This long and anxious dwelling with experience and matter and the fluctuations of individual things, drags down the mind to earth, . . . removing and withdrawing it from the serene tranquility of abstract wisdom, a condition far more heavenly. Now to this I readily assent; and indeed this which they point at as so much to be preferred, is the very thing of all others which I am about. For I am building in the human understanding a true model of the world, such as it is in fact, not such as man’s own reason would have it to be; a thing which cannot be done without a very diligent dissection and anatomy of the world.—Bacon, Novum Organum
Although it has looked before and after, the focus of this history has been two decades, from the late 1830s to the late 1850s. George Eliot figures prominently in this Victorian circle as editor, essayist, and friend. Her most original genius was to be reserved for fiction; but she did not begin to write novels until 1856, at age 36. It has often been remarked that Eliot is unique among Victorian novelists, in the extent to which her artistic career was preceded by an apprenticeship to the seminal intellectual movements of her age. This study provides ample evidence for that assertion. It also adds an important dimension to George Eliot's intellectual biography, filling in the formative associations with Charles Bray's Coventry circle and the London era of the Westminster Review editorship.

Among previous biographical studies of Eliot, Gordon Haight's George Eliot (1968) contains a meticulous account of the facts of her life, but shies away from exploring the ideological contexts of those early years. More recent biographers have ventured into the interpretive realm, most notably, Ruby Redinger in George Eliot: The Emergent Self (1975); but their bias has been toward the emotive side of George Eliot's development. Much recent criticism, psychological or feminist in bias, is similarly slanted towards Eliot's heart rather than her head.1 But the image of the painfully homely provincial spinster, the "Strauss-sick" renegade from Evangelical piety, the young woman editor in a man's world, the sexual heretic cast out from Victorian drawing rooms, must be counterbalanced by a clearer vision of George Eliot as a solidly established member of a Victorian circle of brilliant theoreticians, ambitious synthesizers, and progressive optimists. Much has been made of George Eliot's migraine headaches and her emotional dependence on George Henry Lewes; not enough has been said of her confident and aggressive intellectuality. A clearer understanding of the formative years of Eliot's intellectual development can provide new ways of reading her novels. This finale, a reading of Middlemarch, is intended as a suggestive illustra-
tion of that claim rather than an exhaustive exploration of its possibilities.

In a novel whose characters are so often seeking a vocation, trapped in the wrong vocation, or striving anxiously to fulfill the obligations and potential of the vocation they have chosen, Middlemarch's auctioneer Borthrop Trumbull is uniquely self-satisfied: "Surely among all men whose vocation requires them to exhibit their powers of speech, the happiest is a prosperous provincial auctioneer keenly alive to his own jokes and sensible of his encyclopaedic knowledge." Language is Borthrop Trumbull's medium, and he wields it powerfully. "Being an auctioneer," George Eliot wryly tells her reader, Trumbull "was bound to know the nature of everything" (229); he "would have liked to have the universe under his hammer, feeling that it would go at a higher figure for his recommendation" (442). George Eliot enjoys her own gentle jokes in depicting the Middlemarch auction in chapter 60. Trumbull's remarkable success lies in his endless ability imaginatively to alter his point of view—and thus, that of his customer: "'I have in my hand . . . an ingenious contrivance—a sort of practical rebus, I may call it; here, you see, it looks like an elegant heart-shaped box, portable—for the pocket; there, again, it becomes like a splendid double flower—an ornament for the table; and now'—Mr. Trumbull allowed the flower to fall alarmingly into strings of heart-shaped leaves—'a book of riddles; No less than five hundred printed in a beautiful red'" (443).

The sibylline and sympathetic narrator of Middlemarch poses the "riddles" of human nature in the "heart-shaped leaves" of her novel, mirroring "this mighty volume of events/The world, the universal map of deeds."^3 On one hand the Victorian map of Middlemarch bears resemblance to Trumbull's grandly visionary description of that most Victorian of portrait heroes, the Duke of Wellington: "a [fine] subject—of the modern order, belonging to our own time and epoch." Trumbull, who "knows the nature of everything," knows also the limits of that knowledge; his picture is a subject "the un-
derstanding of man could hardly conceive; angels might, perhaps, but not men, sirs, not men” (443). Yet although the universe may pass under Borthrop Trumbull’s hammer, it does so one particular piece at a time: “Now ladies,” he tells his audience, “this tray contains a very recherchy lot—a collection of trifles for the drawing room table—and trifles make the sum of human things—nothing more important than trifles” (442–43). Under the measuring observation and shaping imagination of its author, George Eliot’s vision of Middlemarch, like Borthrop Trumbull’s of Middlemarch, strives toward angelic understandings with an emphatic insistence on the trifles of which any synthetic “sum” must be made.

Like the auctioneer George Eliot approached this subject “of the modern order” with “encyclopaedical knowledge.” In the Leader in 1850, George Henry Lewes presaged his love for the woman he was to meet a year later when, under his gadfly persona “Vivian,” he excoriated merely “clever women” at the expense of truly wise ones: “The women whose minds are stored with the writings of poets, moralists, and historians, who have thought upon the questions which affect the inner life of man, who have observed and analyzed the passions, watched society, traced the operation of moral laws . . . those women I find to be . . . adored by their humble servant.”

George Eliot was worthy of Lewes’s adoration. In 1949 historian of ideas Basil Willey made the often-quoted observation that “probably no English writer of the time, and certainly no novelist, more fully epitomizes the century; her development is a paradigm, her intellectual biography a graph, of its most decided trend.” George Eliot’s contemporaries were immediately responsive to the distinctively Victorian qualities of Middlemarch: “What she writes is so full of her time,” claimed reviewer Sidney Colvin in the Fortnightly,
deed, the ideas of to-day are certain to be the ideas of to-morrow and the day after, if scientific thought and the positive synthesis are indubitably to rule the world, than any one, it should seem, might speak boldly enough to George Eliot's place. Of course, so much of the Victorian "to-day," its scientific thought and its positive synthesis, has been buried with the cast-off intellectual oddities of another age. Middlemarch has endured because of its timeless human truths rather than its dated ideological underpinnings. But I believe that an appreciation of some of the ways in which it manifests a distinctively contemporary consciousness can both add significantly to our understanding of this literary masterpiece and provide a final epitome of the frame of mind shared by this circle of Victorian intellectuals. Scores of critical treasure-hunters have excavated the encyclopaedic "stratum of conglomerated fragments" this Victorian genius left behind her in the form of letters, essays, and novels. Anna Kitchel's publication of Eliot's "Quarry for Middlemarch" in 1950 and Jerome Beaty's "Middlemarch From Notebook to Novel" a decade later have more recently been followed by publication of the complete Middlemarch notebooks, transcribed and edited, providing ample evidence for the breadth of George Eliot's learning and the minute research at the foundations of this remarkable novel. The previous chapters of my study document many important intellectual sources upon which George Eliot could draw for the topography of her Victorian world. For example, the reader who knows something of magnetism and mesmerism will read passages like the following in a new way: "When Mrs. Casaubon was announced he started up as from an electric shock, and felt a tingling at his finger-ends. . . . every molecule in his body has passed the message of a magic touch. . . . For effective magic is transcendent nature; and who shall measure the subtlety of those touches which convey the quality of soul as well as body?" (285). The relation between innate disposition and external objects, the dilemmas of determinism shared by these Victorians, can illuminate the dialogue between those
two gentlemen of chapter 4's epigraph:

1st Gent. Our deeds are fetters that we forge ourselves.
2nd Gent. Ay, truly: but I think it is the world
That brings the iron. (25)

Dr. Tertius Lydgate, searching for "certain primary webs or tissues, out of which the various organs—brain, heart, lungs, and so on—are compacted" (110) is, of course, a Spencerian transcendental anatomist. And so forth; such a list could be continued at length. Scholarly essays have been written, and remain to be written, on the resonant interweavings of contemporary ideas about determinism, or positivism, or biology, or evolutionary theory, in George Eliot's fiction. Much that I have said in chapters 1 through 4 should stimulate the reader familiar with Eliot's novels.

But source-hunting is not my primary intention here. For surely the whole of this great novel is more than the sum of such particular parts. For each of these thinkers, the details of positivist logic or phrenological dissection or evolutionary embryology were merely the means to a much larger end: the foundations for a Victorian cosmology. Rather than syllogisms or skulls, character and plot were to be George Eliot's data, the particulars in which she would embody her generalizations. "Ideas are often poor ghosts; our sun-filled eyes cannot discern them. . . . But sometimes they are made flesh; . . . they are clothed in a living human soul, with all its conflicts, its faith, and its love. Then their presence is a power," she writes in her first fiction, Scenes of Clerical Life. The incarnation is to be a literal one, as a Victorian sensibility defines its shape in the complex yet coherent human web of Middlemarch society.

II. A VICTORIAN SENSIBILITY: THE POETRY OF THE REAL

The aesthetic faculties are . . . intermediate between the purely moral and the purely intellectual faculties.—Lewes, Comte's Philosophy of the Sciences, 1853.
"Every limit is a beginning as well as an ending," George Eliot opens her "Finale" (607). After eighty-six chapters she ends her narrative with the "great beginning" of marriage; but remember that she also began *Middlemarch* with the marriages of her heroine Dorothea and hero Lydgate, exploding at the outset any conclusive linear myth of happily ever after. On the circumference of the Victorian circle traced by my book, endings similarly return us to beginnings. At the opposite pole of the nineteenth century from Coleridge's *Theory of Life*, George Eliot's *Middlemarch* can be read as a finale that interacts dynamically with Coleridge's prelude to the Victorian age. "Who that cares much to know the history of man, and how the mysterious mixture behaves under the varying experiments of Time, has not dwelt, as least briefly, on the life of Saint Theresa," the novel's "Prelude" begins (3; my emphasis). Thus *Middlemarch* opens: with mystery and experiment, the unknowable and the knowable, inextricably intertwined. In this first paragraph, the narrator's synthesizing sensibility is mirrored in her heroine, Saint Theresa." The glory of Theresa's "epos," her "epic life," is exemplified by her ability to translate passionate emotion—"the rapturous consciousness of life beyond self"—into constructive action—"the reform of a religious order" (3).

By contrast the second and third paragraphs of the three-paragraph "Prelude" present a world without order. In the second Eliot depicts a life spiritually inadequate, one in which modern-day Theresa's lack "coherent social faith" (3). She then goes on, in the third, to mock the equal inadequacy of a simplistically empirical cosmos, those who believe that "the social lot of women might be treated with scientific certitude" (4). The twentieth-century reader might be tempted simply to conclude that Eliot's contemporary men and women, without the centering force of Saint Theresa's Catholic church, are doomed to disorder, "dim lights and tangled circumstances" (3); and that scientific certitude offers little that is really certain to replace the fallen idols of orthodox faith.

But the confident tone of the narrator's opening words, the
ease with which she moves from the mystical to the empirical, cannot be overlooked. The fallible and confused modern-day Theresas must be juxtaposed with Eliot's omniscient narrator, with her much broader view of "the history of man": "With dim lights and tangled circumstance they tried to shape their thought and deed in noble agreement; but after all to common eyes their struggles seemed mere inconsistency and formlessness" (3; my emphasis). These struggles only seem formless. Is not a finer and fuller vision possible to the uncommon eye—the all-seeing "I" of the novelist? This uncommon eye is both intuitive and empirical; it can give clearer shape to spiritual inconsistency and refine simple scientific certitudes into less rigid forms: "Meanwhile the indefiniteness remains, and the limits of variation are really much wider than anyone would imagine" (4). The uncommon eye can contain the polarities of mystery and experiment; it can mediate between the chaos of formlessness and the reductiveness of unrefined structures.

The final words of the "Prelude" describe the failed Saint Theresa of the modern age, "foundress of nothing, whose loving heart-beats and sobs after an unattained goodness . . . are dispersed among hindrances, instead of centering in some long-recognisable deed" (4). As so many critics of Middlemarch have observed, the novel overflows with failed monistic cosmologists, seeking the wrong Key to All Mythologies or the nonexistent Universal Tissue—systems no more valid than phrenology or mesmerism. "I have made up my mind not to run that risk of never attaining a failure," Will Ladislaw tells Dorothea Brooke (165). The unknowable lies at the boundary of the known; but the search for a center must continue. "Difficulties of thought and acceptance of what is without comprehension belong to every system of thinking. The question is to find the least incomplete," George Eliot writes in 1874. Both the novelist and her characters search for what Dorothea Brooke calls "the fullest truth, the least partial good" (151). The uncommon eye persists in seeking the order of the continuous cosmos.

Source-hunting for Middlemarch's models has inspired
small scholarly conflagrations for a century. Where did Eliot get the name Casaubon? Was he a portrait of Mark Pattison? Dr. Brabant? George Henry Lewes? But George Eliot herself answered the question: "When a young friend put the question direct: 'But from whom, then, did you draw Casaubon?' George Eliot, with a humorous solemnity, which was quite in earnest, nevertheless, pointed to her own heart." No novel in the English language can boast a more fully-articulated cast of characters than *Middlemarch*. But the one of George Eliot's creative identity is refracted in the many of a diverse group of fictional individuals.

The first two chapters of the novel introduce two most dissimilar reflections of that narrator who coupled mystery so easily with experiment. In chapter 1 Dorothea Brooke: Dorothea, we quickly learn, is both a religious mystic and a would-be social reformer: "'How very beautiful these gems are!' said Dorothea, under a new current of feeling, as sudden as the gleam. 'It is strange how colours seem to penetrate one, like scent. . . . They look like fragments of heaven'" (10). But a page later, Dorothea switches from "fragments of heaven" to bricks and mortar: "Here, Kitty, come and look at my plan; I shall think I am a great architect, if I have not got incompatible stairs and fireplaces" (11).

This same theme is orchestrated in quite another way in the paragraph that immediately follows Dorothea's architectural outburst, as chapter 2 opens with an abrupt introduction to that "pulpy" (52) proponent of many-sidedness, Dorothea's uncle:

"Sir Humphry Davy?" said Mr. Brooke, over the soup, in his easy smiling way, taking up Sir James Chettam's remark that he was studying Davy's Agricultural Chemistry. "Well, now, Sir Humphry Davy: I dined with him years ago at Cartwright's, and Wordsworth was there too—the poet Wordsworth, you know. Now there was something singular. I was at Cambridge when Wordsworth was there, and I never met him—and I dined with him twenty years afterwards at Cartwright's. There's an oddity in things, now. But Davy was there: and he was a poet too. Or, as I may say, Wordsworth was poet one, and Davy was poet two. That was true in every sense, you know. [11-12]"
It is easy to identify George Eliot with her "ardent, theoretic, and intellectually consequent" heroine (21); but she also shares much with her wise fool Brooke, who "goes into" science, theology, history, and political economy with equal fervor: "Pigeon-holes will not do" (14). "I should learn everything then," says Dorothea (21); Brooke is George Eliot's affectionate parody of the same encyclopaedic impulse, and his amusing ramblings always contain a germ of truth: "I have always been in favor of a little theory: we must have Thought" (13). It is significant that Brooke's first words in the novel are of Sir Humphry Davy and William Wordsworth, "poet one" and "poet two," "in every sense." Art and science, intuitive imagination and empirical observation, are not mutually exclusive. Brooke is a far cry from Goethe or Spinoza!—but he nonetheless speaks to the ideal of the poet-scientist.

Of course Middlemarch has both its own poet-scientist and scientific poet, in Tertius Lydgate and Will Ladislaw. For Lydgate, as for George Henry Lewes, heart and brain are the dual lords of life, both literally and metaphorically. Lydgate's search for a vocation is fulfilled by the "intellectual passion" of his scientific research (107). In a brilliant stroke of imagination on Eliot's part, her scientific hero "kindles" that passion by discovering a passage "on the valves of the heart" in a book on anatomy. It is through the medium of language, a metaphorical leap of the poetic imagination, that Lydgate first becomes a scientist: "He knew that valvae were folding doors, and through this crevice came a sudden light startling him with his first vivid notion of finely-adjusted mechanism in the human frame" (106-7). In The Principles of Success in Literature (1865), George Henry Lewes drew the distinction between the appeal of science to the intellect, and art to the emotions. As might be expected, Lewes quickly goes on to deny any necessary separation of the two processes: "But having recognized the broadly-marked differences, we are called upon to ascertain the underlying resemblances. Logic and Imagination belong equally to both." Likewise, Lydgate's research is "the most perfect interchange between science and art" (108). Like the nonfictional Victorian cosmologist, his methodology em-
phasizes the mutual interaction of general and particular, theory and practice: "The two purposes would illuminate each other: the careful observation and inference which was his daily work . . . would further his thought as an instrument of larger inquiry." The "great idea" and the "arduous practice of his profession" are "twin object[s]" (109). Like Dorothea Brooke, Tertius Lydgate is a would-be architect, who seeks to realize his theory in the concrete world of physical objects: "Living bodies . . . must be regarded as consisting of certain primary webs or tissues, out of which the various organs—brain, heart, lungs, and so on, are compacted, as the various accommodations of a house are built up in various proportions of wood, iron, stone, brick, zinc and the rest" (110; my emphasis). Following Bichat, Lydgate performs minute dissections in his serach for "ultimate facts."

At first glance Will Ladislaw scarcely seems to be a scientist, though he is unmistakably a poet. Will tells Dorothea: "To be a poet is to have a soul so quick to discern that no shade of quality escapes it, and so quick to feel, that discernment is but a hand playing with finely-ordered variety on the chords of emotion—a soul in which knowledge passes instantaneously into feeling, and feeling flashes back as a new organ of knowledge." Although Will does recognize that feeling and knowing work in tandem, something is missing from this scheme, as Dorothea quickly points out: "But you leave out the poems. . . . I think they are wanted to complete the poet" (166). "The true seeing is within," Ladislaw idealistically argues with his painter friend Naumann (142). But Naumann disagrees: he wants "the idealistic in the real" (159). Abstract imagination without concrete realization—the poet without his poems—is only half of the equation.

Will never shows any interest in science, but he does find his ultimate vocation as a politician, becoming "an ardent public man" in later years (610): "He studied the political situation with as ardent an interest as he had ever given to poetic metres" (337). He is "a sort of Burke with a leaven of Shelley," thinks Mr. Brooke in his wonderfully muddled way (366)—but as al-
ways, there is a leaven of truth in Brooke's inspired foolishness. For politics is both Ladislaw's science and his poetry; his way of translating the ideal into the real. Romantic visions are transformed into concrete political proposals (just as Saint Theresa's mysticism led to the reform of a religious order). However skeptical she may be about the details of the political process, George Eliot, setting her novel on the eve of the first reform bill and writing from the vantage-point of the second, knows how profoundly the particular lives of her provincial characters will ultimately be altered by the large evolutionary forces of political and social change in the Victorian era that is immediately to follow Middlemarch. Eliot takes Shelley's "Defense of Poetry" quite literally: her poet is the acknowledged "legislator of mankind." For this Victorian sensibility, the ideal politician would also be the ideal poet, the man of particular legislation and sweeping imaginative vision: a fusion of polar opposites. In this light Mr. Brooke's unlikely marriage of Burke and Shelley takes on more serious meaning as the political defender of tradition and order is counterbalanced by the poetical proponent of revolutionary change.

As critics of Middlemarch have often noted, one of the chief unifying principles of the novel is the way in which characters not directly linked by plot provide thematic contrasts with one another. One such example is illustrated above: Lydgate the scientist—the empiricist who is also a transcendental anatominist; and Ladislaw the poet—the intuitive visionary who deals in practical legislation. Before turning to the ways in which George Eliot embodies a Victorian sensibility in the plot and structure of her novel, let me extend my discussion of character by noting that Ladislaw and Lydgate are only one of the many such polar pairs that interact dynamically upon the mind of the reader: the unassuming brown sparrow Mary Garth and the preening white dove Rosamond Vincy; the open-minded Reverend Camden Farebrother and the zealous Evangelical bigot Bulstrode; the emotionally ossified religious scholar Casaubon with his dusty fragments, and the virile scientific researcher Lydgate with his vital connections; generous-spirited
Dorothea and egotistical Rosamond; male Lydgate who channels his aggressive ambition into an ardent career, female Dorothea who seeks intellectual fulfillment through the submissive hero-worship of marriage; "uncle" Brooke who takes young Ladislaw under his nebulous political patronage, "uncle" Garth who tutors young Fred Vincy in concrete agricultural management; the list could be continued at length. It could be said that George Eliot's characterizations in Middlemarch are a Spencerian combination of individuation and interdependence. Concerned with the "minutiae of mental make" (111) in every character, George Eliot paints a brilliantly individualized portrait of each, yet draws them together in the mind of her reader through the mediums of Middlemarch, a common humanity, and the novelist's philosophy of the one in the many, incarnate in the narrator's vision of a larger whole.

I conclude my discussion of character in Middlemarch with the polar antithesis to Mr. Brooke, Caleb Garth. The contrasts are obvious: Brooke the wealthy landowner and Garth the estate agent stand at opposite poles of Middlemarch's social spectrum; "the Garths were poor," but "did not mind it" (186). Brooke is the most foolish character in the novel, a childish figure benevolently tolerated by his friends and actively mocked by the larger community, but Caleb Garth's wisdom is questioned by none, including his author. Garth's refusal to act as Bulstrode's agent is the coup de grâce to the banker's ruination in Middlemarch. The narrator clearly feels a special affection for Caleb: "(Pardon the details for once—you would have learned to love them if you had known Caleb Garth)," she apologizes to her reader (171). Brooke is lost in airy fancies and half-baked theories; Garth is the consummately practical man: "He was ready to accept any number of systems, like any number of firmaments, if they did not obviously interfere with the best land-drainage, solid building, correct measuring, and judicious boring (for coal)” (185).

Like Dorothea Brooke and Tertius Lydgate, Caleb Garth is a would-be architect. And like them he too meets with setbacks.
The first thing we learn about him is that he "had failed in the building business" (170); yet we catch our first glimpse of Garth, when Fred Vincy comes to confess his financial pecadillos, "absorbed in a plan for Sir James Chettam's new farm-building" (171). Caleb Garth is the most unqualifiedly heroic of Middlemarch's characters—not because of his success (which is minimal) but because of his sensibility, that undaunted striving for "the fullest truth" that incarnates the ideal in the everyday. Caleb's work is also his religion, in the truest sense of that word: "Getting a bit of good contriving and solid building done," he tells his wife, is "a great gift from God" (295). Caleb Garth is a practical empiricist: "A good deal of what I know can only come from experience," he advises Fred Vincy; "you are young enough to lay a foundation yet" (409). But the foundation of Garth's creed is as intuitive as it is rational; he speaks to Fred "with the air of a man who felt himself to be saying something deeply religious" (409). And here, the pragmatic Caleb Garth interacts dynamically with his polar opposite, Mr. Brooke. For Caleb Garth too articulates a vision of the whole; he too is a poet-scientist.

It is not surprising that Dorothea Brooke—who at the outset of Middlemarch stated her desire to "learn everything," so that "there would be nothing trivial about our lives. Everyday-things with us would mean the greatest things" (21)—should four hundred pages later meet up with Garth and experience growing "confidence" in his "knowledge." The beautiful young heiress and the old workman find they have similar goals: "'Most uncommon!' repeated Caleb. 'She said a thing I often used to think myself when I was a lad:—'Mr. Garth, I should like to feel, if I lived to be old, that I had improved a great piece of land and built a great many cottages, because the work is of a healthy kind while it is being done, and after it is done, men are the better for it.' Those were the very words: she sees things in that way'" (402). Yet just as Dorothea's architectural blueprints were juxtaposed to the "fragments of heaven" in her jewelry (10-11), so Garth follows his account of the pragmatic work of building with an imaginative vision: "You
would like to hear her speak, Susan. She speaks in such plain words, and a voice like music. Bless me! it reminds me of bits in the ‘Messiah’—‘and straightway there appeared a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying;' it has a tone with it that satisfies your ear.” Laborers' cottages are not the only structures in which Caleb Garth glories: “Caleb was very fond of music, and when he could afford it went to hear an oratorio that came within his reach, returning from it with a profound reverence for this mighty structure of tones” (402).

And so, Caleb Garth hears the angels sing. At the conclusion of Middlemarch, Dorothea Brooke is granted a redemptive vision of the larger whole, as she looks out her window to “the largeness of the world and the manifold wakings of men to labour and endurance” (578). But it is Caleb Garth who experiences the most comprehensive vision, a panorama closest to the omniscient narrator's own bird's-eye view of “that myriad-headed, myriad-handed . . . social body.” Like his creator Garth recognizes the poetry of the real, the sublime in the mundane:

It laid hold of his imagination in boyhood. The echoes of the great hammer where roof or keel were a-making, the signal-shots of the workmen, the roar of the furnace, the thunder and splash of the engine, and the huge trunk vibrating star-like in the distance along the highway, the crane at work on the wharf, the piled-up produce in warehouses, the precision and variety of muscular effort wherever exact work had to be turned out,—all these sights of his youth had acted on him as poetry without the aid of the poets, had made a philosophy for him without the aid of philosophers, a religion without the aid of theology. [185]

III. BUILDING A NOVEL: THE PART AND THE WHOLE

We need not shrink from this comparison of small things with great; for does not science tell us that its highest striving is after the ascertainment of a unity which shall bind the smallest things with the greatest? In natural science, I have understood, there is nothing petty to the mind that has a large vision of relations, and to which every single object suggests a vast sum
of conditions. It is surely the same with the observation of human life.—George Eliot, The Mill on the Floss, 1860

Critics of Middlemarch have often pointed out that George Eliot's description of Lydgate's microscopic visions sounds as much like the enterprise of a psychological novelist as it does the work of a research scientist: "He wanted to pierce the obscurity of those minute processes which prepare human misery and joy, those invisible thoroughfares which are the first lurking-places of anguish, mania, and crime, that delicate poise and transition which determine the growth of happy or unhappy consciousness" (122). When Lydgate quotes his "favourite bit from an old poet" to his wife Rosamund, he is surely voicing an ambition shared by his creator:

What good is like to this,
To do worth the writing, and to write
Worthy the reading and the world's delight?
[320]

In fact, Lydgate's poetry sits more comfortably upon a Victorian novel than it does a treatise on anatomy.

It is a familiar observation that still bears repeating that virtually every major character in Middlemarch is in search of a key to all mythologies, on an evolutionary scale from Dorothea's spiritual yearning "after some lofty conception of the world" (6) and Lydgate's intellectual search for the primary tissue (111), down to the "central poising force" (359) of Celia Brooke Chettam's maternal instinct and, at the lowest level, the froglike Rigg-Featherstone's avaricious aspiration for a money-changer's shop in which he might "have locks all round him of which he held the keys" (381). This desire for a vision of the whole does not originate with Middlemarch, however; it is a theme that can be traced throughout George Eliot's fiction. We find it in her heroines: in The Mill on the Floss's Maggie Tulliver, "thirsty for all knowledge . . . yearning for something that would link together the powerful impressions of this mysterious life"; and Felix Holt's Esther Lyon: "Her life was a heap of fragments, and so
were her thoughts: some great energy was needed to bind them together.’” The blind scholar Bardo of *Romola* foreshadows Casaubon’s arachnoid ambitions: “That great work in which I had desired to gather, as into a firm web, all the threads that my research had laboriously disentangled . . . was cut off by the failure of my sight.” No character is more consumed by this ambition than the eponymous hero of Eliot’s final, and most visionary, novel, *Daniel Deronda*: “He felt the inward bent towards comprehension and thoroughness . . . he felt a heightening discontent with the wearing futility and enfeebling strain of a demand for excessive retention and dexterity without any insight into the principles which form the vital connections of knowledge.”

In my opening discussion of Coleridge’s *Theory of Life*, I observed how closely Eliot’s “Notes on Form in Art” translated Coleridge’s “individuation” into formal aesthetic principles. But long before these notes of 1868, Herbert Spencer had made an aesthetic application of that scientific model. Spencer mentions in his *Autobiography* that the famous Spencerian password, “heterogeneity,” first appeared not in a scientific but in a literary context, in an essay on the “Philosophy of Style” published in the *Westminster* under George Eliot’s editorship in 1852. In that same essay, Spencer argues that a perfect literary composition will “answer to the description of all highly-organized products of both men and nature. It will be, not a series of like parts simply placed in juxtaposition, but one whole made up of unlike parts that are mutually dependent.”

As early as her first published writing, “Poetry and Prose, From the Notebook of an Eccentric” (in Charles Bray’s *Coventry Herald* in 1846) George Eliot had herself applied the same sensibility that animated the positivist, the phrenologist, and the transcendental anatomist, to the writer’s craft: “I love to think how the perfect whole exists in the imagination of the artist. . . . I love to watch the artist’s eye . . . scrupulously attentive to the details of his actual labour, yet keeping ever in view the idea which that labour is to fulfill. I say to myself—this is an image of what our life should be,—a series of efforts directed to the production of a contemplated whole.”
In the preceding chapters of this study, I have attempted to delineate the ways in which each of these Victorian thinkers sought to make it whole. All of their systems share a temperamental tendency to mediate between head and heart, that sensibility which Eliot personifies in the poet-scientists, the passionate intellectuals, the realistic idealists of her novel. The second common denominator found in this Victorian frame of mind is what Atkinson and Martineau called "the true cosmical view of Nature: the sense of variety in unity, and unity in variety: the whole in the parts and the parts in the whole." The part/whole antithesis is, of course, closely linked to the head/heart dichotomy: the rational empiricist dissects the parts; the passionate idealist intuits the whole. Middlemarch is George Eliot's own aspiration toward a key to all mythologies, her effort to incarnate a monistic conception of the world. It is to the larger organism of Middlemarch as a whole, the structure of the novel and the strategies of its narrator, to which I now turn in order to view this novel as Eliot's own distinctive embodiment of a Victorian cosmology.

The reader will remember that in 1851, Atkinson and Martineau had proclaimed, "While we dilate the sight in the sense of the Unity of Nature, . . . we must not forget to contract the sight to every particular and circumstance." In 1876 Lewes would write, echoing his hero Goethe, "Analysis and synthesis are the systole and diastole of science." Similarly, when George Eliot builds her fictional structure, she makes an aesthetic application of her hero Lydgate's scientific dictum: "There must be a systole and diastole in all inquiry"; "A man's mind must be continually expanding and shrinking between the whole human horizon and the horizon of an object-glass" (468). The uncommon eye of Middlemarch's narrator focuses with alternating but equal intensity on the whole and the part. Within a single paragraph, Eliot can shift from "a careful telescopic watch [of] . . . the parishes of Tipton and Freshitt" to "a microscope directed on a water-drop" (44); from the telescopic horizon of human society to the microscopic object-glass of the individual psyche.

On one hand, Middlemarch: A Study of Provincial Life takes
as its building-blocks the entirety of the social organism. In the *Cours de philosophie positive*, Auguste Comte had observed this social organism from afar:

Can we conceive of a more marvelous spectacle, in the whole range of natural phenomena, than the regular and constant convergence of an innumerable multitude of human beings, each possessing a distinct and, in a certain degree, independent existence, and yet incessantly disposed, amidst all their discordance of talent and character, to concur in many ways in the same general development, without concert, and even consciousness on the part of most of them, who believe that they are merely following their personal impulses?

Similarly, in *Social Statics* Herbert Spencer argued that

This union of many men into one community—this increasing mutual dependence of units which were originally independent—this gradual segregation of citizens into separate bodies, with reciprocally subservient functions—this formation of a whole, consisting of numerous essential parts—this growth of an organism, of which one portion cannot be injured without the rest feeling it—may all be generalized under the law of individualization.

Both visions are mirrored in Eliot's sweepingly telescopic vantage-point. "Watching keenly the stealthy convergence of human lots," the novelist "sees a slow preparation of effects from one life on another":

Old provincial society had its share of this subtle movement: had not only its striking downfalls, its brilliant young professional dandies who ended by living up an entry with a drab and six children for their establishment, but also those less marked vicissitudes which are constantly shifting the boundaries of social intercourse, and begetting new consciousness of interdependence. Some slipped a little downward, some got higher footing: people denied aspirates, gained wealth, and fastidious gentlemen stood for boroughs; some were caught in political currents, some in ecclesiastical, and perhaps found themselves surprisingly grouped in consequence; while a few personages or families that stood with rocky firmness amid all this fluctuation, were slowly presenting new aspects in spite of solidity, and altering with the double change of self and beholder. Municipal town and rural parish gradually made fresh threads of connection. [70-71]
This synthetic incarnation of a dynamic social organism is temporal as well as spatial. In 1871 George Eliot is writing a historical novel set forty years earlier; and her telescopic vision traces fundamental unities of human nature across the space of all recorded history: "In fact, much the same sort of movement and mixture went on in old England as we find in older Herodotus" (71).

But Eliot's microscopic vision places an equal emphasis on the "play of minute causes" (44) within each unique and individuated part of this human whole. She is equally concerned with "heterogeneity," the "endless minutiae by which [each character's] view . . . was gradually changing with the secret motion of a watch-hand." (144). It is impossible to do justice by summary example to the brilliant particularity with which the novelist "pierce[s] the obscurity of those minute processes" (122) within each of her characters. Casaubon's realization of his own mortality, "a man . . . now for the first time looking into the eyes of death," with its mingling of the trivial and the sublime—"the pathos of a lot where everything is below the level of tragedy except the passionate egoism of the sufferer" (310-11) or Bulstrode's soliloquy of self-justification leading to his murder of Raffles—"the rigid outline with which acts present themselves to onlookers . . . was broken into little sequences, each justified as it came by reasonings which seemed to prove it righteous" (452)—these can only be randomly offered as a suggestion of the incredibly rich microscopic particularity of the novel's psychological analysis.

But we must keep in mind that this is a world of dynamic polarities in which opposites interpenetrate. Reread George Eliot's description of old provincial society on the preceding page and note the underlying biological metaphor of "subtle movement" and "fresh threads of connection." Eliot's telescopic vision, sweeping over time and space, is equally microscopic: she focuses on the "particular web" of Middlemarch (105), intricately and uniquely woven in a highly specified historical moment and well-mapped place. Conversely, the microscopic "minutiae of mental make" (111) of each character
must be subsumed into fundamental unity: "A human being . . . is a very wonderful whole" (300). And transcending the individuated whole of Dorothea Brooke or Tertius Lydgate or Fred Vincy is the larger whole of human nature. Casaubon's small shivering self in the face of death or Bulstrode's calculating rationalizations resonate with universal insight into human nature, as Middlemarch's omniscient and moralizing narrator so constantly reminds her reader: "We are all of us born in moral stupidity, taking the world as an udder to feed our supreme selves" (156). In reading Middlemarch we are each drawn into a greater human whole by virtue of the novelist's insistence that her particular psychological insights must be constantly enlarged into universal moral truths.

But even the most optimistic of organicists must come to terms with the fact that the Victorian cosmologies of Middlemarch's characters, one after another, seem to fail; their visions proving, if not incorrect, at least inadequate. Saint Theresa may have been "centered," but Dorothea Brooke is "incalculably diffusive" (613). If George Eliot attempts her own key to all mythologies in Middlemarch, she does so with a keen sense of the very real hazards of such an enterprise. But there has been a consensus among George Eliot's critics that because Middlemarch contains so many doomed searchers for that elusive key, therefore Eliot must believe that the enterprise is inherently futile, that the monist entertains a false view of reality. But once we have placed George Eliot within this Victorian circle, such an interpretation becomes difficult to sustain. Again and again Eliot's closest intellectual associations and deepest friendships are with men and women not unlike Tertius Lydgate and Dorothea Brooke, searchers for universal tissues and binding theories. I believe that George Eliot shares their aspirations.

That "eminent philosopher" among George Eliot's friends who can "dignify" the mundane by the "serene light of science" has been (arguably) identified as Herbert Spencer. But the actual historical source of Eliot's famous parable of the pier glass is not particularly important; any eminent philosopher searching for a centering system runs this risk:
Your pier-glass or extensive surface of polished steel made to be rubbed by a housemaid, 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. It is demonstrable that the scratches are going everywhere impartially, and it is only your candle which produces the flattering illusion of a concentric arrangement, its light falling with an exclusive optical selection. [194-95]

In a provocative essay on "Narrative and History" in *Middlemarch*, critic J. Hillis Miller has argued that "in each case the character is shown to be mystified by a belief that all the details he confronts make a whole governed by a single center, origin, or end. In each case the narrator demystifies the illusion." Miller asserts that *Middlemarch* is George Eliot's "subversion" of the "metaphysics" of wholeness, her deconstruction of the universe. But is Miller's "illusion" George Eliot's? Miller's reading would stress the "minute and multitudinous" disorder of those scratches; I would emphasize the "centre of illumination." "The phenomena constituting the external reality to us are presented discontinuously," writes George Henry Lewes in *Problems of Life and Mind*; "and it is the office of Philosophy so to connect them that their actual continuity be discovered." The continuous cosmos is no illusion for these Victorians, even though their systems may prove inadequate to embody it.

The illusion of the pier glass-gazer—and the potential pitfall of the eminent philosopher—lies in mistaking the part for the whole, not in believing that there is such a thing as wholeness. Any reading of the pier glass parable must begin by stressing that each "little sun" is in itself "a wonderful whole." George Eliot insists throughout *Middlemarch* on the integrity of each unifying consciousness: "Mr. Casaubon, too, was the centre of his own world; if he was liable to think that others were providentially made for him, and especially to consider them in 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."

Eliot validates every such center, demanding her readers' sympathetic response and educating her characters to similar insight: "He had an equivalent centre of self," Dorothea realizes (157).

"Things must be recognized as separate wholes before they can be recognized as wholes composed of parts, or before those wholes again can be regarded as relatively parts of a larger whole," Eliot writes in "Notes on Form." But if we are to escape the illusion of the pier glass, the separate whole, each center of consciousness, must finally be seen in the context of the larger whole. This broader vision is the province of the uncommon eye of the omniscient narrator, the synthetic philosopher who can see the order inherent in the dim lights and tangled circumstance that is hidden to the common eyes of the novel's characters—and its readers. If George Eliot is to succeed in making it whole with Middlemarch, she must demonstrate this interconnectedness. Like Caleb Garth, Dorothea Brooke, and Tertius Lydgate, George Eliot is an architect, building her novel on the philosophical foundations of a Victorian frame of mind. The structure of Middlemarch is Eliot's own blueprint for wholeness. Where our common eye is limited to the small candle of self, the omniscient narrator's is not.

Multiplicity is concomitant to unity, "trifles make the sum of human things," as Borthrop Trumbull says. The rich, abundant, and carefully detailed subject matter of Middlemarch underscores this point most obviously. But Eliot also emphasizes multiplicity in more subtle structural ways. "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 writes (292; and note the electrical metaphor). Eliot self-consciously shifts her novelistic viewpoint throughout, to emphasize that every circle contains innumerable circles, each with its center and circumference. Take the famous opening of chapter 29: "One morning, some weeks after her arrival at Lowick, Dorothea—but why always Dorothea? Was her point of view the only possible one with regard to this marriage? . . . Mr. Casaubon had an intense
consciousness within him” (205); or similarly, chapter 53:

Joshua himself was thinking that the new moment now was not far off when he should settle on the North Quay with the best appointments in Safes and Locks.

Enough. We are concerned with looking at Joshua Rigg’s sale of his land from Mr. Bulstrode’s point of view. [382]

The deliberate awkwardness with which Eliot makes her transitions from one center of consciousness to another serves to emphasize her point: this multiplicity is an important aspect of the novel’s fundamental wholeness. Like her auctioneer Trumbull, Eliot insists that the events of Middlemarch be “viewed in many different lights” (323).

The phrase “point of view” becomes a leitmotif in Middlemarch: “Sir James Chettam, for example, whom she constantly considered from Celia’s point of view, inwardly debating whether it would be good for Celia to accept him” (7); “Mr. Brooke, seeing Mrs. Cadwallader’s merits from a different point of view, winced a little when her name was announced in the library” (39); “‘He is no better than a mummy!’ (The point of view has to be allowed for, as that of a blooming and disappointed rival)” (43); “It is a narrow mind which cannot look at a subject from various points of view” (49); “‘She is not in the least Evangelical,’ said Rosamund, reflectively, as if that religious point of view would have fully accounted for perpetual crepe” (77). Such a list could be continued at length: the above examples are taken only from book 1. Paradoxically, the author’s self-consciously shifting focus serves to draw attention to the continuity and cohesiveness of the omniscient narrator’s larger vision.

Juxtaposing its myriad parts, the multilayered plot of Middlemarch is structured in such a way as to draw further attention to the larger whole. In the midst of her own marital crises, Dorothea Brooke’s attention is drawn randomly out her window to Peter Featherstone’s funeral, to a scene which
alof as it seemed to be from the tenor of her life, always afterwards came back to her at the touch of certain sensitive points in memory, just as the vision of St. Peter’s at Rome was inwoven with
moods of despondency. Scenes which make vital changes in our neighbours' lot are but the background of our own, yet, like a particular aspect of the fields and trees, they become associated for us with the epochs of our own history, and make a part of that unity which lies in the selection of our keenest consciousness. [238]

"Scenes which make vital changes in our neighbours' lot are but the background of our own": each character in the novel is a "little sun," a circle with a center whose circumference is coincident with the center of another. Each character's consciousness is "inwoven" with the external medium of Middlemarch in an apparently random manner—one center may touch another circumference at any given point—but the final result is a unity that balances part and whole, overlapping circles that ideally coalesce to form one great sphere.

The plot of the novel underscores this belief. George Eliot's narrative deliberately displaces central moments in the lives of her characters to the periphery of other lives. Eliot opens the "Finale" of her novel on the note of "Marriage, which has been the bourne of so many narratives" (607); Middlemarch is no exception: the marriages of Dorothea and Casaubon, Rosamond and Lydgate, provide the novel with its predominant subject matter. But Eliot's focus is a curious one: we never see the central event of marriage itself take place in the novel. After a long depiction of her courtship, Dorothea's wedding is an offstage event, mentioned in passing at a windy dinner party gossip session on the feminine virtues among a number of minor characters: "Miss Brooke, however, was not again seen by either of these gentlemen under her maiden name. Not long after that dinner party she had become Mrs. Casaubon, and was on her way to Rome" (69). Celia, Dorothea's sister, obtrudes upon a moment of marital crisis between Mr. and Mrs. Casaubon "on a second visit to Lowick, probably the last before her marriage" (207). Lydgate's marriage is dated by Mary Garth, busy sewing the trousseau: "Rosamond Vincy . . . is to be married next week, and she can't be married without this handkerchief" (292). That the marriage has taken place is revealed in a chapter which centers on Casaubon's discovery of
his fatal illness: "One of the professional calls made by Lydgate soon after his return from his wedding journey was to Lowick Manor" (305). The doctor's marriage is of peripheral concern to Dorothea, facing her husband's fatal heart condition: "'Is Mrs. Lydgate at home,' said Dorothea, who had never, that she knew of, seen Rosamond, but now remembered the fact of the marriage" (315). The reader's only clue to the moment of these great centering events of a life is through their casual impingement on the lives of other characters, themselves absorbed in their own crises.

Marriage is the best, but not the only, example of this deliberate displacement of centers. The reader discovers that Fred Vincy has undergone a serious illness, but the fact is noted in an analysis of Lydgate's conflicts with Middlemarch's other physicians: "This had happened before the affair of Fred Vincy's illness had given to Mr. Wrench's enmity towards Lydgate more definite personal ground" (331). Mrs. Vincy's dismay over Fred's social descent to become Caleb Garth's assistant prompts her husband to remind her of their daughter Rosamond's miscarriage, another offstage event: "I'm sure I felt for her being disappointed of her baby; but she got over it nicely," Mrs. Vincy replies (416). The reader is not present at the event, nor does he even experience either Rosamond's or Lydgate's reactions to it. We are reminded in chapter 52 that Fred Vincy has reformed, "now returned from Omnibus College with his bachelor's degree" (375); but the narrative picks up Fred only in Middlemarch, where the events of his life overlap with those of the other characters in the novel. Dorothea paces the "virtual tomb" of Lowick in despair: "It was Sunday, and she could not have the carriage to go to Celia's, who had lately had a baby" (348); this is the only description of that event, which for Celia herself is a "central poising force" (359). The decentralized web of Eliot's plot underscores her belief that one decisively central psychic event is inseparable from a multitude of everyday external occurrences; each part, every individuated, heterogeneous drama, is subsumed into a larger whole, Middlemarch—and Middlemarch.
Has George Eliot, finally, made it whole? She begins the "Finale" of her novel with the admission that she has not: "Every limit is a beginning as well as an ending. Who can quit young lives after being long in company with them, and not desire to know what befell them in their after-years? For the fragment of a life, however typical, is not the sample of an even web" (607). Just as George Eliot plays with polarities by opening her novel with happy endings and closing it with new beginnings, so the form of Middlemarch oscillates between wholeness and open-endedness: the exhaustively-documented known of the novel's narrative and the amorphous unknown beyond the space of its pages; that which can be predicted and analyzed in human nature and that which remains mysteriously unknowable. Yet even as George Eliot admits to the limitations of her fictional vision; which must, after all, restrict itself to a particular time and place, a suitable number of pages, etc.—"Every limit is a beginning as well as an ending"—does she perhaps intend subliminally to remind the reader that omniscience is associated with divinity as well as with Victorian narrators? "I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the ending, saith the Lord, which is, and which was, and which is to come" (Revelation 1:8); in my beginning is my ending. The novelist's sphere may only be a faint type of God's vision of the great world itself; but the eye of the fictional creator is as close as mere mortals can come to Bacon's "true model of the world" as seen by the eye of the Creator.

Let me return one final time to "Notes on Form in Art" and George Eliot's definition of "the highest example of Form": "The relation of multiplex interdependent parts to a whole which is in itself in the most varied & therefore the fullest relation to other wholes." What I would emphasize here is that apparently even the "highest Form" or wholeness is nonetheless "[related] to other wholes"; each perfect whole is "relatively [part] of a larger whole." Any aspiration in Middlemarch toward an all-encompassing and self-contained wholeness is finally as much an illusion as that of the individual little suns in the pier glass.
But such illusions are the inescapable lot of mortal vision. And however inadequate they are to be cherished and commended, for they represent man's aspiration toward the transcendent, his momentary glimpses of the Unknowable. This passage from *Felix Holt* illuminates *Middlemarch* as well:

For what we call illusions are often, in truth, a wider vision of past and present realities—a willing movement of a man's soul with the larger sweep of the world's forces—a movement towards a more assured end than the chances of a single life. We see human heroism broken into units and say, this unit did little—might as well not have been. But in this way we might break up a great army into units; in this way we might break the sunlight into fragments.  

The narrator of *Middlemarch* takes the "little suns" of her characters' small visions and weaves these "fragments of a life" into the larger fictional web of *Middlemarch*. But the whole of *Middlemarch* is itself only a small part of a larger whole. George Eliot's own key to all mythologies can unlock only partial truths. The centre of illumination provided by the uncommon eye of the novelist is only the faint type of a perfect vision of the ultimate whole:

Who shall tell what may be the effect of writing? . . . As the stone which has been kicked by generations of clowns may come by curious little links of effect under the eyes of a scholar, through whose labours it may at last fix the date of invasions and unlock religions, so a bit of ink and paper which has long been an innocent wrapping or stop-gap may at last be laid upon under the one pair of eyes which have knowledge enough to turn it into the opening of a catastrophe. To Uriel watching the progress of planetary history from the Sun, the one result would be just as much of a coincidence as the other. [302]

Uriel, you will remember, is Milton's "Regent of the Sun," "The sharpest-sighted Spirit of all in Heaven" (*Paradise Lost*, 3:690–91). He is, quite literally, the eye of God:

... one of the sev'n  
Who in God's presence, nearest to his Throne  
Stand ready at command, and are his Eyes
That run through all the Heav'ns, or down to th' Earth
Bear his swift errands over moist and dry,
O'er Sea and Land.

Paradise Lost, 3:648-53

Uriel is a wonderful figure for the Victorian monist; he knows
the unknowable, those things that, as Borthrop Trumbull
said, "the understanding of man could hardly conceive; angels
might, perhaps, but not men, sirs, not men" (443). In com-
parison to Uriel’s vision, even the knowing eyes that can un-
lock the mystery of the written word (the Victorian novelist’s?)
are blind.

But remember that one character in Middlemarch does, in
fact, hear the angels sing: "Bless me! it reminds me of bits in
the ‘Messiah’—‘and straightway there appeared a multitude of
the heavenly host, praising God and saying;’ it has a tone with
it that satisfies your ear,” Caleb Garth tells his wife. And ap-
propriately Caleb hears the angels’ music in the “plain words”
of Dorothea Brooke (402). It is the most misguided and unre-
liable characters in Middlemarch, the likes of Fred Vincy, who
see the world from “an immeasurable depth of aerial perspec-
tive” (172). Farmer Garth is, quite literally, the closest to the
earth of any character in Middlemarch. And so it should be.
For in George Eliot’s world, we catch glimpses of the transcen-
dent ideal through the mundane real. The final emphasis in
any discussion of Middlemarch’s narrator should rest not on
her omniscience but on her common humanity; or rather, that
common humanity as the source of any omniscience she might
have. Eliot’s narrator, like her characters, is ultimately more
clown than angel. But in Middlemarch Uriel is of little inter-
est—it is Bulstrode or Rosamond or Casaubon who are to be
the subject of this particular vision.

Like all of her Victorian compatriots, George Eliot is a vi-
sionary who insists on remaining an empiricist. I conclude my
discussion of Middlemarch with the opening paragraph of
book 4, chapter 34. It is a perfect example, I think, of the whole
in the part, Middlemarch in microcosm:
It was on a morning of May that Peter Featherstone was buried. In the prosaic neighbourhood of Middlemarch, May was not always warm and sunny, and on this particular morning a chill wind was blowing blossoms from the surrounding gardens on to the green mounds of Lowick churchyard. Swiftly-moving clouds only now and then allowed a gleam to light up any object, whether ugly or beautiful, that happened to be within its golden shower. In the churchyard the objects were remarkably various, for there was a little country crowd waiting to see the funeral. [236]

Eliot's realism is resolutely "prosaic." This is the world of real weather, not vernal literary convention. It is a "particular morning," particularly described. Yet a "gleam" of visionary sunlight pierces the low-hanging clouds of this everyday view. It lights up "any object, whether ugly or beautiful." Eliot's creative vision penetrates to the poetry of the real. It illuminates things as they are; but it does so by the light of the imagination. And they are, always, "remarkably various." Although that visionary ray may suffuse everything in its path alike in a "golden shower," the "little country crowd" remains on terra firma, each unmistakably his quotidian self.

1. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar suggest that Eliot's intellectuality typifies her "need to evade identification with her own sex" (The Madwoman in the Attic [New Haven, 1979], p. 466). They dismiss Eliot's intellectual backgrounds: "As the token female in an intellectual circle that included such eminent thinkers as Spencer, Jowett, Froude, and Mazzini, Eliot might have suspected that . . . 'She was that most disagreeable of all monsters, a blue-stocking—a monster that can only exist in a miserably false state of society, in which a woman with but a smattering of learning of philosophy is classed along with singing mice and card playing pigs' (George Eliot to John Sibree Jr., George Eliot Letters, 1:245). Eliot, of course, had far more than a smattering of learning or philosophy . . . But this could only serve to make her more freakish in her society" (p. 467).

2. Eliot, Middlemarch, p. 441. Further references will be cited in parentheses in the text.


For essays on George Eliot and positivism, see chapter 1, note 63.


11. See N. N. Feltes, "George Eliot and the Unified Sensibility," PMLA 79 (1964):130-36: "Middlemarch and George Eliot's other works and letters, express a view of the human personality in which wholeness is all, a view remarkably close to that expressed by G. H. Lewes in Problems of Life and Mind" (136). In Religious Humanism Knoepflmacher makes the point that "a majority of Victorians were to regard George Eliot as one who combined at least the 'essence' of the Church with the predominant 'spirit of science'" (p. 28). Middlemarch, says Knoepflmacher, "thrives on paradox. It is a mystic's rejection of religion and a rationalist's plea for irrationality" (p. 114).

13. George Levine writes: “Although *Middlemarch* is concerned with the obstacles to the ideal and the limits of knowledge, its narrator is the altruistic scientist who perceives ‘unapparent relations’ and the continuities behind the discontinuities. Through all its questioning of history, narrative, and language, the book implies the continuous cosmos it is too wise to impose upon the common life of Middlemarch” (“George Eliot’s Hypothesis of Reality,” p. 16).


15. For the purposes of this discussion, I shall treat “George Eliot” and the narrator of *Middlemarch* as one and the same; I also assume some contiguity between the views of the real Marian Evans and her fictional persona.

16. Sir Humphry Davy (1778-1829) was a chemist who produced new theories of light and heat. His *Elements of Agricultural Chemistry*, which Sir James reads, was published in 1810. He gave a course of lectures on galvanism at the Royal Institution in 1801, and retained “electro-chemistry” as a lifelong interest. It is literally true that Davy was a poet-scientist, writing youthful poems such as “The Sons of Genius” before turning to the laboratory (see *Dictionary of National Biography*, 5:637). Coleridge said of him: “If he had not been the first chemist, he would have been the first poet of his age”; he attended Davy’s scientific lectures “to increase his stock of metaphors.” But Southey considered Davy a better scientist than poet: “He had all the elements of the poet; he only wanted the art” (“Sir Humphry Davy,” *Encyclopaedia Brittanica*, 11th ed. (New York, 1910), 7:871-75).


18. Note that Lydgate performs “galvanic experiments” (p. 112) in his search for “ultimate facts”; he is an “electro-biologist.” As David Carroll writes: “Lydgate is pursuing the interaction of mind and matter to the apotheosis—the discovery of mind in matter—where their separateness will be resolved and paradise will eventually be regained” (“*Middlemarch* and the Externality of Fact,” in Ian Adam, ed., *This Particular Web: Essays on "Middlemarch*” [Toronto, 1975], p. 77).

19. Ladislaw’s poetic principles closely parallel Eliot’s notion of “Romanticism, which has helped to fill some dull blanks with love and knowledge” (p. 140; my emphasis). Note also Eliot’s use of the phrenological term organ.

20. This theme can be found throughout Eliot’s fiction; for example, in *Adam Bede* (1859): “All passion becomes strength when it has an outlet from the narrow limits of our personal lot in the labour of our right arm, the cunning of our right hand, or the still, creative activity of our thought” ([Boston, 1968], p. 180); and *Daniel Deronda* (1876): “For, look at it one way, all actions men put a bit of thought into are ideas—say, sowing seed, or making a canoe, or baking clay; and such ideas as these work themselves into life and go on growing with it, but they can’t go apart from the material that set them to work and makes a medium for them” ([Harmondsworth, England, 1967], p. 583).

was written in the romantic period (1821) and published in the Victorian age (1840). Much that Shelley says about poetry resonates with Ladislaw's character as poet-politician: "The most unfailing herald, companion, and follower of the awakening of a great people to work a beneficial change in opinion of institution, is poetry" (p. 1,086).

22. Barbara Hardy writes of Will, "He writes no more poems, and perhaps the reader knows why"; "Will's lyric is not only unaware of social links between its passionate moment and lower forms of variants, it is also unaware of the thickly peopled world. In this invariably social novel, we are perpetually reminded of the community" ("Middlemarch and the Passions," in Adam, This Particular Web, pp. 19, 20). I would suggest that Will's "politics" become his "poetry," his incarnation of the idealistic in the real.


28. A number of critics have applied "Notes on Form in Art" to Middlemarch, but to disparate ends. Darrell Mansell reads the essay as evidence that Eliot "is more anxious . . . than most Victorian novelists that her novels be considered as organic wholes" ("George Eliot's Conception of 'Form,'" Studies in English Literature 5 [1965]:655); conversely, J. H. Miller finds that "against the notion of a work of art which is an organic unity . . . George Eliot opposes the concepts of a text made of differences and of human lives which have no unitary meaning. . . . George Eliot presents a view of artistic form as inorganic, acentered, and discontinuous" ("Narrative and History," English Literary History 41 [1974]:468).

29. Herbert Spencer, "Philosophy of Style," Westminster Review 58 (1852):247. "Heterogeneity" appears on the same page: "increasing heterogeneity in our modes of expression." Lewes's essay on "Goethe as a Man of Science" was in the same issue.


33. Lewes, "Materialism and Spiritualism," p. 713.

34. Critics from Henry James onward have loved to talk about "parts" and "wholes" in Eliot's fiction. As James's Theodora says: "George Eliot's intentions are extremely complex. The mass is for each detail and each detail is for the mass" ("Daniel Deronda: A Conversation," Atlantic Monthly [1876], rpt. in Carroll, Critical Heritage, p. 451). Excellent essays have been written on both the whole and the parts. Isobel Armstrong takes the larger view: "These generalizations exert an extraordinary pressure on the particular facts of the narrative. They place them, with a sort of mild
and tactful deliberation, sub specie aeternitatis" ("'Middlemarch': A Note on George Eliot's 'Wisdom,'" in Hardy, Critical Essays, p. 129); conversely, Barbara Hardy provides a masterful dissection of the parts in "The Surface of the Novel: Chapter 30" (in "Middlemarch": Critical Approaches to the Novel [London, 1967]): "Looking hard at the part . . . brings out other aspects of organization—the local configurations of scene and chapter. . . . I want to say that some parts are simple and not symbolic, but that other, larger units are more intricately and systematically organized than I had imagined" (p. 150).

Brian Swan singles out the part/whole relationship as central to Eliot's notion of symbolic form: "one in which everything is related to everything without sacrificing its own quidditas, the actuality of its present existence" ("Middlemarch: Realism and Symbolic Form," English Literary History 39 [1972]:289). For Swan, Eliot is thus simultaneously "realistic" and "symbolic."

35. Comte, Cours, in Lenzer, pp. 270-71. In his study of Comte, Lewes paraphrases this same passage almost verbatim (see Comte, p. 263).

36. Spencer, Social Statics, p. 497.

37. This notion is a staple of Middlemarch criticism. Gillian Beer writes: "The typical concern of the intellectual characters of the book is with visions of unity, but a unity which seeks to resolve the extraordinary diversities of the world back into a single answer"; but they are wrong: "any single interpretation of experience will mislead" ("Myth and the Single Consciousness: Middlemarch and The Lifted Veil," in Adam, This Particular Web, pp. 102, 111). Similarly, W. J. Harvey: "We know that George Eliot was generally suspicious of anything in the nature of a key to the meaning of life" ("The Intellectual Background of the Novel," in Hardy, "Middlemarch": Critical Approaches, p. 35). George Levine agrees: "George Eliot . . . had discarded the many religious and epistemological assumptions of her inherited culture, including the convention that a single unitary theory of reality could certainly be established" ("George Eliot's Hypothesis," p. 7).

38. See N. N. Feltes, "George Eliot's 'Pier-Glass': The Development of a Metaphor," Modern Philology 67 (1969):69-71. It is now almost taken for granted that the philosopher is Spencer, although Feltes's actual evidence for the identification is less than decisive, consisting of a faint parallel between the pier glass and a metaphor about the effect of moonlight on water that Spencer used in the Study of Sociology. Hilda M. Hulme suggests that the philosopher may be Lewes himself, and quotes Lewes's use of a mirror image from Bacon's Nova Organum in his 1848 essay on Spinoza ("The Language of the Novel: Imagery," in Hardy, "Middlemarch": Critical Approaches, p. 123). Clearly, Eliot had many models from which to choose. The philosopher may well personify any Victorian synthesizer, rather than a particular individual.


40. Lewes, Problems of Life and Mind, Foundations of a Creed, 1:163. Levine's essay "George Eliot's Hypothesis of Reality" contains a timely defense against deconstructionist readings: "Our subversive readings tend to neglect the primary object to which these self-conscious deconstructions of our common-sense traditions of order and narrative are preliminary: the reconstruction of meaning and order that is Lewes's objective as well" (p. 6; see pp. 5-6).
41. Eliot, "Notes on Form," in Pinney, p. 432; my emphasis.

42. See also pp. 165, 205, 224, 250, 284, 301, 321, 375, 382, and 430. Hardy argues that Middlemarch's "shifting point of view is the structural equivalent for its theme of illusion, and the insistent rotation . . . puts each illusion in its place amongst the rest and lets the contradictions stand" (The Novels of George Eliot [1959; rev. ed. London, 1963], p. 96).


44. Eliot, Felix Holt, pp. 276-77.

45. George Levine also sees Uriel as the personification of transcendent vision: "The novel is not an intuition embracing the universe but an intuition that, to 'Uriel,' what we take as discontinuous will be in fact continuous, that the invisible continuous cosmos is there, waiting for an all-embracing Uriel-like intuition" ("George Eliot's Hypothesis of Reality," p. 17).

"A response to the mystery of things, together with the sense of awe and wonder that it produces, is one of the great human sanctities for George Eliot" (Harvey, "Idea and Image," in Hardy, Critical Essays, pp. 172-73): "She continued to feel a longing, if not for the transcendent, at least for the numinous, the incandescent, the mysterious" (Beer, "Myth and the Single Consciousness," in Adam, This Particular Web, p. 91).