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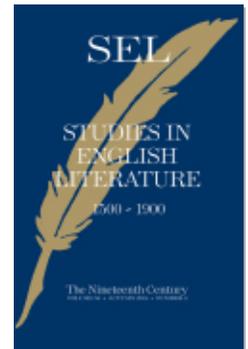
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Liberal Evaluation in the Character System of *Middlemarch*

MATTHEW FLAHERTY

The realist novel has long been viewed as an agent of liberal humanist values—as a tool distinctively suited to cultivating sympathetic views of diverse human practices. According to F. R. Leavis and others, novels invite readers to refine their everyday moral feelings and practical judgments insofar as they depict life with “imaginative sympathy, moral discrimination and judgment of relative human value.”¹ Yet claims such as Leavis’s raise more questions than they answer: in this liberal view of the novel, what qualities make a given novel’s moral judgments more sympathetic or discriminating than another? What techniques, if any, do novelists use to produce such enlightened value judgments? And what historical and philosophical influences lead novelists to create art designed for this specialized task? Although scholars from Leavis to Martha C. Nussbaum have linked novels with the development of the liberal imagination, the subjective and relatively ahistorical nature of much of this criticism has yet to address satisfactorily the question of what makes the novelistic genre distinctively amenable to the cultivation of liberal judgment.² Even more historically focused studies that read novels alongside liberal philosophy and politics have provided little help in clarifying specific formal features that allow novels to promote liberal habits of mind.³

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By reading George Eliot's depiction of characters in *Middlemarch: A Study of Provincial Life* (1874) alongside John Stuart Mill's account of practical judgment in *On Liberty* (1859), I argue that British realist novels made use of the specific technique of character juxtaposition to promote ideals of mid-Victorian liberalism. More specifically, this article contends that George Eliot uses systematic contrasts between characters in *Middlemarch* to invite her readers to adopt two liberal habits of mind defended by Mill: a mode of strong evaluation first introduced to English novelists by Jane Austen, and a mode of "many-sided" evaluation especially noticeable in English novelists writing after George Eliot.⁴ Although both strong and many-sided evaluations require the ability to make comparative judgments about practical forms of life, these evaluative postures are in tension with each other: strong evaluation requires firm practical commitment to a specific good whereas many-sided evaluation requires flexible critical detachment from specific commitments. Among the results of focusing on these dialectically complementary modes of evaluation as they are described in Mill's philosophy and promoted by George Eliot's novel is a new sense of the characters of *Middlemarch* and, more particularly, the novel's distinctive use of secondary characters to promote flexible ethical thinking in readers.

Bringing together Mill's philosophy with Alex Woloch's concept of the character system, the first section of this article argues that *Middlemarch* uses systematic contrasts between characters to elicit a strong evaluative stance favorable to the practice of sympathy in readers. By deliberately juxtaposing sympathetic behaviors expressed by Dorothea Brooke alongside egoistic behaviors of secondary characters committed to different ways of life, *Middlemarch* invites its implied reader to endorse the specific version of the good life expressed by Dorothea at the expense of indifference to the commitments of characters such as Rosamond Vincy and Edward Casaubon. The remainder of this article argues for a more controversial thesis: namely, that *Middlemarch* also uses character contrasts to cultivate critical judgments of Dorothea's sympathy. To make this case, I focus on secondary characters—including Will Ladislaw, Camden Farebrother, and especially Fred Vincy—who express an ethos of spontaneous enjoyment that contrasts with Dorothea's ethos of disciplined sympathy. Insofar as *Middlemarch* uses the liberated practice of characters such as Fred as a positive standard by which to clarify the comparatively constrained aspects of Dorothea's sympathy, the novel invites many-sided evaluation in its implied reader—that

is, a flexible critical stance that perceives the reciprocal advantages and disadvantages of practically opposed commitments.

This article's focus on Fred Vincy as a positive ethical exemplar is unusual in George Eliot criticism. Although Fred plays an important structural role in *Middlemarch* as the protagonist of the novel's third marriage plot, critics of the novel since Henry James have struggled to justify Fred's prominence in the narrative given his seeming distance from the more serious ethical concerns of Dorothea Brooke and Tertius Lydgate.⁵ By arguing that Fred expresses an ethos of enjoyment that facilitates readers' critical analysis of the novel's other central characters, this article helps justify Fred's inclusion in the novel. Insofar as characters such as Fred Vincy and Will Ladislaw point readers to ethical deficiencies in the practice of otherwise privileged protagonists, I argue that they function as a specialized mid-Victorian type of secondary character designed to facilitate liberal habits of evaluation in readers.

George Eliot had much occasion to integrate the ideas of Mill's liberal philosophy into her fictional practice: she edited Mill's essays for the *Westminster Review*, read widely from Mill's *A System of Logic, Ratiocinative and Inductive* (1843) and *Principles of Political Economy* (1848), and paraphrased passages from *On Liberty* (1859) in *Daniel Deronda* (1876).⁶ To examine *Middlemarch's* participation in a midcentury conjunction between liberal ethics and novelistic form, I will discuss the concepts of strong and many-sided evaluations in turn: first as they are described in Mill's *On Liberty* and then as they are promoted by the character system of *Middlemarch*.

In *On Liberty*, Mill endorses strong evaluative stances when he celebrates the human capacity to select practical commitments on the basis of reflective judgment: "The human faculties of perception, judgment, discriminative feeling, mental activity, and even moral preference, are exercised only in making a choice ... He who lets the world, or his own portion of it, choose his plan of life for him, has no need of any other faculty than the ape-like one of imitation. He who chooses his plan for himself, employs all his faculties. He must use ... discrimination to decide, and when he has decided, firmness and self-control to hold to his deliberate decision."⁷ In this passage, Mill describes the human ability to exercise choice through the selection of a specific "plan of life." For Mill, such existential modes of judgment are evaluative insofar as they require individuals to choose actions based on their "discriminative feeling" and "moral preference."

Such judgments are what Charles Taylor calls “strong” insofar as exercises of moral preference involve discriminations based on “a language of evaluative contrasts ranging over desires.”⁸ A person firmly committed to a life plan that prioritizes goods such as sensitivity and openness, for example, will necessarily resist desires they associate with contrasting states of callousness and rigidity. Were this strong evaluator to experience an impulse to coldly dismiss a work subordinate, they would prefer to ignore their own desire to be dismissive in favor of another that better comports with their aspiration to be sensitive.

The uniquely human capacity to use strong evaluation to navigate between desires frequently leads to conflicts between desired goods. Conflicts of strong evaluation can also have political implications: for example, left-leaning voters firmly committed to the value of caring for others may support lessening criminal punishments, and thus neglect competing goods such as fairness.⁹ To the extent that a strong evaluator adheres with “firmness and self-control” to a specific plan of life they are often forced to place a lower priority on competing goods.¹⁰

The English novelist most innovative in using characters to promote postures of strong evaluation in readers is not George Eliot, but her predecessor, Jane Austen. Austen’s novels perfected the art of making various value-laden perspectives available to readers who could learn from her novels to make fine discriminations between goods expressed in competing plans of life. Her titles famously announce as much: using characters to enact various goods such as sense and sensibility or vices such as pride and prejudice, Austen’s novels expose readers to conflicts between different approaches to the good life while also recommending strong evaluative stances to make sense of such conflicts. To understand *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), for example, the implied reader is invited to view Elinor Dashwood’s judicious sense as superior to Marianne Dashwood’s volatile sensibility, just as readers of *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) are invited to perceive Elizabeth Bennet’s spirited independence as superior to Mary Bennet’s trite moralism. Woloch introduces the concept of the “character-system” to identify the way in which Austen’s novels use relations between characters to promote readers’ interest in various ethical modes at the expense of others.¹¹ In such novels, secondary characters such as Marianne Dashwood and Mary Bennet serve as negative examples that help create a “valorized symbolic register” around the expressions of a novel’s protagonist.¹² In this way, contrasts between characters invite readers to adopt postures of strong

evaluation: an energetic endorsement of one good (usually expressed by a major character) at the expense of indifference or even hostility to competing goods (usually expressed by minor characters).

Although critics of George Eliot have not yet invoked notions of strong evaluation or the character system to describe *Middlemarch*, these concepts are implicit in existing readings of her fiction.¹³ Many scholars acknowledge the way in which *Middlemarch's* rhetorical emphasis on the sympathy expressed by Dorothea Brooke comes at the expense of goods expressed by secondary characters: Nina Auerbach, Jeremy Tambling, and others have observed the extent to which *Middlemarch* asks readers to feel a forcible contrast between the sympathy that Dorothea exhibits and the comparative deficiencies in sympathy exhibited by the practices of other characters.¹⁴ Insofar as *Middlemarch* carefully juxtaposes the generous sympathy expressed by the novel's protagonist with the comparatively egoistic behaviors of secondary characters such as Rosamond and Fred Vincy and Edward Casaubon, one could say that the novel asks readers to perceive the lives of its characters through a lens of strong evaluation: a perspective that energetically endorses the good of Dorothea's sympathetic belief while inviting indifferent or antipathetic views toward competing goods such as Rosamond's social respectability, Fred's optimistic spontaneity, or Casaubon's scholarly research.¹⁵ Through practical contrasts among characters such as these, *Middlemarch* invites readers to endorse the mode of sympathy expressed in Dorothea's plan of life with the kind of firmness and conviction privileged by Mill.

Although Victorians are often associated with the earnest and narrow convictions of strong evaluative stances, midcentury Victorian intellectuals recognized that postures of strong evaluation could have a deleterious effect on social solidarity if left unchallenged. For liberal intellectuals such as Mill and Matthew Arnold, habits of earnest conviction championed by figures such as John Wesley and Thomas Carlyle required the addition of more open-minded habits of thought to help avoid social division and prejudicial thinking.¹⁶ Beginning in the late 1850s in Britain and continuing through the 1870s, liberal intellectuals including Mill, Arnold, and Walter Bagehot supplemented defenses of strong practical conviction with defenses of reflective detachment.¹⁷ In *On Liberty*, Mill calls this reflective capacity "many-sidedness": a disposition to consider multiple and possibly conflicting evaluations of human practices.¹⁸ Rather than one-sidedly perceiving a

single kind of good expressed by a given life plan, a Millian liberal also seeks to perceive other goods that tend to be excluded by any given set of commitments. Mill recommends, for example, that persons who tend to value the version of the good life expressed in “democracy” also consider defenses of “aristocracy” and likewise for any number of other practically opposed goods, such as “co-operation and ... competition,” “luxury and ... abstinence,” “sociality and individuality,” and “liberty and discipline.”¹⁹ The process of liberal opinion formation for Mill requires this mode of dialectical perception that perceives goods in tension with one’s own favored practical commitments.

Written ten years after the publication of *On Liberty*, George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* depicts its characters in a manner closely aligned with the liberal habits of evaluation Mill defends. *Middlemarch*’s use of characters to promote many-sided thinking is particularly noticeable in the novel’s favorable juxtaposition of characters who enact an ethos of spontaneous enjoyment alongside more disciplined characters, such as Dorothea, who do not. Such juxtapositions, I argue, invite not only one-sided appreciation for Dorothea’s self-abnegating sympathy but also a many-sided appreciation for antithetical practices of impulsive spontaneity.²⁰

To describe the positive contrast *Middlemarch* draws between the spontaneous ethos expressed by characters such as Fred Vincy and Will Ladislaw and the disciplined ethos expressed by characters such as Dorothea, I invoke Michel de Certeau’s distinction between “*tactics*,” or spontaneous practices that resist authority, and “*strategies*,” or deliberate practices that impose authority.²¹ De Certeau conceives of tactics as modes of practical resistance to the modern regimes of discipline described by Michel Foucault. Rather than submitting to modes of bureaucratic, institutional, and cultural authority, tacticians seek out relative liberation from controlling discourses through practices characterized by spontaneity, impulsiveness, and purposelessness. For de Certeau, tactical practitioners of everyday arts such as cooking, sewing, and speaking resist controlling imperatives of rationality in favor of spontaneous impulsivity; that is, they accept the possibilities experience offers in the present rather than seeking to control future experience through planning, discipline, and judgment. Although de Certeau’s concepts of tactics and strategy are most commonly used to explain resistance to power in urban settings under late capitalism, these concepts can also be used to analyze resistance to a wide variety of hegemonic regimes

throughout history: from industrial practices of organization in twentieth-century Paris or London to religious practices of self-regulation in nineteenth-century English villages.²²

The novel's ironic treatment of Rosamond Vincy, to take our first example, invites readers to view her practice as a negative foil not only to Dorothea Brooke's sympathy but also to her brother Fred's tactics. In Rosamond's first introduction to Lydgate, the narrator of *Middlemarch* draws attention to the calculated self-regulation Rosamond exhibits through a constantly maintained awareness of others: "Every nerve and muscle in Rosamond was adjusted to the consciousness that she was being looked at. She was by nature an actress of parts that entered into her *physique*: she even acted her own character, and so well, that she did not know it to be precisely her own" (p. 119). By describing Rosamond as an actress, the narrator emphasizes the way in which her continuing consciousness of others' expectations creates distance between natural feelings prompted by her "own character" and the artificial self-presentation she reveals to others. For the discerning reader, Rosamond's quest for the good things in life appears less as a spontaneous improvisation that seizes upon the impulses of the moment than as a strategic self-presentation designed to achieve calculated aims.

The narrator's description of Rosamond's ensuing flirtations with Lydgate draws further attention to the censorship of feeling involved in Rosamond's theatrical self-presentation. By observing that Rosamond answers questions in a manner that "a more naive girl" would not, the reader is led to notice the degree to which Rosamond's interactions are guided by deliberate calculations rather than immediate feeling (p. 151). The novel's narrator makes use of similarly detached rhetoric to describe Rosamond's effort to conceal her feelings later in the novel when Lydgate's businesslike manner during a house call injures Rosamond's pride: "Rosamond, made nervous by her struggle between mortification and the wish not to betray it, dropped her chain as if startled, and rose too, mechanically" (p. 259). By telling the reader that Rosamond drops the chain "as if startled" rather than out of genuine surprise, the narrator invites scrutiny of the artifice involved in this response.²³ Although this moment of design is immediately followed by the eruption of genuine tears—glossed by the narrator as a brief "moment of naturalness"—the narrator's earlier use of the imperfect subjunctive emphasizes Rosamond's prevailing tendency, even at her least self-controlled, to rely on what Lydgate sees as her "most perfect management of self-contented

grace" (p. 259). Such scenes invite the implied reader to view Rosamond's habitual management as the opposite of tactical work that is "free, creative, and precisely not directed toward profit."²⁴ Instead of purposeless work with no further aim than creative self-expression, Rosamond's theatrical self-presentation appears to carry the strategic aim of facilitating her goals, or adding to what the narrator of *Middlemarch* calls "her elegant accomplishments" (p. 235).

If readers are invited to take distance from Rosamond's calculated interactions with others, then they are also invited to take distance from her tendency to promote conformity with socially approved standards. In response to her brother Fred's assertion that "[a]ll choice of words is slang ... mark[ing] a class," Rosamond asserts that "[t]here is correct English"—a view that both normalizes and reifies speech patterns associated with a dominant social group (p. 105). Rosamond's investment in preserving markers of class distinction is made particularly conspicuous through the ironized free indirect discourse used to describe her reasons for marrying Lydgate: an outcome she finds desirable for the prospect it presents "of rising in rank and getting a little nearer to that celestial condition on earth in which she would have nothing to do with vulgar people" (p. 156). The disjunction here between Rosamond's small-minded aspirations for class advancement and the lightly exaggerated phrase "celestial condition on earth" betray the presence of an implied author who takes ironic distance from such class-bound desires. For informed readers, the distance between Rosamond's view of people she deems "vulgar" and those of the author who speaks in chapter 17 of George Eliot's *Adam Bede* (1859) is significant, indeed.²⁵ Rosamond's expressed desire to avoid any association with vulgarity is consistent with her attempts elsewhere in the novel to regulate what she sees as abnormal behavior: another habit that the novel subjects to ironic scrutiny. A product of Mrs. Lemon's finishing school for young ladies, Rosamond carefully avoids unbecoming behavior herself and politely corrects her mother and brother for what she sees as their vulgar expressions (see pp. 105 and 107). Rosamond is equally quick to enforce conformity with conventional gender roles, both affirming her own embrace of traditionally feminine behaviors ("you never hear me speak in an unladylike way") and criticizing the effeminate implications of Fred's flute playing ("A man looks very silly playing the flute"; pp. 104 and 108). If readers of *Middlemarch* are invited to be amused by the weight Rosamond places on the maintenance of class and gender roles in such

trivial matters, then they are also invited to speculate as to why it may be important for characters such as her brother to resist the terms of her discourse. Rosamond gives voice to a leveling strategic rationality insofar as she readily endorses standards that replace the eccentric and unique with what conforms to the approval of accepted social conventions.

Even if she is the most conspicuous strategist in the novel, Rosamond is not the only character in *Middlemarch* whose attitudes and behaviors are subjected to critical scrutiny. *Middlemarch's* depiction of Rosamond's suitor and eventual husband, Lydgate, invites readers to adopt similarly critical views of strategic desires for control and status. The negative implications of Lydgate's ethos are expertly clarified and defamiliarized in a telling conversation with the vicar, Farebrother. After Farebrother advises Lydgate of the need for patience and politeness when seeking to implement medical reforms in the provincial Middlemarch community, Lydgate responds: "Don't you think men overrate the necessity for humoring everybody's nonsense, till they get despised by the very fools they humor?" said Lydgate, moving to Mr Farebrother's side, and looking rather absently at the insects ranged in fine gradation, with names subscribed in exquisite writing. "The shortest way is to make your value felt, so that people must put up with you whether you flatter them or not" (p. 162). Just as Rosamond attempts to distinguish herself from "vulgar" people through marriage, Lydgate seeks to "make [his] value felt" through professional success. And no less than Rosamond's class aspirations, Lydgate's sharp distinction between "fools" and men such as himself who do work of "value" is immediately subjected to ironic scrutiny by the novel's attention to the image he views while speaking. The picture of "insects ranged in fine gradation" on Farebrother's wall can be taken as a metaphor for Lydgate's hierarchical and status-driven view of the world—a view the implied reader of *Middlemarch* is led to understand as more petty and small-minded or as plagued with more "spots of commonness" than might first appear (p. 144). The questionable nature of Lydgate's desire to be recognized in Middlemarch also manifests in his self-presentation, which the narrator explicitly evaluates as "a little too self-confident and disdainful" (p. 143). Although Lydgate's ethos expresses a different kind of controlling rationality than Rosamond's, *Middlemarch* nevertheless invites critical scrutiny of his strategic desire to maintain a hierarchical view of his social world—a desire that includes "its being known (without his telling) that he was better born than other country surgeons" (p. 144). Instead of preferring tactical

spaces of darkness and ambiguity that disrupt hierarchies and allow play within the foundations of power, Lydgate articulates a preference for maintaining order and distinction in the social world—a preference that, in passages such as these, the implied author of *Middlemarch* does not appear to share.²⁶

If *Middlemarch* reveals strategic costs in the practices of Rosamond and Lydgate, then it also reveals such costs in the practice of its most privileged character, Dorothea. A sequence near the novel's conclusion, even as it attempts to emphasize sympathy's advantages, also points to the troubling strategic implications of Dorothea's practice: a practice that depends upon a form of strenuous self-policing directly at odds with a tactical reliance on impulse and play. The sequence in question begins when Dorothea, who loves Will Ladislaw, pays a visit to Rosamond. She finds Ladislaw and Rosamond speaking together in an emotional situation, seemingly confirming the rumor that they are having an affair. Keeping her emotions in check, Dorothea leaves silently and weeps alone as her darkest fears are confirmed. The next morning, she attempts to suppress an "outleap of jealous indignation and disgust" by thinking of Rosamond's husband: "All the active thought with which she had before been representing to herself the trials of Lydgate's lot, and this young marriage union which, like her own, seemed to have its hidden as well as evident troubles—all this vivid sympathetic experience returned to her now as a power: it asserted itself as acquired knowledge asserts itself and will not let us see as we saw in the day of our ignorance" (p. 605). Here, Dorothea's "vivid sympathetic experience" is presented as a kind of energizing "power" that provides her with resolve and courage—but at a price. Dorothea's expression of sympathy is made possible only by first stifling the powerful feelings implicit in the "outleap of jealous indignation and disgust" she instinctively feels. While Dorothea's sympathetic exercise makes her interpretations of the emotions of others refined and precise, like an "acquired knowledge," the passage invites readers to see the way this sympathetic power also negates personal emotions—those experienced in "the day of . . . ignorance" Dorothea must now leave behind. Like Dorothea's conscientious qualms over accepting her mother's jewelry or her desire to renounce the pleasurable activity of horseback riding, Dorothea's exercise of sympathy is associated here with self-abnegation—a kind of "coercion" that results from the "intensity of her religious disposition" (p. 51).

The suppression of personal impulses required by Dorothea's exercise of sympathy is more directly emphasized soon after

Dorothea speaks to Rosamond of her husband Lydgate's troubles. Dorothea is reminded of "the grounds of obstruction and hatred" between her and Rosamond but, worried that jealousy might dictate her response, exerts strenuous effort to control her emotions: "She was beginning to fear that she should not be able to suppress herself enough to the end of this meeting ... She tried to master herself with the thought that this might be a turning-point in three lives—not in her own; no, there the irrevocable had happened, but—in those three lives which were touching hers with the solemn neighborhood of danger and distress" (pp. 610–1). Here, Dorothea's self-policing in the service of the ideal of sympathy appears to readers as demanding as any of de Certeau's strategies. The words "fear," "suppress," and "master" signify the weight of the constraint Dorothea imposes upon herself. This "solemn" effort at self-mastery realizes a rigorous model of virtue at the expense of expressing human emotion. Instead of giving free play to spontaneous impulse, Dorothea instead directs her will in accordance with a kind of religious or "scriptural" obligation—one "that seek[s] to create ... conformity with abstract models" of behavior.²⁷ Censoring her impulses of personal feeling until they conform to an idealized standard, here—as elsewhere in the novel—Dorothea is "habitually controlled by ... thoughtfulness for others" (p. 179).

If *Middlemarch* uses Dorothea's exchange with Rosamond to suggest that sympathetic regulation comes at the cost of emotional spontaneity, then the novel also uses this scene to reveal the way in which sympathy instantiates a moral hierarchy. After witnessing the "self-forgetful ardour" Dorothea displays when offering to assist Lydgate, the narrator describes Rosamond as feeling "something like bashful timidity before a superior" (p. 610). This perceived sense of moral inferiority manifests as a sense of moral coercion: Rosamond finds herself "urged by a mysterious necessity to free herself from something that oppressed her as if it were blood guiltiness" (p. 612). As in the previous scene, the narrator's choice of rhetoric once again places emphasis on the constraining effects of Dorothea's actions: Rosamond immediately feels "oppressed" rather than liberated by Dorothea's act of moral superiority. The novel's emphasis on the hierarchical implications of Dorothea's sympathetic practice are not limited to this scene alone: Celia Brooke is hurt by the "assumption of superiority" implicit in Dorothea's resistance to accepting their mother's jewels, and Casaubon is offended by the pity Dorothea feels for him when his heart condition worsens (p. 38; see also pp. 349–50).

Along with Rosamond's theatricality and Lydgate's science, Dorothea's sympathy is presented through ironizing rhetoric, revealing dialogue, and character juxtapositions that all invite readers to take critical distance from its strategic implications. As different as the practices of these characters are, they are all shown to rely on techniques of emotional regulation that result in hierarchical understandings of their social world.²⁸ I now want to explore *Middlemarch's* depiction of characters whose practices are valorized by the novel's implied author precisely for their expressions of tactical resistance to such processes.

Middlemarch offers generous depictions of several characters who enact an ethos of enjoyment at odds with the strategic ethos enacted by characters such as Rosamond, Lydgate, and Dorothea. In the novel's opening scene, Celia Brooke's common sense is favorably juxtaposed with her sister Dorothea's self-abnegation as they dispute the extent to which Christian women are permitted to wear jewelry: by defending the legitimacy of worldly pleasure against the intrusion of religious regulation, Celia expresses her own version of tactical resistance to Puritan discipline. Farebrother is another character whose embrace of spontaneity is favorably contrasted with modes of discipline enacted by other characters. A foil to more strategic characters such as Nicholas Bulstrode and Lydgate, Farebrother displays minimal concern for how he is perceived by others and equally little interest in regulating others' perceptions of his behavior: his conversations with Lydgate display "a desire to do with as little pretence as possible," and he frequents whist tables even though this makes him appear "too lax for a clergyman" (pp. 161 and 170–1). The most conspicuous foil to the mode of discipline embraced by Dorothea is neither Celia nor Farebrother, however, but Will Ladislaw. Ladislaw describes the sense of responsibility Dorothea feels for the well-being of all people as a "fanaticism of sympathy," and he defends an antithetical ethos of carefree enjoyment by arguing that the world "is being taken care of when you feel delight" (pp. 199–200). Ladislaw's amateur excursions into painting early in the novel express this ethos of enjoyment particularly well. Painting because he takes pleasure in it rather than out of a desire to add to his accomplishments, Ladislaw's dilettantism enacts a comparatively liberated alternative to the more strategic labors of characters such as Rosamond and Lydgate.

While all these characters enact alternatives to the modes of discipline criticized by the novel, none of these characters fully succeeds in avoiding complicity with strategic thought and behav-

ior. Celia's careful concern for social conventions, Farebrother's selfless act of renunciation, and Ladislav's fastidious attention to his honor implicate each in degrees of strategic self-regulation. Given these other characters' concerns to adhere to various forms of social and moral authority, the character who enacts the clearest positive alternative to strategic modes of discipline is the idle young gentleman, Fred Vincy.

The adolescent Fred might seem an unlikely candidate for playing a serious role in the novel's overall ethical scheme. Indeed, Fred's own comedic narrative trajectory from playful idleness to disciplined roles of responsible farmer and devoted husband might suggest that the novel's implied author cares little about the ethical investments of his youth. However, the novel's attentive presentation of the playful ethos Fred enacts as a young man suggests that this ethos has a possibly greater significance within the novel's rhetorical structure. By resisting strategic practices and perspectives of other characters in the novel, the young Fred allows readers to perceive a relatively liberated and nonjudgmental alternative to repressive and hierarchical modes of behavior criticized in the novel.

Early in the novel, Fred's behavior notably expresses an ethos of ease. Rather than straining under the weight of distant purposes or grand aspirations, Fred's practice is less regulated and controlled than that of the novel's other characters. The narrator describes Fred variously as "of a hopeful disposition"; as "a spirited young fellow, with a good appetite for the best of everything"; and as being "so good-tempered that if he looked glum under scolding, it was chiefly for propriety's sake" (pp. 131, 121, and 206). The terms emphasized here—"disposition," "appetite," and "temper[]"—are unconnected with the burdens of deliberate analysis or disciplined practice. Like de Certeau's tactics, Fred's practice is "habitual and non-reflective"—an art not of conscious intentions and settled purposes but "of manipulating and enjoying" that embraces a "mobility of goals and desires" that offer themselves in the moment.²⁹ The novel's presentation of Fred's ethical approach in such moments makes it visible as a more impulsive and less deliberate alternative to the strenuous forms of self-control that we have seen exhibited in Rosamond's theatrical artifice and Dorothea's self-abnegating sympathy.

Given that Fred's egoism is presented as instinctive, it might be easy for informed readers to group Fred alongside George Eliot's other memorable egoists who are controlled by their wayward desires, such Hetty Sorrell in *Adam Bede*. In sharp contrast to

George Eliot's depiction of Hetty, however, Fred is presented to readers as a character who possesses a coherent and principled commitment to a specific plan of life. Just as readers of *Middlemarch* are invited to understand Lydgate's aspiration to become a hero of science or Dorothea's aspiration to achieve spiritual perfection, they are invited to understand Fred's aspiration to enjoy life's pleasures: "usually bright and careless," Fred's eyes convey a readiness "to give attention to anything that held out a promise of amusement" (p. 526). *Middlemarch* presents Fred's pursuit of amusement not merely as something he happens to like but also as something he aspires to like. We are told that Fred thinks of himself as a "man ... of pleasure" and that he implicitly views himself as having a "right to be free from anything disagreeable" (pp. 525 and 206). Such passages create a picture of Fred as a reflective being committed to a distinctive ethos of strong evaluation that readers can learn to understand and potentially appreciate. Although several of these descriptions of Fred's consciously endorsed plan of life are placed in a context that subjects his beliefs to ironizing scrutiny, one notable exception occurs in the narrator's favorable description of the Vincy family, which adheres to an ethos that Fred best expresses: "The Vincys had the readiness to enjoy, the rejection of all anxiety, and the belief in life as a merry lot, which made a house exceptional in most county towns at that time, when Evangelicalism had cast a certain suspicion as of plague-infection over the few amusements which survived in the provinces" (p. 152).³⁰ In contrast to the narrow-minded asceticism of Evangelicalism, the Vincy family, and Fred in particular, embrace an ethos that rejects anxiety in favor of a "readiness to enjoy."

The word George Eliot's narrator applies to Fred's love of enjoyment, which includes an affection for gambling at dice, is "[h]opefulness": a quality that could be associated with the excitement of improvisation or the pleasure involved "in making a throw of any kind" (p. 209). The novel's appreciation for Fred's ethos of purposeless spontaneity is conveyed not only through charitable descriptions of his carefree attitude but also through carefully selected dialogue by which Fred offers articulate criticisms of strategic behaviors. For example, it is not difficult to intuit that the implied author of *Middlemarch* shares Fred's distaste for the "finicking notions" of Rosamond's finishing school that are incompatible with Fred's taste for improvisation (p. 106). And given the narrator's own critical evaluation of Lydgate's "disdainful" attitude, Fred's criticism of Lydgate for being a "prig ... [who] is

always making you a present of his opinions” hits the mark with similar force (pp. 143 and 106–7). For the implied reader, Fred’s justified criticisms of characters whose behaviors and judgments seek to regulate comportment and preserve status lend indirect legitimacy to the contrasting ethical approach he embodies. In addition to his conscious embrace of experiences of enjoyment, Fred’s ethical approach also involves a stance of nonjudgmental tolerance. Fred articulates this relaxed approach to value judgment in an explanation to Farebrother of why he is not prepared to argue against the doctrines of his clerical school: “I think it would be rather ridiculous in me to urge scruples of that sort, as if I were a judge” (p. 413). By juxtaposing the pride implicit in Rosamond’s and Lydgate’s approaches to matters of judgment with the simple humility and tolerance of Fred’s approach, the implied author of *Middlemarch* makes the latter stance appear more attractive to readers. The rhetorical effect of this contrast is to invite readers of *Middlemarch* to resist strategic discourses of “transparency” and “totality” that adjudicate between acceptable and unacceptable modes of behavior in favor of tactical approaches such as Fred’s—approaches that occur within “spaces of darkness” or uncertainty and thus allow for flexibility and mobility.³¹

Insofar as Fred successfully expresses a tactical plan of life that other characters do not, his depiction makes visible the ethical complexity in George Eliot’s treatment of secondary characters. Fred Vincy’s practice—like that of Celia Brooke, Will Ladislaw, and Camden Farebrother—articulates values of enjoyment, mobility, impulsiveness, and tolerance that contrast favorably with the comparatively repressed, disciplined, and hierarchical practices of more strategic characters. Rather than functioning only to reinforce a one-sided evaluative distinction between sympathy and egoism, the juxtaposition of Fred and Dorothea also privileges Fred’s tactical spontaneity at the expense of Dorothea’s strategic discipline.

George Eliot’s depiction of peripheral characters such as Fred who exceed the terms of her novels’ ostensible moral schemes is not only an accident of the creative process but a self-conscious part of her fictional practice. The much-discussed description of the pier glass in chapter 27 of *Middlemarch* explicitly describes the kind of conflicting evaluative modes that we have seen exhibited in the novel’s character system. George Eliot’s narrator uses the metaphor of a candle to describe the function of individual perspectives in arranging and ordering personal experience while also suggesting that any given arrangement is only one of many possibilities:

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. These things are a parable. The scratches are events, and the candle is the egoism of any person now absent.

(p. 232)

The narrator's description of the way that a candle's light supplies an ordered view of scratches in the pier glass—illuminating "concentric circles" that appear as satellites in relation to a "little sun"—can be viewed as a metaphor for strong evaluative perspectives that privilege goods such as sympathy or tactics at the expense of other goods. From such perspectives, the good of primary importance in a person's life appears as a little sun, and the view from which that sun is illuminated determines the way in which the actions of oneself and others—the scratches on the pier glass—are interpreted. The candle's illumination is akin to the clarity afforded by what George Eliot's narrator here calls "egoism," or what I have been calling "strong evaluation": that is, a perspective that interprets human behavior in light of a single good of primary importance while allowing alternative goods to be seen dimly or left in darkness.

Although I began this article by describing strong evaluative contrasts in *Middlemarch's* character system that illuminate the central "sun" of Dorothea's sympathy, I have also explored the extent to which relations between characters make visible a different tactical perspective, from whence "the lights and shadows ... fall with a certain difference" (p. 193). The novel's depictions of characters such as Fred, Dorothea, Ladislav, and Lydgate are many-sided in this way: less like a candle narrowly illuminating a single meaning and more like a prism susceptible to illumination in light of multiple meanings.

Although George Eliot's use of the character juxtapositions borrows from older literary predecessors and traditions, her use of many-sided character juxtapositions in novels such as *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), *Middlemarch*, and *Daniel Deronda* gives distinct

expression to ideals of midcentury Victorian liberal philosophy.³² Along with other Victorian novels such as Anthony Trollope's *The Way We Live Now* (1875) and George Gissing's *The Odd Women* (1893), George Eliot's *Middlemarch* employs systematic oppositions between characters to promote flexible habits of evaluation in readers. Insofar as novels such as *Middlemarch* use character contrasts not only to invite strong commitment to particular plans of life but also to invite critical reflection on such plans, such novels ask readers to adopt liberal habits of mind to make sense of their aesthetic structure. To understand and evaluate *Middlemarch*'s depictions of character fully, readers must learn to practice many-sided judgment.

NOTES

¹ F. R. Leavis, *The Great Tradition: George Eliot, Henry James, Joseph Conrad* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1948), p. 29. Intersections between liberal ideals and novelistic form are also visible in critical judgments as diverse as Lionel Trilling's appreciation for the novel's unparalleled ability to convey "the extent of human variety and the value of this variety" (*The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society* [New York: NYRB Classics, 2008], p. 222); M. M. Bakhtin's celebration of the novel's capacity to include a "social diversity of speech types" ("Discourse in the Novel," in *The Novel: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory, 1900–2000*, ed. Dorothy J. Hale [Malden MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006], pp. 481–510, 485); and Martha C. Nussbaum's assertion that "the moral imagination is encouraged by the ... activity of novel-reading" (*Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* [Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1990], p. 166). Insofar as such statements associate novels with ethically sensitive responses to diverse forms of life, they associate the genre, either implicitly or explicitly, with the ends of liberal humanism.

² Nussbaum's acknowledgment of the limitations of *Love's Knowledge* could just as easily be applied to Leavis's *The Great Tradition* or Trilling's *The Liberal Imagination*. Although Nussbaum describes her project as "rooted in [a] love for certain novels," she concedes that "[n]o claim about novels in general ... could possibly emerge from this book" (p. 23). If the concrete focus of Leavis, Trilling, and Nussbaum on their love of particular novels explains too little about what makes the novel form ethically distinctive, then the more abstract focus of Bakhtin on concepts such as heteroglossia and dialogism has different limitations. Bakhtin's reluctance to discuss specific novels in detail makes it difficult to see what makes particular novels more effective than others in promoting the liberal and humanistic ethos his writing privileges.

³ David Wayne Thomas, Elaine Hadley, and Amanda Anderson have all analyzed conjunctions between ideals of mid-Victorian liberalism and Victorian novels. For instance, Thomas analyzes Camden Farebrother's cultivation of reflective agency in George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1874) (see *Cultivating Victorians: Liberal Culture and the Aesthetic* [Philadelphia: Univ.

of Pennsylvania Press, 2004], pp. 7–15); Hadley discusses Septimus Harding's display of disinterestedness in Anthony Trollope's *The Warden* (1855) ("A Body of Thought: The Form of Liberal Individualism," in *Living Liberalism: Practical Citizenship in Mid-Victorian Britain* [Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2010], pp. 63–124); and Anderson addresses Daniel Deronda's expression of many-sidedness in George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* (1876) ("The Cultivation of Partiality: George Eliot and the Jewish Question," in *The Powers of Distance: Cosmopolitanism and the Cultivation of Detachment* [Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2001], pp. 119–46). By analyzing how novels use exemplary characters to thematize liberal ideals directly, however, this body of work does not consider how novels promote such ideals through the formal structures in which characters are presented.

⁴ John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, 4th edn. (London: Longmans, Green, Reader, and Dyer, 1869), p. 130.

⁵ Henry James asserts in his 1873 review of *Middlemarch* that "we care less so about Fred Vincy than appears to be expected of us" and associates Fred's depiction with the tendency of the novel "to make light of the serious elements of the story and to sacrifice them to the more trivial ones" ("Henry James, review, *Galaxy*, March 1873," in *George Eliot: The Critical Heritage*, ed. David Carroll [London: Routledge, 2013], pp. 355–9, 355). Thomas, Bruce Martin, and Robert Scholes follow James in seeing Fred as a character who has little ethical significance in his own right, viewing him as a negative foil to the novel's favored sympathetic practices (see Thomas, p. 11; Martin, "Fred Vincy and the Unravelling of *Middlemarch*," *PLL* 30, 1 [Winter 1994]: 3–24; and Scholes, "The Novel as Ethical Paradigm?," *Novel* 21, 2/3 [Winter/Spring 1988]: 188–96, 192). J. Hillis Miller sees Fred's story as separated from Dorothea Brooke's for tonal reasons as well as ethical reasons, asserting that George Eliot employs a "lower, pastoral, comic, or ironic style ... for the courtship of Fred Vincy and Mary Garth" (*Reading for Our Time: "Adam Bede" and "Middlemarch" Revisited* [Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 2012], p. 141)—a register that contrasts sharply with what Hilary Mackie describes as the novel's use of "a classical, if not actually an epic, model for Dorothea" to narrate her story ("The Key to Epic Life? Classical Study in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*," *Classical World* 103, 1 [Fall 2009]: 53–67, 65). James Phelan's account of *Middlemarch* offers a notable exception to the critical trend of viewing Fred's narrative as disparate from the novel's overall ethical scheme. As Phelan has it, the kindness that Caleb Garth and Farebrother display to Fred plays a critical role in justifying the narrator's concluding assertion that "the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts" (George Eliot, *Middlemarch* [New York: W. W. Norton, 1977], p. 578, qtd. in Phelan, *Reading People, Reading Plots: Character, Progression, and the Interpretation of Narrative* [Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1989], p. 198).

⁶ For discussions of Mill's influence on George Eliot, see Avrom Fleishman, *George Eliot's Intellectual Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2010), pp. 44–72 and 194–6; and Catherine Gallagher, *The Industrial Reformation of English Fiction: Social Discourse and Narrative Form, 1832–1867* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1988), pp. 228–37.

⁷ Mill, pp. 105–6.

⁸ Charles Taylor, "What Is Human Agency?," in *Philosophical Papers Volume 1, Human Agency and Language* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1985), pp. 15–43, 23.

⁹ See Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2012), pp. 212–3.

¹⁰ Mill, pp. 105–6.

¹¹ Alex Woloch, *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2009), p. 14; see also p. 47.

¹² Woloch, p. 47.

¹³ For a reading of George Eliot's *Romola* (1863) that invokes Woloch's idea of the character system to analyze the privilege the novel accords to sympathy, see Jacob Jewusiak's "Large-Scale Sympathy and Simultaneity in George Eliot's *Romola*," *SEL* 54, 4 (Autumn 2014): 853–74, 855–8.

¹⁴ See Nina Auerbach, "Dorothea's Lost Dog," in "*Middlemarch*" in the *Twenty-First Century*, ed. Karen Chase (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2006), pp. 87–105; and Jeremy Tambling, "*Middlemarch*, Realism, and the Birth of the Clinic," *ELH* 57, 4 (Winter 1990): 939–60.

¹⁵ *Middlemarch* invites readers to adopt postures of strong evaluation favoring sympathy when comparing Dorothea's behavior with the various egoistic preoccupations of other characters, including the narrow scholarly obsessions that prevent Edward Casaubon from attuning to the feelings of his young wife, the optimistic self-absorption that prevents Fred from considering the needs of a hard-working family, and the concern for nice furniture that prevents Rosamond Vincy from supporting her husband when his medical practice is embroiled in scandal.

¹⁶ For a discussion of Victorian earnestness, see Walter E. Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind, 1830–1870* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1957), pp. 218–62.

¹⁷ For Houghton's discussion of "the open and flexible mind," see pp. 176–80.

¹⁸ Mill, p. 83.

¹⁹ Mill, p. 87.

²⁰ My focus on many-sided judgment in *Middlemarch* extends the work of scholars who have already emphasized the difficulty that George Eliot's novels present to readers seeking to take ethically weighted contrasts between characters at face value. See, for instance, Miller, "Narrative and History," *ELH* 41, 3 (Autumn 1974): 455–73; David Lodge, "*Middlemarch* and the Idea of the Classic Realist Text," in "*Middlemarch*": *George Eliot*, ed. John Peck (London: Macmillan, 1992), pp. 45–64; Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth, "Negotiating *Middlemarch*," in "*Middlemarch*" in the *Twenty-First Century*, pp. 107–31; and Auerbach.

²¹ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1988), p. xix. Although I am not aware of previous scholarship that uses de Certeau's philosophy to analyze George Eliot's fiction, my focus on practices of resistance to power in her fiction supplements the work of Jeff Nunokawa, who draws from Irving Goffman to analyze other practices that George Eliot's characters use to resist the coercive pressure of regulatory norms (see Nunokawa, "Eros and Isolation: The Antisocial George Eliot," *ELH* 69, 4 [Winter 2002]: 835–60).

²² The narrator of *Middlemarch* calls attention to the importance of resistance to Evangelical influence in a description of the Vincy family (see George Eliot, *Middlemarch: A Study of Provincial Life*, ed. Gregory Maertz [Peterborough ON: Broadview Press, 2004], p. 152). All subsequent references to *Middlemarch* are from this edition and will appear parenthetically in the text and notes by page number. For more on George Eliot's complicated relationship to ascetic Evangelicalism, see Fleishman, pp. 12–44.

²³ This analysis is indebted to Maria Su Wang's discussion of the same scene in "Realism's Operative Paradox: Character Autonomy vs. Authorial Construction in *Middlemarch*," *Narrative* 23, 3 (October 2015): 291–311, 297.

²⁴ De Certeau, p. 25.

²⁵ George Eliot, *Adam Bede* (1871; New York: Penguin, 1959), pp. 177–81.

²⁶ For de Certeau's discussion of the tactical peasants of Pernambuco who refuse to objectify and totalize their views of experience, see pp. 15–8.

²⁷ De Certeau, p. 29.

²⁸ For more on connections between sympathy and repression in George Eliot's fiction, see John Kucich, *Repression in Victorian Fiction: Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, and Charles Dickens* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1987).

²⁹ De Certeau, pp. 66 and xxii.

³⁰ For instance, Fred's gambling failures provide context that ironizes his belief that "the prospect of success is certain" and his assumption that events can be fashioned "according to desire" (p. 209).

³¹ De Certeau, p. 18.

³² As a formal technique, George Eliot's use of antithetical character foils is anticipated by Sophocles' juxtaposition of Antigone's familial piety with Creon's rational statecraft in *Antigone* (441 BCE), Miguel de Cervantes' juxtaposition of Don Quixote's idealistic chivalry with Sancho Panza's skeptical practicality in *Don Quixote of La Mancha* (1605), and especially by Jane Austen's juxtaposition of Henry Crawford's energetic theatricality and Fanny Price's disciplined sincerity in *Mansfield Park* (1814).