

AMBITION VS DUTY

We publish below two succinct essays from *Il Romanzo*, the five-volume survey of the novel as a form, edited by Franco Moretti and published by Einaudi between 2001 and 2003, which come from a section entitled 'The Inner Landscape', devoted to works of the nineteenth century exemplifying the new map of the passions. One of these, Rossana Rossanda on Dostoevsky's *Idiot* as a rare representation of goodness in fiction, appeared in *NLR* 18. In this issue, Francesco Fiorentino and Enrica Villari address the two opposite values of ambition and duty, taking Stendhal's *Le Rouge et Le Noir* as a classic of the first and George Eliot's *Middlemarch* as one of the second. Texts of notable elegance, alone neither requires further introduction. In conjunction, however, they offer a pointed illustration of contrasts within the moral-political universe of French and English letters in the epoch after Waterloo. Stendhal's admiration—never uncritical—for the figure of Napoleon, under whom he served in Russia, and detestation of the Restoration order, is explicit in the narrative of his novel. Less well-known are his trenchant views of English society, of which he drew up a systematic survey after the last of his three visits there, in 1826: still in the grip of a selfish aristocracy, a middle class impervious to any idea not connected to profit, labourers reduced to thinking machines, a culture saturated with the compulsions of work and religion—horrible tristesse de l'Angleterre, une vie pure de joie—whose pervasive idiom was cant. Eliot, when she helped edit the *Westminster Review*, with which Stendhal had connections in its Benthamite days, was a translator of David Strauss, of Feuerbach and Spinoza. But religious scepticism never became any kind of political radicalism: sharing Carlyle's view of the French Revolution, fearful of mob violence in 1848, she refused even Mazzini as a dangerous conspirator. By the time of her great novels, she was a cautious conservative, warning working men not to get above themselves and declining any support for women's suffrage. For her the figure of ambition was the unscrupulous intriguer who is the villain of *Romola*. Its antithesis was the modest sense of duty, freely chosen and best practised in private life, that becomes the moral of *Middlemarch*. It was a lesson congenial to Victorian society, where the Queen was among Eliot's admirers. Enrica Villari ends her fine reflection on the novel with a passage from a French champion of Eliot's vision of the world, counterposing it to that of Zola. The first critic to advance a Darwinian theory of literary evolution, Ferdinand Brunetière is today mainly remembered as a leading supporter of the verdict on Dreyfus.

DUTY

Middlemarch

MIDDLEMARCH IS A NOVEL set in a provincial town of England in the era of reform that began in the 1830s.¹ Its two young protagonists, Dorothea Brooke and Tertius Lydgate, aspire to play their part in ‘changing the world a little’. Unlike many characters in nineteenth-century novels, impelled by a drive to possess and consume (money, success, status), they are moved by the opposite impulse: to give themselves to a cause or to fulfil a duty. But in their case, these are not traditional responsibilities, but solitary modern vocations. Kierkegaard wrote in 1843 that it was a mistake to consider duty as a collection of external rules. Were it so, the ethical life would be ugly and dull: ‘If the ethical did not have some much deeper connection with personal being, it would always be very difficult to defend it against the aesthetic.’² The fascination of the nineteenth century with duty was not ‘a love of the law for its own sake, but rather a concern with the hygiene of the self’.³ Duty, no longer abstract, could become the legitimate subject matter of a novel.

In George Eliot’s work, duty—even traditional duty—is never mere conformity to a dogma. It is rather a basic facet of a balanced personality. Already, for the humble characters of her early novels, where duty might seem no more than compliance with tradition, what matters is not the small task fulfilled, but the way it becomes a constitutive part of their being. ‘To keep one’s kitchen spotlessly clean’—as Proust puts it in his essay on *Adam Bede*—‘is an essential, almost a religious duty, and an attractive one too.’⁴ Duty becomes a value in itself. In her short story ‘Brother Jacob’, written ten years before *Middlemarch*, Eliot had shown that—like any other form of social change—women’s emancipation from

menial labour did not necessarily lead to a higher, nobler existence, but could engender sloth and moral corruption, dissolving personality in the passive consumption of pleasure and luxury.⁵ Dorothea and Lydgate do not run this very modern risk: their dignity lies in resisting the pleasure principle in the name of a higher vocation. But because they are modern, they have to forge, alone, a new sense of duty for themselves. Their duties are subjective, not enjoined by any law. Dominated by this ethical imperative, their lives are stories of mistakes and existential failures.

Dorothea is not yet twenty years old. In possession of a substantial dowry and as out of place in Middlemarch as ‘a fine quotation from the Bible,—or from one of our elder poets,—in a paragraph of to-day’s newspaper’, she adopts a singular approach in her search for a husband. Dorothea disdains the traditional duties of a wife and mother. Her mind is ‘theoretic’, and ‘yearned by its nature after some lofty conception of the world which might frankly include the parish of Tipton and her own rule of conduct there’. So she decides to marry Casaubon, a man of learning old enough to be her father. She sees him as a latter-day Locke or Pascal, a great man with whom to share her great project. It is a fatal mistake. Poor Casaubon cannot live up to Dorothea’s expectations. He comes to realize that his pursuit of knowledge is doomed to failure, and this bitter awareness unfits him to be either teacher or husband for Dorothea. The marriage proves a painful fiasco.

Lydgate is as little conventional as Dorothea. He despises the privileges of his aristocratic birth and venerates the great physicians of the past. After studying medicine in the great capital cities of Europe, he has rejected the allure of the metropolis to withdraw to Middlemarch, where he plans to reform medical practice (establishing a hospital for the cure of fevers) and pursue daring anatomical research (hoping to discover the original human tissue). His vocation is to ‘do good small work for Middlemarch,

¹ This is a translation of ‘Il dovere: *Middlemarch*’, in Franco Moretti, ed., *Il romanzo*, vol. 1, Rome 2001.

² Søren Kierkegaard, ‘Equilibrium between the Aesthetic and the Ethical in the Development of Personality’, in Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, Harmondsworth 1992.

³ Lionel Trilling, ‘In Mansfield Park’, *Encounter*, September 1954.

⁴ Marcel Proust, *By Way of Saint-Beuve*, trans. Sylvia Townsend Warner, London 1958, p. 282.

⁵ See Enrica Villari, Introduction to George Eliot, *Jacob e suo fratello*, Venice 1999, pp. 9–34, esp. 23–9.

and great work for the world'. But a disastrous marriage with a profligate, frivolous wife saddles him with conspicuous debts, and he ends up a rich and fashionable doctor in London, author of a minor treatise on gout. Universally considered a success, 'he always regarded himself a failure'.

Leslie Stephen thought all of Eliot's characters were illustrations of a common theme, of which Dorothea and Lydgate could be seen as variants. We are asked, he thought, to sympathize with the noble aspirations of generous and passionate souls, knowing that they 'cannot receive any full satisfaction within the commonplace conditions of this prosaic world'.⁶ But this is not so. This nineteenth-century version of the relationship between the self and the world was for George Eliot only a half-truth, because it was a truth that was too consoling:

Some gentlemen have made an amazing figure in literature by general discontent with the universe as a trap of dulness into which their great souls have fallen by mistake; but the sense of a stupendous self and an insignificant world may have its consolations. Lydgate's discontent was much harder to bear; it was the sense that there was a grand existence in thought and effective action lying around him, while his self was being narrowed into the miserable isolation of egoistic fears, and vulgar anxieties for events that might allay such fears.⁷

It is true that the fresco of society in *Middlemarch* is no less powerful than that of Balzac's novels in its depiction of the 'hampering threadlike pressure of small social conditions, and their frustrating complexity', and that Eliot believed there was no creature 'whose inward being is so strong that it is not greatly determined by what lies outside it'. Yet the failures of Dorothea and Lydgate have more to do with the character of their vocations and the problematic nature of their modern ideas of duty. Dorothea pictures duty as something out of a novel:

I should learn everything then . . . It would be my duty to study that I might help him the better in his great works. There would be nothing trivial about our lives. Everyday-things with us would mean the greatest things. It would be like marrying Pascal. I should learn to see the truth by the same light as great men have seen it by. And then I should know what to do, when I got older: I should see how it was possible to lead a grand life here—now—in England.

⁶ Leslie Stephen, unsigned obituary article on George Eliot, *Cornhill Magazine*, February 1881, in David Carroll, ed., *George Eliot: The Critical Heritage*, New York 1971, p. 482.

⁷ All references are to the Penguin edition of *Middlemarch*.

Through duty she imagines herself rising above the banality of the world in the same confused way that Emma Bovary fantasizes about doing so through pleasure, in her first adulterous experience:

She was entering something marvellous where everything would be passion, ecstasy, delirium; blue immensity was all about her; the great summits of sentiment glittered in her mind's eye, ordinary existence appeared far below in the distance, in shadow, in the gaps between these peaks.⁸

In their uncanny similarity of feeling and quixotic imagination, the heroine of duty and the heroine of pleasure are cousins. Dorothea indulges in romantic fantasies about the one no less than Emma does about the other. Casaubon proves as much of a disappointment for Dorothea as Rodolphe for Emma. At a crux in her life, Emma experiences a mystical crisis, evidence that the absolute pursuit of pleasure and its absolute negation may answer to the same need. A sense of *ennui* and rejection of ordinary life are at the root of both. It is this rejection that distinguishes the modern calling from traditional conceptions of duty. 'To keep one's kitchen spotlessly clean' holds no attractions for Dorothea, and not simply for reasons of class.

From the outset, in the 'Prelude' to the novel, the motif of late-born Saint Therasas indicates that the fate of a lofty vocation in an unheroic world will be the theme of *Middlemarch*. Bearing on it is the cult of the hero in Thomas Carlyle. It might be said of Dorothea and Lydgate that they react to what for him was the greatest enemy of heroism: the 'Doctrine of Motives' as the ultimate driving force in the universe, which—as he put it—taught that there can be 'nothing but a wretched love of Pleasure, fear of Pain; that Hunger, of applause, of cash, of whatsoever victual it may be, is the ultimate fact of man's life'.⁹ Yet the initial lament for the destiny of belated Saint Therasas, denied the chance of an epic life, has

⁸ Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, trans. Geoffrey Wall, Harmondsworth 1992, p. 131.

⁹ Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship & The Heroic in History*, Oakland 1993, p. 149. The influence of Carlyle on Eliot has been neglected, but was fundamental. Her entire body of work, with its celebration of realism and the attractions of everyday life, can be read as an antidote to his cult of the heroic, yet would be unthinkable without Carlyle and what Eliot described as the vitality of his 'dangerous paradoxes': see 'Thomas Carlyle', *Leader*, 27 October 1855, in George Eliot, *Selected Essays, Poems and Other Writings*, Harmondsworth 1990, pp. 343–8, esp. 344.

too often drawn attention away from the fact that the novel is constructed against, if not the idea of heroism itself, then certainly the sublimely abstract notions of duty cherished by its leading protagonists.

At the beginning of the novel we cannot but be impressed by Dorothea's nobility of character. But no less by the negative traits that accompany it. Dorothea's sense of duty takes the form of hero-worship—'heroes as men of letters' in Carlyle's vision—which she directs at Locke, Pascal, Milton, Hooker and every other great sage of the past. The consequence is a bookish, abstract conception of duty, tainted with the fanaticism of its Puritan forebears. The asceticism of Dorothea's rejection of even the simplest pleasures (her refusal to inherit her mother's jewellery; her abandonment of riding; her marriage to a withered old man) is not free from a strong sense of superiority to her sister Celia, whose desires are more earthly. In choosing Casaubon she is as insensitive to his real needs as he is to hers, as the famous aside in Chapter XXIX makes clear: '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?' The elevated asceticism of her notion of duty at the start of the novel has not immunized her from what Eliot calls our 'moral stupidity':

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

This is the novel's most significant recurring idea, to which Eliot returns almost obsessively; she finds traces of moral stupidity in the most surprising places and characters, starting with Dorothea. Moral stupidity is the stumbling-block of all the false notions of duty in the novel. Nowhere more starkly than in the piety of a master of self-deceit, the puritanical banker Bulstrode. He is the archetypal modern man, bending religion's higher law to his own will:

He was simply a man whose desires had been stronger than his theoretic beliefs, and who had gradually explained the gratification of his desires

into satisfactory agreement with those beliefs. If this be hypocrisy, it is a process which shows itself occasionally in us all, to whatever confession we belong.

This egotistical myopia, with which the romantic imaginings of Dorothea (and Emma Bovary too) are imbued, is a common trait of almost all the characters. Reflecting on Dorothea's choice of husband, Will Ladislaw concludes that 'she must have made some original romance for herself in this marriage', and he is not mistaken. Then there is Rosamond, completely engrossed not in Tertius Lydgate as he really was, but rather in her projection of him, and the romance of his 'good birth'. So too there is the romance of Casaubon and Lydgate about women, every bit as unrealistic as that of Dorothea and Rosamond.

Dorothea starts to free herself from her 'moral stupidity' when her notion of duty shifts, in the unhappy experience of her marriage. Things begin to unravel during her honeymoon in Rome. Dorothea becomes aware of the chasm between her fantasy of marriage to a great scholar and the reality of a man desiccated and embittered by his intellectual failure. But this is not the whole story. To Dorothea, the architectural and artistic beauty of Rome forms a painful contrast with the wretched condition of its inhabitants. With an engrained puritanical distrust of the visual arts, she asks herself: what is the relationship between art and life? Upon the naive realization that they do not coincide, Dorothea unhesitatingly makes her choice. The magnificence of Catholic Rome teaches her that 'there [are] so many things which are more wanted in the world than pictures'. This aesthetic parenthesis in the novel, in which there is much talk of art, artists and German Romanticism, marks an essential step in the shaping of Dorothea's destiny. Back in England, Dorothea tells her uncle Mr Brooke that her dislike of Tipton Grange's paintings comes from their contrast with the poverty and suffering of the farm labourers around them. Enjoyment of their formal beauty seems to her 'a wicked attempt to find delight in what is false, while we don't mind how hard the truth is for the neighbours outside our walls'. There is the same disconnection between her initial abstract sense of duty and the reality of her disagreeable, unhappy husband:

She was no longer struggling against the perception of facts, but adjusting herself to their clearest perception; and now when she looked steadily at her

husband's failure, still more at his possible consciousness of failure, she seemed to be looking along the one track where duty became tenderness.

In a memorable scene, overcome by resentment at Casaubon's harsh treatment of her, Dorothea forces herself to consider 'a litany of pictured sorrows and of silent cries', those of the man now diagnosed with a heart disease who 'for the first time found himself looking into the eyes of death'. Ultimately, sympathy triumphs over resentment. It is late at night. Dorothea waits for her husband to come out of the library, and elicits the miracle of the only kind words he utters in the entire novel. A concrete duty replaces an abstract one, as her inward-looking, high-minded self-absorption is transformed into tenderness and compassion. This is the secret truth at the centre of Dorothea's story.

In 'The Fate of Pleasure', Lionel Trilling argues that the kind of modern spirituality displayed by the protagonist of Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*—lonely, full of bile, utterly scornful of comfort—was the logical outcome of a reaction against the early nineteenth century belief, expressed by Wordsworth, that 'the grand elementary principle of pleasure' constituted 'the naked and native dignity of man'. Trilling adds that it is precisely 'because it came into being at a particular time', that this spirituality 'may be regarded as a contingent and not a necessary mode of thought'.¹⁰ Dorothea's story is an early contemporary critique of this modern form of spirituality. When, at the end of the novel, Celia asks her why she submitted to Casaubon, Dorothea replies: 'Of course I submitted to him, because it was my duty; it was my feeling for him.' Dorothea marries Ladislaw in the end, a man twenty years younger than Casaubon and with whom she will have two children, proving that duty does not require the mortification of the flesh and renunciation of life that inspired her former marriage. By the end, Dorothea comes to resemble the estate manager Caleb Garth and his daughter Mary, the most traditional characters in the novel, who are often compared to the figures in Jane Austen. For them, protective loyalty to their apprentice Fred Vincy and the work ethic have been attractive duties all along. But for the Saint Theresa of *Middlemarch*, such knowledge is the outcome of a painful process of learning, from a starting point in the dangerous

¹⁰ Lionel Trilling, 'The Fate of Pleasure', in Trilling, *Beyond Culture: Essays on Literature and Learning*, London 1965, pp. 57–88, esp. 58 and 79.

modern disconnection between duty and that pleasure which constitutes the only true connection we have with life.

Lydgate's vocation does not lack a connection with life or experience. The medical profession—'the finest in the world' since it offers 'the most direct alliance between intellectual conquest and the social good'—protects Lydgate from the dangers of exaltation in solitary modern vocations. His concern for every one of his patients guarantees that sense of real life which is missing from the fruitless pursuit of a 'Key to all Mythologies' by Casaubon, whose want of it is betrayed by his reaction to the refutation of his old acquaintance Carp, which 'was kept locked in a small drawer of Mr Casaubon's desk, and also in a dark closet of his verbal memory'. Yet Lydgate's failures, too, have deep roots in a heroic conception of duty.

For this makes no allowance for lesser obligations. Lydgate's first mistake, at the beginning of the attachment to Bulstrode that will be his undoing, is to acquiesce in the banker's blackmail and vote for Tyke rather than Farebrother, as his conscience would dictate. He regards the choice between Tyke and Farebrother in the election for the new hospital chaplain as too trivial to concern him, busy as he is with the grand project of the New Fever Hospital in Middlemarch and with his scientific discoveries, which he believes will save the lives of millions of people. 'In his student's chambers, he had prearranged his social action quite differently'; that is, in an altogether loftier fashion. Lydgate considers the issue of the chaplain beneath him, deciding to make no choice at all and let matters take their course. He arrives late at the committee meeting, and fate takes its revenge: his is the casting vote. Without further reflection he opts for the unjust cause. But the 'affair of the chaplaincy remained a sore point in his memory as a case in which this petty medium of Middlemarch had been too strong for him'. In Lydgate's grandiose conception of duty, there is no room for money or women either. Yet debts and his marriage to Rosamond will be the reasons for the failure of his aspirations.

Others have noted how money—the inheritance denied Will and then refused by him when offered by Bulstrode; clergyman Farebrother's economic hardship; Fred and Lydgate's debts; the infamous codicil in Casaubon's will—plays a crucial role in the novel. In no other novelist does the commercial Protestant ethic find so clear an expression: it is a

duty, a form of moral responsibility, to acknowledge the importance of money. To take money for granted—as Fred, Lydgate and Rosamond do—is a form of selfishness and as corrupting as the compulsive avarice that transforms the relatives of the landowner Featherstone into ‘Christian Carnivora’ at his funeral. Eliot is ‘interestingly original in seeing a refusal to understand the economic realities that underlie class distinctions as a sort of vulgarity’,¹¹ and in dismissing exalted visions of existence in which a noble self confronts an abject world as banal. Against these, her novel offers an unsparing examination of Lydgate’s ‘spots of commonness’, those prejudices he shares with ‘ordinary men of the world’ which his high conceptions prevent him from recognizing.

In a letter to John Blackwood, written while she was working on *Middlemarch*, Eliot explained that her aim was to show ‘the gradual action of ordinary causes, rather than exceptional’.¹² In the summer of 1870, work on *Middlemarch* under way, she and her partner Lewes read Balzac’s *Lost Illusions* to each other. Explicit or implicit references to Balzac, ‘perhaps the most wonderful writer of fiction’,¹³ appear constantly in her writing, as if he were its exemplary antipode. There is no evil yet irresistible Carlos Herrera in *Middlemarch*, but rather the resistible force of that ‘hampering threadlike pressure of small social conditions, and their frustrating complexity’. An epistemology of extraordinary causes gives way to an epistemology of ordinary ones. Lydgate’s story of lost illusions shows how, for all his genuine aspirations to improve the world and himself, he will end by admitting that he must ‘do as other men do, and think what will please the world and bring in money’. It is a tale of the small, recurrent, subtle pressures to which he submits inadvertently, because they wear not the lurid mask of Herrera, but the innocuous appearance of a pretty face:

For in the multitude of middle-aged men who go about their vocations in a daily course determined for them much in the same way as the tie of their cravats, there is always a good number who once meant to shape their own deeds and alter the world a little. The story of their coming to be shapen after the average and fit to be packed by the gross, is hardly ever told even

¹¹ David Daiches, *George Eliot: Middlemarch*, London 1963, p. 47.

¹² Letter of 24 July 1871, in Gordon S. Haight, ed., *The George Eliot Letters: Vol. V, 1869–73*, New Haven 1955, p. 168.

¹³ George Eliot, ‘The Morality of “Wilhelm Meister”’, *Leader*, 21 July 1855, in Eliot, *Selected Essays*, pp. 307–10, especially p. 309.

in their consciousness; for perhaps their ardour in generous unpaid toil cooled as imperceptibly as the ardour of other youthful loves, till one day their earlier self walked like a ghost in its old home and made the new furniture ghastly. Nothing in the world more subtle than the process of their gradual change! In the beginning they inhaled it unknowingly; you and I may have sent some of our breath towards infecting them, when we uttered our conforming falsities or drew our silly conclusions: or perhaps it came with the vibrations from a woman's glance.

It is the foreshadowing of Rosamond, well before Lydgate makes her acquaintance. He will end by calling her his 'basil plant' which 'flourished wonderfully on a murdered man's brains'.

The epistemology of ordinary causes explored in *Middlemarch* was of fundamental importance in the cultural history of the nineteenth century. It involved a restitution of responsibility to individuals for their actions, reopening a space in which the ancient notion of duty regained value. At the time, it also meant going against another unnecessary dogma which was taking hold in the best French literary culture, as was immediately understood by French literary critics of the 1880s, who counterposed Eliot's example to Zola's fiction:

We believe that every man determines his own destiny, that he is the creator of his own happiness or the inept and criminal author of his own misfortune. That is one way of conceiving life. Zola believes, on the contrary, that 'vice and virtue are products, like vitriol and sugar' and that we form a malleable substance, shaped by a random combination of circumstances. That is another way of conceiving life.¹⁴

Translated by Allesandra Asteriti

¹⁴ This is Ferdinand Brunetière's reply to Zola in *Revue des deux Mondes*, 15 February 1880, cit. John P. Couch, *George Eliot in France: A French Appraisal of George Eliot's Writings, 1858–1960*, Chapel Hill, NC 1967, p. 88.