





George Eliot was 50 years old when she began writing *Middlemarch*, which progressed slowly, partly because the son of her companion, George Henry Lewes, was dying from tuberculosis during the first months of composition. Published first in eight installments during 1872, the novel won immediate popularity and has remained popular ever since, ardently praised by other writers, including Emily Dickinson and Virginia Woolf, as well as by less specialized readers. I read *Middlemarch* for the second time only a few months after my first encounter with it, and I have subsequently read it many times more. I single it out as an important influence on my academic career because its power over me has continued to enlarge throughout my adult life, taking different form in every new reading. To focus on a passage that caught my attention from the beginning and that continues to seem crucial to me will enable me at least to suggest shapes that my understanding has taken and why they matter to my endeavors as teacher and writer about literature.

One of the narrator's many metaphorical interventions, the sequence that first attracted my puzzled contemplation at fifteen turned on the grotesque and unexpected image of the world as an udder. "We are all of us born in moral stupidity, taking the world as an udder to feed our supreme selves." I thought I understood the point of the sentence: everyone is an egomaniac. I even understood that Eliot had made the issue of self-absorption central to the novel. But why that peculiar figure of the udder? It's impossible to visualize the world as an udder and difficult to imagine the sense in which "we . . . all" use it thus or just what vital fluid "we" expect from the world. In my first reading, I left the sentence as an enigma. Yet it had begun its influence: it remained in my mind.

toward publication. Dorothea responds angrily, and the newlyweds leave their quarrel unresolved when Casaubon departs for a day of research.

At his return, Dorothea apologizes for “speaking so hastily” and declares herself wrong, because “I fear I hurt you and made the day more burdensome.” She does not apologize for what she has said, only for its possible effect. Casaubon responds, quietly, “I am glad that you feel that, my dear.” He does not explicitly accept her apology, and “there was still an uneasy feeling in his eyes as he looked at her.” The reader must interpret what has not been said, as well as the actual utterances, wondering, and perhaps tentatively deciding, why Casaubon continues to feel uneasy.

In a first reading—particularly the first reading of a teenager—it is easy to attribute Casaubon’s uneasiness to his inability to endure the slightest shadow of criticism, and to conclude that this sensitivity stems from the man’s moral insufficiencies. Our sympathy readily goes out to Dorothea, attractive, admirable, trying hard, and only a teenager herself. Later readings, however, complicate the matter—partly because of the retroactive effect of the latter sentence. Even in my first reading, I think, I believed (as I still believe) that Dorothea fails to apologize for the substance, as opposed to the effect, of what she has said because her commitment to truth equals her commitment to the marriage. She indeed suspects that Casaubon’s failure to publish significant results from his prolonged, massive note-taking signals timidity about exposing his work to public view. (Casaubon has been a nightmare figure for many academics, with his combination of im-

term. *Middle age* does not concern itself directly with literary responsibility, yet its treatment of its characters' moral dilemmas has illuminated for me what such a concept entails.

In the passage we have been pondering, another paragraph intervenes between the account of the marital dialogue and the udder sentence. Its elevated tone and abstract language signal an important shift. We move here from particularized narrative to reflective meditation. First we learn that Dorothea (who, as we already know, never speaks again of what has happened) always remembers the episode, and remembers it vividly, in the way "we all remember epochs in our experience when some dear expectation dies, or some new motive is born." That first person plural pronoun, intensified by the "all" that follows it, appears also in the sentence about the udder, emphasizing that the history of Dorothea duplicates in important respects that of every other human being. With that pronoun, the narrator claims to be telling us, her readers, something about ourselves. Expectations die, motives arise, for everyone. Thus our inner worlds, as well as our outer ones, continue to change.

In Dorothea's case, the expectation of emotional response from her husband has died. She sees, indeed, that such an expectation was delusional in the first place: she has "been under a wild illusion." More important than the death, however, is the birth that accompanies it: Dorothea feels "the waking of a presentiment that there might be a sad consciousness in his life which made as great a need on his side as on her own."

So we come to the udder, having been reminded of Casaubon's "uneasy egoism," the cause of his jealousy and of its concealment, and having learned of Dorothea's relinquishment of expectation. We may

expect that the figure, newly considered, will shed light especially on Casaubon, whose "egoism" has more than once been the subject of narratorial comment. Thus, more than 100 pages earlier, the narrator has observed, "Mr. Casaubon, too, was the center of his own world; if he was liable to think that others were providentially made for him, and especially to consider them in the light of their fitness for the author of a *Key to the Mystery*, this trait is not quite alien to us, and, like the other mendicant hopes of mortals, claims some of our pity" (Chapter 7). The comment, with its edge of irony directed at "us," although it lacks the disturbing quality of the apparitional udder, like that udder bears on the human tendency to consider the world (specifically the world of other people) in relation to our own needs and desires.

Yet the immediate context that evokes the udder image concerns not Casaubon, but Dorothea, who has for the first time begun to realize that her husband may feel as needy as she. It is easy to criticize Casaubon for excessive self-concern, since the self in question appears so unattractive. Celia, Dorothea's sister, deplores her brother-in-law's moles and his blinking; the reader can readily see his narrowness of mind and heart and his inadvertent cruelties; Dorothea already realizes that she has married a severely limited man. The reader receives repeated invitations from other characters in the novel to judge Casaubon harshly. In contrast, Dorothea, full of spiritual devotion, yearns to do good. It is correspondingly easy to judge her generously.

But when the narrator observes that we all are born in moral stupidity, that "all" includes Dorothea, who has newly glimpsed the meaning of sharing the moral universe with others. Dorothea is beautiful, innocent, earnest. She doesn't blink all the time, and she has no moles.

She asks eager questions and makes no pedantic observations. Yet her needs do not necessarily exceed her husband's in importance. Although she has early begun to emerge from the universal stupidity, as the narrator tells us, it is easier for her

kind of human sacrifice to an unworthy man. Perhaps the rest of *Middlemarch* will explore the consequences of willed self-sacrifice.

The issues raised in the scene between Dorothea and her husband, particularly those articulated in the final paragraph, which introduces the figure of the udder, reverberate throughout the novel and delineate several of its central concerns. All conclusions are subject to change: what I think I know after pondering a paragraph or a page frequently turns into quite a different judgment as the narrator reveals more. The sequence of different judgments generates the process of enlightenment that one experiences in reading.

Having read only to the scene where Dorothea realizes her husband's independent needs, we still have much to learn about the intricate structure of moral possibility that Eliot creates. Already, though, the novel has established some imperatives for adequate reading. Most obviously, it has reinforced the urgency of paying attention—in the first instance, paying attention to words. By means of strategic recurrences of key terms, provocative metaphors (like that udder), and radical shifts in diction (not only from one character to another, but, strikingly, in the narrator's discourse), Eliot urges us to be puzzled or excited or engaged or repelled. Her uses of language often call attention to themselves.

Thus, in the middle of the brief, but momentous, conversation between Dorothea and Casaubon, an odd sentence occurs. Dorothea has just asked for reassurance, inquiring whether her husband really forgives her. A "quick sob" attends her question. The narrator comments that she needs some manifestation of feeling so badly that "she was ready to exaggerate her own fault." Then comes the strange sentence: "Would not love see returning pen-

itence afar off, and fall on its neck and kiss it?" The strangeness comes first from the shift in tone. This question essentially rephrases the point of the preceding observation about Dorothea's need for emotional response from her husband. But its phrasing belongs to a different linguistic universe from its predecessor. The sentence about Dorothea's willingness to exaggerate her own fault is personal and specific. The question about love and penitence employs personifications—"love" seeing in the distance "penitence" returning from somewhere (where? why?) and greeting him or her (but the text says "its") with an enthusiastic kiss. The phrasing of the question sounds vaguely antiquated ("afar off"), possibly biblical. Is it intended to dignify, or to universalize, the marital exchange? To evoke the narrator's generalizing perspective? The substance of the sentence belongs to Dorothea's consciousness, but the language does not appear to emanate from Dorothea. Does it create a pause in the narrative flow to draw the reader's attention to the significance of Dorothea's need? We can only wonder, trying out possibilities.

Such moments abound in this dense novel, always demanding and rewarding attention, never quite yielding up their full meaning. The poet John Keats, in a letter to his brothers, George and Thomas (21 December 1817), spoke of a quality he called "negative capability": "when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason." *Middlemarch* often encourages such a state, making its reader aware of possibilities and of the impossibility of deciding among them all. In creating such awareness, it compels us to think about how language works. It thus provided for me early instruction in the discipline of attentiveness. As one who gobbled stories for the sake of story, I needed to slow down, to recognize action







demands of one ego collide with those of another. How can we imagine resolution for such a clash?

Dorothea's husband dies, leaving her a large sum of money on the humiliating condition that she not marry Will Ladislaw. Meanwhile, around Dorothea various love relations have bloomed and faded. Fred Vincy, under the tutelage of Mary Garth's father, has made himself worthy of Mary, and she has accepted him. Lydgate has come to realize his wife's relentless self-concern and the degree of unwitting sacrifice he has made for his marriage. Dorothea, compelled by erotic feeling and by romantic fantasy, agrees to marry Will, giving up Casaubon's wealth, which she has felt as a burden. She bears children, and she lives a life "filled with emotion, and . . . filled also with a beneficent activity which she had not the doubtful pains of discovering and marking out for herself" ("Finale"). That activity centers on caring for children and husband and helping Will, who, despite his earlier fecklessness, has become "an ardent public man," and finally a Member of Parliament.

In the last paragraph of *Middlemarch*, the narrator groups Dorothea's two marriages as "determining acts of her life" and characterizes both as "not ideally beautiful." Her marital choices differ from each other in many respects, most notably in the erotic component of the match with Will, in his initial lack of vocation (as opposed to Casaubon's claim of a high calling), and in the emotional responsiveness he supplies. The novel's concluding comments make Dorothea's happiness apparent, yet a rueful tone dominates. Happy and pro-

consistently subordinates himself, by acts of will, to others.

Recalling that Dorothea's realization of another's consciousness, the needs of another ego, involved "an idea wrought back to the directness of sense," we may better understand Mr. Farebrother's importance. Like Dorothea's compassion for her disagreeable husband, like her reaching out to Rosamond, like her role of domestic helpmeet, Farebrother's intervention in Fred's life appears to come from an almost instinctual movement of heart and mind. Farebrother embodies the moral position that Dorothea achieves, one far removed from that entailed in taking the world as udder. He accepts the responsibilities inherent in human connectedness. And he is not a woman.

Farebrother and Dorothea demonstrate a crucial moral possibility. Neither is a paragon. We see Dorothea's capacity for self-congratulation even as we witness also her self-castigation. Her initial desire to link herself to an accomplished man has at least as much to do with her yearning to gain from him as with her desire to help. Her need for appreciation sometimes seems to weaken her. Farebrother has more conspicuous weaknesses, indulging in gambling, despite his clerical status, because of his wish to increase his financial resources. Both at their best, however, show that the ego's universal dominance can be set aside, at least for a time, in the service of others.

"Service" is not quite the right word, though. *Middlemarch* concerns itself with community not only in its official social sense (the town as an organized unit) but also in its wider, vaguer meaning designating the social state in which human beings participate by virtue of being hu-

ergy of an action," as she does in relation to Casaubon, who lacks such experience (Chapter 29), she implicitly speaks of vocation. To teach literature, in the classroom and on the page, provides the vividness, ardor, and energy of thought, passion, and action. It also partakes of the moral, inasmuch as it actively seeks to enlighten others about the nature of the

though, from Imlac, who responds to the prince's comment in a deflated tone, but with a reasonable observation. "To be a poet," he remarks, "is indeed very difficult." He fails to remark what the rhap-