

The Power of *Middlemarch*

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Dorothea's eyes followed her husband anxiously, while he sank down wearily at the end of a sofa, and resting his elbow supported his head and looked on the floor. A little flushed, and with bright eyes, she seated herself beside him, and said –

“Forgive me for speaking so hastily to you this morning. I was wrong. I fear I hurt you and made the day more burdensome.”

“I am glad that you feel that, my dear,” said Mr. Casaubon. He spoke quietly and bowed his head a little, but there was still an uneasy feeling in his eyes as he looked at her.

“But you do forgive me?” said Dorothea, with a quick sob. In her need for some manifestation of feeling she was ready to exaggerate her own fault. Would not love see returning penitence afar off, and fall on its neck and kiss it?

“My dear Dorothea – ‘who with repentance is not satisfied, is not of heaven nor earth:’ – you do not think me worthy to be banished by that severe sentence,” said Mr. Casaubon, exerting himself to make a strong statement, and also to smile faintly.

Dorothea was silent, but a tear which had come up with the sob would insist on falling.

“You are excited, my dear. And I also am feeling some unpleasant consequences of too much mental disturbance,” said Mr. Casaubon. In fact, he had it in his thought to tell her that she ought not to have received young Ladislaw in his absence: but he abstained, partly from the sense that it would be ungracious to bring a new complaint in the moment

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of her penitent acknowledgment, partly because he wanted to avoid further agitation of himself by speech, and partly because he was too proud to betray that jealousy of disposition which was not so exhausted on his scholarly compeers that there was none to spare in other directions. There is a sort of jealousy which needs very little fire: it is hardly a passion, but a blight bred in the cloudy, damp despondency of uneasy egoism.

“I think it is time for us to dress,” he added, looking at his watch. They both rose, and there was never any further allusion between them to what had passed on this day.

But Dorothea remembered it to the last with the vividness with which we all remember epochs in our experience when some dear expectation dies, or some new motive is born. Today she had begun to see that she had been under a wild illusion in expecting a response to her feeling from Mr. Casaubon, and she had felt 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.

We are all of us born in moral stupidity, taking the world as an udder to feed our supreme selves: Dorothea had early begun to emerge from that stupidity, but yet it had been easier to her to imagine how she would devote herself to Mr. Casaubon, and become wise and strong in his strength and wisdom, than to conceive with that distinctness which is no longer reflection but feeling – an idea wrought back to the directness of sense, like the solidity of objects – that he had an equivalent centre of self, whence the lights and shadows must always fall with a certain difference.

–George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, Chapter 21

I first read George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* (1872) at around the age of fifteen. From its opening pages on, I knew that it would powerfully affect me. Obsessed in those days with the idea of being *good*, I found the novel thrilling because it initially struck me as offering a model of female goodness in its central character, Dorothea Brooke. Dorothea was noble and spiritual and self-sacrificing. She wanted, I thought, only to devote herself to others. When, occasionally, she had a moment of anger, she promptly repented. I wasn’t much like that myself, except in aspiration. As I now realize, I wanted to be a Victorian heroine, only I was never willing to pay the price in repression and limitation.

Middlemarch was indeed destined to influence me strongly, but it urged me toward more than moral virtue; it helped determine my vocation. I have spent almost sixty adult years pondering imaginative literature. *Reading* imaginative literature provided impetus and shape for such a career. Eliot’s novel helped me to realize – more accurately, to begin a long process of realization – that productive reading demands not only close attention, but also active intellectual and emotional engagement. The intricacies of plot and attitude that mark the mammoth work (more than 800 pages in the closely printed Penguin edition that I read most recently) teach the reader how to read, or at least how to start reading. They also educate that reader about the nature of responsibility, and of vocation.

Middlemarch did not stand alone in this process of teaching, which depended on my reading of numerous imaginative works, each providing new nuances of instruction as it raised individual interpretive problems. I use Eliot’s novel here partly to represent many other novels and their functions in my professional development, but partly as the uniquely powerful construction that it is.

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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 ego-maniac. 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.

When I returned to it, its puzzles multiplied. If we "take" the world as an udder,

are we taking it with our minds, *thinking* the world an udder designed for our use? In that case, our stupidity consists in considering the world what it is not. Or are we imagined as taking in a physical sense, grasping the metaphorical udder? If so, we might be stupid only in believing that we can hold onto it forever. For a time, perhaps, hanging onto the udder actually gives us what we seek. Only after we learn to believe in the fact of other people do we realize that the world must nourish more than us; indeed, that it might not have enough to supply the needs of insatiable ego.

Despite the positive association between udders and milk, this solitary udder has a repellent aspect. Does it belong to some gigantic symbolic cow, or to some yet more monstrous creature? To provide nourishment, it must form part of an animal; and an animal offering milk almost automatically becomes a figure of maternity. Yet no idea of maternity imbues Eliot's representation. The udder doesn't give; "we" take. The sentence suggests not nurturing, but demand. Our moral stupidity appears to produce instant ugliness.

This strange sentence appears toward the end of an episode from Dorothea's honeymoon trip to Rome. Nineteen-year-old Dorothea, burning with spiritual ardor, wishes to devote herself to some great cause. She chooses to marry Edward Casaubon, a clergyman about thirty years older than she, because she imagines him as a source of learning and wisdom and imagines herself as helping him in the composition of his great work, a "key to all mythologies." Even on the wedding trip, actuality fails to match expectation: Casaubon provides no wisdom, and Dorothea can fill no helpful role. The narrated day that ends shortly after the udder comment has begun with Casaubon reproaching his bride for what he takes as a hint that he should proceed more quickly

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 *udder* 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 impossibly large ambition and ridiculously small production.) As her husband fears, Dorothea is already beginning to judge him. She does not give him the uncritical

adoration that he wants. And how could she, how could anyone, adore such a man? Casaubon initially struck me as a villain (not willfully evil, but effectively destructive) and Dorothea as unquestionably a hero. It was easy to take sides.

Easy, but not adequate. Dorothea persists in begging for forgiveness. She sobs as she asks again, in “need for some manifestation of feeling.” She wants love, demonstrated love. She gets an indirect statement of Casaubon’s satisfaction with what she has said, a statement incorporating an erudite quotation and delivered with a “faint smile.” In response, Dorothea says nothing, but a tear falls from her eye. Casaubon suggests that they are both disturbed. He refrains from rebuking her for welcoming his young cousin, Will Ladislav, when her husband was away. The narrator explains Casaubon’s motives for self-restraint: he realizes the ungraciousness of scolding his wife when she has just apologized; he doesn’t want to agitate himself further; and he is too proud to betray his jealousy, “a blight bred in the cloudy, damp despondency of uneasy egoism.” Neither he nor Dorothea ever mentions their exchange again.

This sequence invites psychological interpretation that may advance the reader’s understanding of both participants in the dialogue. Only indirectly, however, does such interpretation contribute to the kind of influence I wish to claim for Eliot’s novel. The detail about Dorothea’s attempt at apology and its aftermath bears on the mysterious sentence about the *udder*, hence on the novel’s moral design; and that design contributes powerfully to the book’s continuing influence on my understanding of literary responsibility.

By “literary responsibility,” I mean the responsibility of one who teaches and writes about literary texts: responsibility to students and to readers and to the texts themselves. “Responsibility” is a moral

term. *Middlemarch* 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 all Mythologies*, 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 to fantasize devotion to a strong, wise mate than to accept the knowledge "that he had an equivalent centre of self, whence the light and shadows must always fall with a certain difference."

This is a complicated piece of knowledge, both in its nature and in its substance. Dorothea needs to, and begins to, conceive her husband's unique selfhood "with that distinctness which is no longer reflection but feeling—an idea wrought back to the directness of sense, like the solidity of objects." *Wrought back to the directness of sense*: the action is difficult to comprehend. The final achievement of thought in moral matters, it seems, is to disappear, transmuted into feeling. Starting with reflection, with theoretical realization that others possess consciousness as pressing as our own, we move to knowledge that feels inevitable and innate. We may kick a stone to prove the solidity, thus the reality, of objects. How do we prove the absolute reality of another consciousness?

But proving is not the problem. The problem is *knowing*, in the way that Dorothea now begins to know. She has not known earlier, and for that ignorance the udder sentence indicts her. Like the rest of us, Dorothea has been born into moral stupidity. Moreover, she has tended to believe in her spiritual/moral superiority to others—to her sister Celia, for example, who, openly concerned with relatively frivolous matters, nonetheless perceives Dorothea's self-deceptions and minor hypocrisies. Dorothea remains a heroic figure, but the novel takes pains to disabuse its readers of the idea I began with, of her as a flawless model of goodness.

The moral insufficiency that Dorothea demonstrates resembles that of every other character that the novel has thus far discussed in some detail; it consists in what Eliot—well before Freud—calls "egoism." As the paragraph we have been considering suggests, egoism involves a failure of the imagination: inability to comprehend imaginatively the feelings or needs of others. Thus Fred Vincy, another *Middlemarch* character, thinks he understands his uncle, but sees in that uncle only the reflection of his own wishes. His sister, Rosamond, fancying herself in love with the young doctor, Lydgate, occupies herself, the narrator tells us, not exactly with Lydgate, but with her relation to him. Lydgate, far more intellectual than Rosamond, understands the young woman no better than she understands him: he thinks only of what he wants her to be. Dorothea has imagined her husband as answering, or failing to answer, her needs, rather than as someone with needs of his own.

The paragraph that describes Dorothea as rising above her egoism provides no clue about what alternative ways of being might substitute for it. Dorothea has yearned to devote herself to a great thinker partly because of her fantasy that she will partake of his wisdom and learn from him what and how to think. Given the melancholy tone of the narrator's summary of the human condition, it seems possible that what now awaits the young bride is utter subordination to a narrow, weak, unfeeling man. Now that she realizes her husband's neediness, must she strive to satisfy his ego at the expense of her own? At this point in the novel, roughly a quarter of the way through, the text has provided no clear models of behavior not centered on self-imagining. Practical-minded folk like Sir James Chettam, Dorothea's sister Celia, and Mrs. Cadwallader already see Dorothea as a

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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 fiction

as not only a texture of action, but also one of language. What could be more obvious than the fact that the life of fiction inheres in words? I tended, however, to treat words as the medium of story – not also as themselves part of story’s meaning. *Middlemarch* revealed to me pleasures concealed in words: pleasures of recognition, discrimination, and surprise.

And pleasure in the figurative resources of common nouns. A few chapters after the udder illuminates the nature of egoism, the novel returns to the same subject with a new figure. Now it invites us to contemplate a pier glass (a tall mirror). The glass, the narrator reminds us, or, alternately, a large surface of polished steel, “will be minutely and multitudinously scratched in all directions; but place now against it a lighted candle as a centre of illumination, and lo! the scratches will seem to arrange themselves in a fine series of concentric circles round that little sun” (Chapter 27). The next sentence insists on the point: the scratches go in all directions; it’s only the candle that “produces the flattering illusion of a concentric arrangement.” Then the narrator names the figure of speech that she is using, calling it a parable, and equating the scratches with events and the candle with “the egoism of any person now absent.” “Now absent” is a little joke: only by remaining on the scene, it appears, can one avoid the danger of being criticized.

The metaphor itself, however, conveys no immediate criticism of anyone at all. The candle, a “little sun,” creates apparent order, as well as warmth and beauty. The “parable” conveys none of the greed or selfishness of the egoism figured by converting the world into an udder to grasp. Maybe this is somehow a good kind of egoism, as opposed to the disagreeable kind that previous allusions have suggested? No: it turns out that the narrator is thinking of Rosamond Vincy, who sees

her brother’s serious illness and his doctor’s serious mistake about it as providential means of bringing her and Lydgate into proximity, and who self-righteously refuses to leave papa and mama when the younger children are sent away because of the danger of infection. She performs this apparent act of self-sacrifice not because of her courage or her devotion to her parents, but because staying with them will enable frequent encounters with Lydgate.

The novel takes its time enforcing full realization of Rosamond’s moral monstrosity, but the seeds of that realization lie in the candle metaphor, despite its benign associations. The figure of the udder that focuses the earlier discussion of egoism applies specifically to “all,” locating the greed and selfishness native to the human animal. Equally specific, the candle image applies to “anyone now absent,” a more limited set. The image applies, however, with special aptness to Rosamond, calling attention to her capacity to make her own actions seem innocent or even virtuous – as when she remains in the house with her contagious brother – although they invariably issue from focused, powerful, unmixed self-interest. Such self-interest indeed, like the candle flame, provides an organizing force, creating a governing pattern for Rosamond’s life. The candle seems to reveal an order previously imperceptible, but that order depends on illusion. It hides a chaos of scratches. Just so with Rosamond, who successfully conceals even from herself the intensity of her altogether selfish purpose.

This truth about Rosamond, as I’ve already suggested, emerges only gradually. The candle metaphor marks an opening stage of emergence. Never merely decorative, metaphor in *Middlemarch* often directs narrative development. To pay attention to it clarifies movements of plot, as well as aspects of character. The novel

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demands attention as well to many other aspects of language: to repetition and variation, to levels of diction, to implications of tone. One must attend also to patterns of action. *Middlemarch* is a good read; it tells several compelling stories, moving among them in unexpected ways. If you don't pay attention, you get lost. You might fail, for example, to notice the parallels, as well as the differentiations, between one story and another. Lydgate marries a frivolous woman (to be sure, a woman deeply serious about her frivolity); Dorothea marries a pedantic, humorless man. Both marriages prove unhappy. Narrative details reveal that their unhappiness issues not only from the problems implicit in characters of opposed nature, but from the similar failings of the young doctor who considers it women's duty to be lovely and soothing and the young woman who yearns to undertake elevated forms of duty. To remain unaware of this fact is to miss crucial subtleties in Eliot's storytelling.

Paying attention, that first imperative of criticism, undergirds literary perception. *Middlemarch* helped teach me a discipline of attention that enabled my own study of literature and that I have tried to inculcate in my students and to demonstrate and encourage by my writing. The point is relatively simple, but the process is complicated. Yet to formulate the novel's influence in this way risks trivializing a profound experience. Yes, *Middlemarch* demanded attentive reading, and its intricacies instructed me in ways of paying attention. But in singling it out as an important influence, I am not primarily thinking about pedagogical or critical techniques. I am responding, rather, to a conviction that this book changed my life and impelled me to want to change other lives.

Much as I admired, from the beginning, Eliot's use of language, what overwhelmed me was the import of that language: the

wisdom of *Middlemarch*. That wisdom issues not from moral pronouncements, but from implications of the novel's linguistic choices as well as its action and structure. The accumulated metaphors, for instance, carry a heavy weight of suggestion. The mysteries of the udder image, lingering in readers' minds, make memorable the ravaging demands of ego, which the characters' patterns of action reiterate in realistic terms. The metaphor of the pier glass not only penetrates the screens of Rosamond's self-construction. It also provides a lasting reminder, useful throughout the book, that things are not necessarily what they seem. Skillful sentences slow down and speed up our course through the novel's intricacies, urging us to reflect on human nature or to indulge in the sheer pleasure of witnessing it in action.

The pattern of action that makes the plot also imparts wisdom. By constructing a fiction around the individual life courses of multiple characters, Eliot creates a moral matrix embodying the possibilities and dangers of connection. The novel's title (like that of Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford*, published two decades earlier) calls attention to its creator's primary concern with the life of a community: not people in isolation, not careers of will triumphant over circumstance or external disaster, but experiences of often inadvertent, often life-changing ways that individuals impinge on one another. Exploring such impingements, *Middlemarch* incrementally defines the nature of universal human responsibility, thus helping to clarify for me the demands of literary responsibility.

The udder image and its context do not receive full clarification until the novel's conclusion. Although Eliot never returns to the odd metaphor itself, the issues raised by it and by the little scene between Dorothea and Casaubon remain at the fiction's heart. The potentially insatiable

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 productive though this heroine becomes, she has had no opportunity to fulfill a public role. She has not achieved sainthood. She remains subordinate to a man, in the eyes of the world, although the man to whom she is helpmeet proves far more satisfying to her than his predecessor.

Contemplating this resolution in relation to the udder metaphor, we might see in it an answer to the conundrum posed by the conflicting needs of insatiable egos. Perhaps the novel suggests that a female ego differs from a male one in its capacity for finding gratification through another. I myself consider Will Ladislaw unappealing, in Eliot's rendition of the character. Through many readings of *Middlemarch*, I declared the book's ending unsatisfactory, though I felt the challenge of the narrator's biting comment: "no one stated exactly what else that was in [Dorothea's] power she ought rather to have done" ("Finale"). Disliking the suggestion that female egos are uniquely suited to self-subordination, I wanted Eliot to work out some nobler resolution for Dorothea's life. But what else that was in her power ought the novelist to have done, given the social circumstances she chose to represent?

Over the years, I have come to believe that the novel's conclusion offers a more comprehensive challenge than I had previously seen. My readiness as a twenty-first-century feminist to see Dorothea as accepting subordination because of her gender does not actually correspond to the implications of *Middlemarch*. The book also represents a self-subordinating male character. The Reverend Camden Farebrother appears rarely in the text, yet he plays a crucial role in the action. In love with Mary Garth, and knowing that Fred Vincy also loves her, he deliberately warns the younger man away from a course by which Fred would lose Mary's respect and any chance of winning her. Farebrother sacrifices his own interest in full awareness that by keeping quiet he might win the opportunity of wooing Mary himself. He has lived a financially stringent and socially narrow life largely because he has long accepted the obligation to care for his mother, his elder sister, and his aunt, all of whom live with him. In short, he

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 human, the linkages that, according to many eighteenth- and nineteenth-century thinkers, naturally bind people to one another. A long tradition asserted the innateness

both of self-love and of human sympathy. *Middlemarch*, with its depiction of how even small human actions impinge on other people in unpredictable and often invisible ways, treats sympathy as a moral achievement rather than an innate virtue, pointedly providing an account of Rosamond Vincy, who appears devoid of the quality (as do two male characters, Featherstone and Raffles).

"Sympathy" comes closer than "service" to characterizing Dorothea's lightly sketched relationship to her second husband and her children. Over the novel's long course, we watch Dorothea develop generous imaginative comprehension of other people's burdens and yearnings. To comprehend in this way, and to act on the comprehension, entails not self-subordination, but self-expansion: the enlargement of understanding, compassion, and imaginative breadth. Like all "realistic" novels, *Middlemarch* concerns ways that people live in a world of other people. Going beyond this common topic, it confronts also the question of how they might live best. Primarily through the figures of Caleb and Mary Garth, Camden Farebrother, and Dorothea, it suggests answers. Everyone needs a vocation: a calling that directs its possessor's attention to some form of action in the world. The world will not supply us with perfect mates or ideal occupations, but it offers abundant opportunities for work and for love, through which we flourish.

A vocation – a form of work embraced for its own sake – is almost by definition a moral calling, best exemplified in *Middlemarch* by Caleb Garth, whose passion for what he calls "business" focuses on a desire to cherish and to improve his physical environment. When the narrator speaks of having "our consciousness rapturously transformed into the vividness of a thought, the ardour of a passion, the en-

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 human, as revealed in the writing of the past and the present.

Teaching is a vocation that supplies space for work and love alike. *Middlemarch* made me want to enable others to duplicate my own profound and joyous experience of the book. To accomplish such an end requires encouraging students and other readers to see that books are indeed in themselves forms of experience – a fact that the young often do not know, and that literary scholars often forget. Representing life in language, novels (to focus on the genre I started with) permit imaginative reenactment not only of the actions of others, but also of the actions’ consequences and the mental and emotional processes that precede, accompany, and follow them. Eighteenth-century literary critics worried about the possibility that young women, imaginatively experiencing the pleasures of romance, might too hastily seek to find equivalent expression in real life. They worried also that sentimental fiction could exhaust a reader’s capacity to feel for others in actuality. They thus took seriously the kind of power I want current readers to acknowledge, and to feel – even though the specific concerns of those earlier critics may seem foolish now.

I have come to believe that the demands implicit in the calling of teacher/scholar parallel the kinds of moral responsibility that Dorothea accepts: to make and reinforce human connections; to imagine and acknowledge and respond to the needs of others; to use her own experience to help recognize and alleviate pressures on her

fellow mortals. For the teacher, responsibility begins in imaginative comprehension of her students and loyalty to the integrity of the literary work. It entails the obligation to emphasize, clarify, and challenge connections between the written record and the life it represents in order to enable students to comprehend literature as language with designs on its readers, words intended to make them think and feel, and to convey a sense of life.

We rise, ideally, from moral stupidity to moral clarity, *Middlemarch* tells us. Moral learning consists in the perception and development of relationships and the experience of their obligations. The study of literature, which renders relationship in all its multitudinous and complicated aspects, contributes to such learning – not by providing precepts; often by making problems of responsibility more perplexing than ever (as when Eliot compels us to ponder that udder).

In Chapters 10 and 11 of Samuel Johnson’s *Rasselas* (1759), Imlac, the wise guide of the young prince, Rasselas, holds forth on the vocation – his own vocation – of writing poetry. The poet, he explains, must study and record the minutiae of nature and of all modes of life. “He must divest himself of the prejudices of his age or country; he must consider right and wrong in their abstracted and invariable state. . . . He must write as the interpreter of nature, and the legislator of mankind, and consider himself as presiding over the thoughts and manners of future generations; as a being superiour to time and place.” Imlac goes on and on, his demands of the poet multiplying until the prince cries out, “Enough! Thou hast convinced me, that no human being can ever be a poet.”

The vocation of teacher, as I have deduced it from *Middlemarch* and as I have described it, sounds almost equally extravagant and impossible. I take comfort,

The Power of "Middlemarch" 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 rhapsodic tone of his prescriptions for the poet has implied: that to be a poet is also exhilarating. Perhaps all vocations, ardently pursued, partake of the impossible and of the exhilarating. *Middlemarch* suggests as much about Dorothea's quest for goodness and Lydgate's efforts (ultimately abandoned) toward scientific discovery. Providing implicit guidance both about what skills and what topics one might teach in presuming to teach literature and about why literature must be taught, the novel reminds us to value the pursuit of the impossible.