Lydgate in the congregation, she does not know Mrs. Vincy or Fred—" 'a good-looking woman, and the fair young man must be her son' "—when we, permitted as readers to cross all barriers, have come to know them intimately: how can she not have met them, we wonder, slightly indignant that she should speak of them so indifferently. (It is a fine touch that the unnoticeable Mary Garth is—not noticed.) Dorothea is perturbed by the scene and by the sense of a life from which she is excluded, and she comments " 'It seems to me we know nothing of our neighbours, unless they are cottagers. One is constantly wondering what sort of lives other people lead. . . .' " George Eliot's own comment is sociological: "The country gentry of old time lived in a rarefied social air: dotted apart on their stations up the mountain they looked down with imperfect discrimination on the belts of thicker life below." To sharpen that discrimination, and thereby to understand more fully, is one of her aims as a

writer. The observing of the funeral is in fact a formative moment in Dorothea's own understanding of her predicament, and not only because Ladislaw is suddenly revealed among the mourners: it brings home to her her isolation from her own kind and suggests the possibility of the resolution in which she becomes "a part of the involuntary, palpitating life" that moves around her.

The addition of Dorothea to the "study of provincial life" not only broadened the social canvas: it also, and this has been thought a mixed blessing, gave George Eliot a point of emotional identification in the novel. She was not tempted to identify with Rosamond, or Bulstrode, or even overmuch with Lydgate, whose distresses she catalogues with scientific objectivity, but Dorothea was another matter. Ever since F. R. Leavis's masterly analysis of her work in *The Great Tradition* (1948), it has been largely agreed that Eliot's chief fault as a novelist lies not, as was once assumed, in her intellectuality and didacticism—her echoes, as James put it, of "Messrs. Darwin and Huxley"—but in the "day-dreaming self-indulgence" of her idealizing portraits of yearning spirituality in such characters as Maggie Tulliver, Romola, and Dorothea—characters seen, as Leavis argues, without perspective or self-knowledge and created to fulfill the author's own yearning after goodness and, more lamentably, beauty. It would be hard to deny that Dorothea is portrayed as impossibly beautiful, as Ariadne, Antigone, Saint Theresa, and the Virgin Mary rolled into one, and that she offers more temptations to her creator than Rosamond, whose beauty, brilliantly placed, is entirely real—just as her pale blue dress is a much more fully realized garment than Dorothea's, which "always seemed to have been lately washed, and to smell of the sweet hedges" (page 530). With all the other characters in the

novel George Eliot was on firm ground; with Dorothea, and Dorothea's projection, Ladislaw, she sometimes stumbles.

This is not, however, to argue that the novel would have profited from her absence. It is only in certain areas of her experience that the tone falters, and even those are not as many, I would suggest, as is sometimes assumed. It is generally agreed that Dorothea's marriage to Casaubon is admirably handled, and her motives for embarking on it plausibly portrayed. Her gradual realization that Casaubon's mind consists not of "large vistas and wide fresh air" but of "ante-rooms and winding passages which seemed to lead nowhither," her contempt which changes to pity when she realizes that his "Key to all Mythologies" can never be completed, her desire to please and fear of rebuff, the "mental shiver" she develops when listening to him—all this is finely done, as is Casaubon's irritable response to her too-eager attentiveness. Brilliantly suggested, too, is the nature of their sexual relationship: disaster is early foreshadowed, in chapter 7, in imagery that hints even more strongly at Casaubon's probable impotence than the crude and hostile reactions of Celia and Sir James: "he determined to abandon himself to the stream of feeling, and perhaps was surprised to find what an exceedingly shallow rill it was. As in droughty regions baptism by immersion could only be performed symbolically, so Mr. Casaubon found that sprinkling was the utmost approach to a plunge which his stream would afford him." After this, it is no surprise to find the honeymoon in Rome an ordeal, an imagined voyage that ends in a "shrimp-pool" or an "enclosed basin," that both are glad to conclude. On their return home, the imagery powerfully suggests Dorothea's continuing virginity: she arrives at Lowick in the snow, and in her old-fashioned blue-green boudoir "the stag in the tapestry looked more like a ghost in his ghostly blue-green world. . . . Her blooming

full-pulsed youth stood there in a moral imprisonment which made itself one with the chill, colourless, narrowed landscape, with the shrunken furniture, the never-read books, and the ghostly stag in a pale fantastic world that seemed to be vanishing from the daylight" (chapter 28). Celia's innocent inquiries about wedding journeys draw from George Eliot the devastatingly discreet comment: "No one would ever know what [Dorothea] thought of a wedding journey to Rome," and there is a deep pathos in her realization that Celia's imminent marriage "seemed more serious than it used to do." Later, there are references to her own marriage as "a perpetual struggle of energy with fear": Will refers to her as "a virgin sacrifice."

Most chilling of all, because the least melodramatic, is the moment when Casaubon is advised to work less hard, for his health's sake, and Mr. Brooke urges: " 'Get Dorothea to play back-gammon with you in the evenings. And shuttlecock, now—I don't know a finer game than shuttlecock for the daytime. I remember it all the fashion. . . . Or get Dorothea to read you light things, Smollett—*Roderick Random, Humphry Clinker:* they are a little broad, but she may read anything now she's married, you know" (page 351). The unintentional cut of the last sentence, delivered to a woman who may be doomed by marriage to sexual inexperience for life, is very telling and makes one wonder precisely how ignorant, or innocent, in her premarried state, George Eliot had intended Dorothea to be.

The novel is certainly, on one level, the near-tragedy of an ignorant young woman with "a young and noble impulse struggling amidst the conditions of an imperfect social state"—a comment in the finale (pages 1025–26) that prompted some critics to comment that it was not so much "the petty medium of Middlemarch" that was to blame, but Dorothea herself. Most critics find it easy enough to under-

stand her motives, however misguided and ill-informed she was in marrying Casaubon; what they cannot forgive is that she should then turn to Will Ladislaw, apparently with the author's approval.

Ladislaw, as a character, as a hero, and as the object of Dorothea's affections, has been found wanting, and it is true that comparisons to Ariel and Shelley do not bode well, and that his unsettled, vaguely artistic purposes might annoy less severe judges than Mr. Casaubon. However, to be unsatisfactory as a character is not to be unreal, and Ladislaw is perhaps more plausible and more firmly drawn than has been generally allowed. George Eliot may certainly have recognized that a woman like Dorothea, having made one mistaken match, might well, on different grounds but from a similarly impulsive nature, make another—on the rebound, as one might now say. This is the point of view of her relatives, and it is given some weight. In marrying Ladislaw, we are not necessarily to suppose that Dorothea has matured from the young woman who, a few chapters earlier, shouts at her sister " 'As if I wanted a husband! . . . I only want not to have my feelings checked at every turn,' " and then bursts into angry tears. And we are not necessarily to suppose that, in marrying Dorothea, Ladislaw has matured from the irresolute young man who flirts with art and poetry, with opium and Mrs. Lydgate, with accepting or not accepting money from Bulstrode, with Utopian projects in the Far West. In short, George Eliot is not proposing the spectacle of an ideal union between two finely matched souls, but the much more commonplace conclusion of two highly sexed, highly attractive young people, drawn together all the more strongly because a taboo has been placed on their relationship, who decide that they can survive, not on water and a crust, but on seven hundred a year and Ladislaw's income. Perhaps there is a touch of bathos