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READING VOICES:
CONVERSATIONS WITH/IN MIDDLEMARCH

by

Barbara Janet Brown

B.A., Simon Fraser University, 1989

THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS
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of
ENGLISH

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ABSTRACT

George Eliot's Middlemarch (1871-2) offers a series of literal and metaphorical conversations on the topic of women's position in society, and how that position is constructed in and through language. These conversations occur between characters, between plots, and between the narrator and reader. The plots "converse" with each other by taking up similar themes and working the themes out in different ways, thus commenting on, qualifying, and interpreting each other. The narrator carries on an extended conversation with the reader through the characters and plots, but also through her narratorial comments. The conversations become the method of inquiry into the languages and definitions that control women; the conversations are also the means through which the reader comes to inquire into her own subjectivity.

The novel explores issues of subjectivity, gender, voice, interpretation and audience in part through the plots of Mary Garth, Rosamond Vincy and Dorothea Brooke. The three young women deal with the language of patriarchy and the restrictions it places on them in different ways: Mary struggles against patriarchal constraints by manipulating them to her own ends; Rosamond defines herself in terms of a romantic heroine and exposes these terms as inadequate to experience; and Dorothea questions the languages that

constrain her by constantly seeking a vocabulary appropriate to her aspirations and experience. The three characters read their society through the languages at their disposal; the novel shows the relationships between the available languages and the characters' senses of self, and thus exposes both the languages and society itself as inadequate to the needs of the women.

The questions about patriarchal language the narrator raises in the plots and characters remain the topic of conversation between the narrator and reader. The narrator solicits the participation of the reader through undermining the authority of narratorial discourse, and by addressing the reader directly. As the narrator and reader expose patriarchal language as an inadequate construct, the narrator invites the reader to compare the reader's own experience, and to explore the ways in which the reader constructs her own sense of self through language.

DEDICATION

For David and Lois Brown,
my parents,

and

in memory of Lillian Olive Marshall,
my grandmother

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Andrea Lebowitz for her patience, support, and guidance--in this project as in others.

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PREAMBLE

CONTEXTUALIZING

For there is no creature whose inward being is so strong that it is not greatly determined by what lies outside it.

Narrator

Early in Middlemarch, the narrator describes Rosamond Vincy admiring herself in a mirror, while Mary Garth looks on:

Mary Garth seemed all the plainer standing at an angle between the two nymphs--the one in the glass, and the one out of it, who looked at each other with eyes of heavenly blue, deep enough to hold the most exquisite meanings an ingenious beholder could put into them, and deep enough to hide the meanings of the owner if these should happen to be less than exquisite (139).

In this passage I see many women and many reflections of women. Mary and Rosamond, the narrator who describes the scene, the author who stands behind the narrator, and me, as the reader--all are present in the passage, and the mirror reflects us all, so that I see myself reflected in Mary and Rosamond, Mary and Rosamond reflect each other, and so forth. The presence of the unnamed beholder in the passage adds another dimension: the beholder sees between and among the reflections. The passage reveals a play of reflections, a play that becomes a conversation, as the various reflections relate to and comment on each other.

The reflections in the passage raise several related issues in the novel: subjectivity, especially as it becomes a consequence of relationships; the importance of interpretation, again in relation, and contextually; gender as an element of context and a way of defining individuals; language and voice, which are intricately connected both to the first three issues, and to the idea of conversation; and audience, and the ways in which the audience constructs the reflection, or the object under scrutiny. Finally, as I suggest above, the passage becomes a metaphorical conversation between and among the reflections.

In the passage, Rosamond and Mary define themselves in relation to each other; that is to say, their subjectivity is a consequence of their relationship. Thus, for Mary, the vision of herself between "the two nymphs" makes her a "brown patch" with "the most unbecoming companion" (140). Rosamond, doubled, admires herself all the more next to Mary. Subjectivity, rather than being a finished product, is a "process and an unfolding," as the narrator says of a person's character, and it depends on context (178). In Middlemarch, subjectivity exists only in relation--to another character, to a situation, and so on. A character's sense of self is positioned and re-positioned as her or his context changes.

Just as subjectivity is bound to context, so is interpretation. Mary and Rosamond look at themselves, and

make sense of what they see, in terms of each other. Making meaning is an ongoing process: meaning is contingent on context and alters as contexts change. Mary becomes Rosamond's immediate context, and vice versa; thus, the narrator describes the interpretations of Mary ("brown patch"), of the unseen "beholder" (Rosamond's "eyes of heavenly blue"), and of Rosamond (concealing "less than exquisite" meanings). In turn, these readings depend on the position (the context) of the interpreter--on where she "stands" in relation to the images, as character or observer.

Definitions of gender are primary elements of context, and therefore of interpretation. The emphasis on plainness and beauty in the passage suggests some of the complexities gender brings to interpretation and subjectivity. Plainness and beauty are labels that become a means of classifying and valuing according to criteria beyond the control of women. Rosamond and Mary interpret themselves and are interpreted through definitions over which they have no control, but which nonetheless affect them profoundly, as Rosamond's pride in her appearance and Mary's self-denigration suggest.

The idea of control through definitions indicates the importance of language and voice--both of which are intricately connected to subjectivity, interpretation and gender. In the passage, each figure and each reflection has a voice, even in the absence of direct dialogue. Aside from

the more obvious voices (the narrator, Mary and Rosamond), the reader and the beholder--they are not necessarily identical, here--give voice to interpretations and judgments of the young women. The beholder articulated in the passage, for example, is apparently susceptible to the "mirror" Rosamond's eyes become, and gives voice to the valuation that arises from the mirror/eyes: Rosamond is seen as exquisite. A separate voice comes from the image in the mirror itself (rather than the mirror of Rosamond's eyes), and Rosamond and Mary judge themselves against it. This voice is not an individual's, but instead is society's collective definitions of plainness and beauty. The "voice" in the mirror becomes one of judgment: Gilbert and Gubar suggest in Madwoman in the Attic that there is a patriarchal voice of judgment in a mirror, and that this voice determines the self-evaluation of a woman looking at herself (38). Thus Mary comments on her "unbecoming companion," and Rosamond preens all the more.

Language, including the definitions that control, creates at least in part the subjectivity of the characters, so that Mary names herself "a brown patch" in relation to Rosamond: Mary finds persuasive the language that defines plainness and beauty, and names herself in its terms. But this language is also exposed and questioned: when Mary names herself in such negative terms, the terms themselves

become suspect because, for the reader, they seem damaging and inappropriate.

The presence of the beholder and the reader (a beholder by implication) add other languages and voices--those of audience. In this passage, the "members of the audience" (reader and "beholder") interpret the scene differently. The "ingenious beholder" the passage describes sees not Rosamond, but "the most exquisite meanings" that the beholder herself puts into Rosamond's eyes. In other words, the beholder sees herself (her meanings) reflected back: the beholder's way of seeing--her subjectivity--creates what she sees, and Rosamond is merely a mirror. The beholder, who is a sort of internal reader, serves as a cautionary figure for the actual reader: the actual reader learns to look for Rosamond behind her reflecting eyes, to look beyond the reader's own subjectivity for Rosamond's.

The reader comes to consider her own subjectivity in relation to others' through the conversation between the reflections.¹ In this passage, as elsewhere in the text, the voices combine in a conversation about the place of women in society and how that place is created in and through language. The passage describes an exchange of interpretations: between Mary and Rosamond, between the reader and narrator, between the beholder and the characters, between the characters and the mirror, and so forth. In exposing and contrasting the voices and languages

that compose the conversation, the text poses questions about the position of women. As Jennifer Uglow puts it, "Middlemarch asks us to compare different ways of interpreting life--by balancing against each other the descriptions provided, for example, by gossip, science, religion, biology and physics, poetry and art. . . . And the testing ground for all these languages is invariably 'the nature of Woman' . . ." (206). Moreover, both the languages and the definitions they offer are explored and questioned, as are, for example, plainness and beauty in the mirror passage.

This study argues that Middlemarch offers a series of literal and metaphorical conversations on the topic of what it means to be a woman: these conversations can occur in the literal speech or silence between characters, or metaphorically between characters, plots, and between the narrator and reader. The plots "converse" with each other by taking up similar themes and working those themes out in different ways, thus commenting on, qualifying, and interpreting each other. The narrator carries on an extended conversation with the reader through the characters and plots, but also through her narratorial comments. Thus the conversations become the method of inquiry into the languages and definitions that control women; the conversations are also the means through which the reader comes to inquire into her own gendered subjectivity.

The points I raise above about the mirror passage (subjectivity, interpretation, gender, voice, and audience) are all implicit in the idea of conversation. The novel investigates the way a speaker positions herself and her discourse; a character speaks from a position that depends on her subjectivity, gender, and audience. Participation in an exchange is contingent on voice and interpretation: without voices, obviously, there is no exchange, but response to an utterance depends on the relation between the speakers, on the speakers interpreting each other and the world around them. Through an analysis of the voices in the text, and the processes by which they are constructed, this study explores the conversations Middlemarch offers about women.

Chapter One sets out the theoretical frame for my argument. It introduces M.M. Bakhtin's dialogism, and shows how dialogism is useful for the conversational analysis I propose. The chapter also connects dialogism with the relationship between the narrator and the reader. The second chapter explores the feminist issues Middlemarch raises in plot and character, concentrating on Mary Garth, Rosamond Vincy, and Dorothea Brooke, and the conversations their voices create. The novel's feminist argument centres on the experiences of these three characters: their parallel plots revolve around courtship and marriage, which is to say, the plots concern the processes through which women

attain sexual maturity and move into the domestic sphere patriarchal society prescribes for them.² The second chapter focuses on how Mary, Rosamond and Dorothea define themselves--that is, on their subjectivity--through their speech. The third and final chapter analyses the relationship between reader and narrator, and the meta/conversation between them. George Eliot's narrator is sometimes accused of being too authoritarian--of telling the reader how to respond.³ But to approach the novel as a conversation is to place the reader and narrator on a more equal footing: the relationship becomes an exchange, rather than one in which the dictatorial narrator pushes the passive reader around. As a conversation, the relationship becomes a forum for further exploration of controlling definitions and language: the questions the narrator raises in plot and character remain the topic of conversation. Indeed, the novel solicits the participation of the reader: the reader's own subjectivity is as much an object of inquiry as is that of the characters. The exploration of subjectivity in the characters implicates the reader (and the narrator); as the characters name and interpret what is around them, the reader names and interprets the characters' patterns of naming, thus coming to question her own.

CHAPTER ONE

REFLECTING ON CONVERSATION

I don't feel sure about doing good in any way now:
everything seems like going on a mission to a
people whose language I don't know.

Dorothea Brooke

In Middlemarch, George Eliot incorporates the languages of gender, class, profession, and so on. Each character's voice resonates against the background of all the other voices and languages; each voice is positioned in relation to the others. This chapter explores the ways in which gendered voices become involved in political struggles, and the way the reader's voice is implicated in the creation of speaking selves.

I want to begin with my central metaphor of "conversation." For my purposes, the word connotes an "interchange of thoughts and words; familiar discourse or talk" (OED). "Interchange" and "familiar" are the focal points--these are more appropriate to Middlemarch than are the more formal discourse or verbal sparring that "conversation" can connote.⁴ I draw this point out because I want to associate conversation with something akin to gossip: conversation as familiar talk that might take place around a kitchen table, for example.

This kind of intimate talk is generally associated with women (as gossip), and is devalued. "'Women's talk,' in both style (hesitant, qualified, question-posing) and content (concern for the everyday, the practical, and the interpersonal) is typically devalued by men and women alike," suggest Belenky et al, in Women's Ways of Knowing (17). But despite its devaluation, "women's talk" is a crucial "way of knowing" that enables "individuals to enter into the social and intellectual life of their community" (Belenky et al 26). In other words, "women's talk" is a mode of inquiry that enables speakers both to place themselves and others in society and to learn about themselves and others.

Thus, conversation is less an exchange of information than it is an inquiry for two (or more) voices. And the sequence of this inquiry is crucial, as Spacks suggests of gossip: "[narrative], interpretation, judgement: this sequence dominates gossip, with varying proportions of each component. Together they generate a characteristic rhythm of investigation. And--more to the immediate point--they create story . . ." (13). Making meaning is a continuing process: meaning is made, and re-made, as the talk continues. Spacks goes on to point out the relationship between this kind of talk and the act of reading a novel: "reading novels establishes a tie resembling that of gossip, since what reader and narrator share is a set of responses

to the private doings of richly imagined individuals" (22). Thus, reading, like gossiping, is a way of knowing: the reader learns from the experience of others--in this case, both the characters and the narrator. Since the narrator responds to the characters and events, the reader can compare her own responses to the narrator's: judgment is negotiated through conversation.

Just as the activity of reading is like gossiping, the subject matter and style of a novel such as Middlemarch echo the content and style of "women's talk." Hesitancy, qualification, and question-posing mark women's talk, and "concern for the everyday, the practical, and the interpersonal" form its content (Belenky et al 17).

Middlemarch centres on human relations, but it also pays attention to the details of human life: Mrs. Cadwallader's penny-pinching, Mrs. Vincy's inappropriate ribbons, Mrs. Garth's pies, and Fred Vincy's handwriting all receive considerable attention. Even the large political issues like the Reform Bill are more frequently played out in private spheres than in public: thus, Will Ladislaw's decision to take up Brooke's campaign is motivated more by the desire to be near Dorothea than it is by political commitment. And while one can hardly call George Eliot's style "hesitant," the novel proceeds by posing questions and by making qualifications. Characters, events, and judgments are subject to endless reflection: Dorothea's ardour is

qualified both by the narrator's irony and by Celia's practical turn of mind, Rosamond's selfishness is mitigated by the narrator's explanation of the circumstances that foster it, and so on.

In sum, then, "conversation" as "familiar discourse or talk" has associations with the denigrated forms of "women's talk" and gossip. However, Middlemarch reverses this evaluation: while undoubtedly a novel, it is best understood as a conversation that turns on the theme of women.

Conversation becomes a mode of inquiry--on the part of the reader as much as on the part of the novel--wherein the (metaphorical or literal) speakers "exchange and interpret information in order . . . to enlarge their grasp of someone else's experience and thus, ideally, better to understand their own" (Spacks 96). To come to terms with another's experience is to recognize the other's subjectivity, to take another's definition of self into account. The experiences of the characters in Middlemarch--particularly the young women's--comment on my own experience, and give me a forum for comparing my subjectivity to theirs. Through this comparison, especially through seeing how language affects the characters, I come to a better understanding of my own subjectivity: my voice enters into conversation with the many voices in the novel.

Since Bakhtin sees the novel as composed of "a diversity of social speech types (sometimes even diversity

of languages) and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized" (262), his observations add another perspective. He argues that when a character speaks, the utterance sounds against a background of all the other "social speech types"--all the other voices--in the novel. For Bakhtin, one voice represents one ideological position, so each utterance enters a political debate with the other languages in the text. Bakhtin suggests that a character is an "image of a language" (336); thus, a character's subjectivity and her utterance are inextricably linked.

Since each voice represents a world view, conflict is inevitable. Bakhtin envisions the conflict as a struggle between the ever-present centripetal and centrifugal forces in language. Centripetal language "gives expression to forces working toward concrete verbal and ideological unification and centralization," while centrifugal language works against unification, since centrifugal language is composed of "languages of social groups, 'professional' and 'generic' languages, languages of generation and so forth" (271-2). In other words, Bakhtin sees an ongoing struggle for control of meaning in the face of many ideological positions, and this struggle occurs first in and through language.

In Middlemarch, the views of women offered by male characters are attempts to control language, definition, and people. Characters like Casaubon and Lydgate seek a unitary

language (though they do not seek the same one) to explain the world and their place in it. Both the language of mythology and the language of science (as these characters conceive them) have a place for women--on the margins, and as accessories to the more important work of the male characters. Thus, Casaubon's primary use for Dorothea is as a sort of "talking head"--he only wants a reader. Lydgate takes a "strictly scientific view of woman": women become objects to be viewed under a microscope (183). Definitions like these seek to control women by reducing them to objects. Neither a talking head nor a specimen on a slide can challenge the views of the male characters. But, since Dorothea and Rosamond resist the definitions, a struggle over language and ideology ensues.

The novel depicts the struggle over definitions as playing out between the genders, but Bakhtin does not include gender in his discussions of linguistic-ideological positions. Recent feminist revisions of dialogism place gender at the centre of the struggle. Feminist dialogics begin "[at] the point of contradiction between the alienated female voice and the interpretive community anxious to incorporate and domesticate that voice in order to silence its threat . . ." (Bauer x). The division between monologic and dialogic language becomes a gendered struggle for control of definition between a marginalized female voice and a centralized male voice. Each utterance has this

struggle as its background, as the context in which it signifies.

Bakhtin argues that a dialogue is composed of "an utterance, a reply, and a relation between the two" (Holquist Dialogism 38). Since an utterance is always addressed to someone or something, there is always a relationship to which the reader should attend. Holquist goes on to suggest that the relation is the crucial component, without which utterance and reply would be meaningless (38). The relationship is a political one: the utterance and reply express the world views of the speakers, in Bakhtin's thought, so the relationship necessarily negotiates two world views. As Bakhtin puts it, referring to the number of languages in a novel, "no matter how these languages are conceived, they may all be taken as particular points of view on the world" (293). Each speaker, with her particular voice, expresses her way of understanding the world, every time she speaks (or, for that matter, when she chooses not to speak). Bakhtin suggests that all utterances are marked by the speaker so that meaning must be negotiated (293). To quote Caryl Emerson,

[because] no two individuals ever entirely coincide in their experience or belong to precisely the same set of social groups, every act of understanding involves an act of translation and a negotiation of values. It is essentially a phenomenon of interrelation and interaction (248).

And because meaning must be negotiated, and world view is at stake, the negotiation is ideological and power is of central importance.

Bakhtin makes a distinction between what he calls "authoritative" language and language that is "internally persuasive." He explains that the authoritative word is external: "we encounter it with its authority already fused to it." (342) "It is, so to speak, the word of the fathers. Its authority was already acknowledged in the past" (342, his emphasis). Clearly, feminists associate this kind of discourse with patriarchy⁵: it is imposed, and one is expected to accommodate oneself to it as it is presented, since it cannot be qualified: "one must either totally affirm it, or totally reject it" (343). To reject the authoritative word entirely is a risky proposition: for the female characters, it is quite literally "the word of the fathers"--it is the word they live by, the centre of the community.

Internally persuasive language, on the other hand, works in concert with the speaker's pre-existing language.

In the everyday rounds of our consciousness, the internally persuasive word is half-ours and half-someone else's. Its creativity and productiveness consist precisely in the fact that such a word awakens new and independent words, that it organizes masses of our words from within, and does not remain in isolated and static condition (345).

This kind of language is adapted and assimilated, and applied to new contexts. It is the kind of language with which we name our reality, and it comes into play with our former ways of naming: it is how we make sense of new contexts.

The speaking self, in this way of thinking, constructs herself through discourse: she resists or succumbs to authoritative language, and she finds certain kinds of language persuasive, so adopts and adapts them. She is a product of her language, yet she also produces her world view by listening continuously to new ways of speaking, and "trying on" new kinds of language herself. Bakhtin argues that these are the processes depicted in the novel:

In a word, the novelistic plot serves to represent speaking persons and their ideological worlds. What is realized in the novel is the process of coming to know one's own language as it is perceived in someone else's language, coming to know one's own belief system in someone else's system. There takes place within the novel an ideological translation of another's language, and an overcoming of its otherness--an otherness that is only contingent, external, illusory (365).

The concept of character development becomes here a negotiation of linguistic/ideological systems. "Coming to know one's own language" in difference from others can mean a struggle if one's internally persuasive language opposes the authoritative word, and this kind of struggle is crucial in a feminist dialogic reading.

For a female character, the notion of exploring her own system through other systems is a process of resisting pre-definitions, of finding names appropriate to her experience, and of reflecting on the processes through which she names her experience. In Middlemarch, subjectivity itself is a process: it is always contingent, always contextual, and is never a finished product. Dorothea, for example, spends much of the text trying to find a position from which she can speak. She continually finds gaps between her experience and the names for it that she has been taught. She "develops" as a character by losing faith in the names given her, and struggling to find more appropriate terms for her experience.

Part of Dorothea's search for new terms occurs in her questioning of old ones. At the beginning of the novel, she is a naive and idealistic character (not that this is her fault, but there it is), and in her naivety, she asks questions that upset the old order (especially Casaubon's and Brooke's conceptions of appropriate order). Bakhtin points out that this kind of questioning is a dialogic device: "Stupidity (incomprehension) in the novel is always polemical: it interacts dialogically with an intelligence (a lofty pseudo intelligence) with which it polemicizes and whose mask it tears away" (403). Thus when Dorothea innocently urges Casaubon to publish his work, his anger and defensiveness expose his "lofty pseudo intelligence" as a

sham: Dorothea inadvertently tears away his mask of scholarship and reveals his anxieties of authorship (232-3). Dorothea does not understand his language, and he refuses to teach it to her, which implies his own sense of its inadequacy. But Dorothea does not entirely see what she has done: she cannot see the extent to which her questions undermine his language--his sense of self. But the reader sees how her "polemical failure to understand" serves to undermine a language that seeks to constrain her (Bakhtin 403).

Dale Bauer's feminist revision of Bakhtin's dialogism equates female polemical stupidity with "a resisting reader within the text" (11, her emphasis).

In other words, "naive" characters resist understanding the world according to dominant conventions, resist abstract categories of language, and also refuse to (or cannot) accept whole-heartedly the ideology of the other; their naivete remains, and because of this ignorance, not despite it, a struggle emerges (Bauer 12).

This struggle takes the form of breaking would-be monologism down by challenging it. Thus, Dorothea "fails to understand" her "place": she resists efforts of Brooke and Casaubon to fit her into a pre-defined place, and in so doing, she creates a space for resisting her "place," a space for questioning the language that consigns her to powerlessness.

Bauer's notion of a resisting reader in the text raises the issue of the reader herself. In the case of Dorothea's

questioning, the reader takes up the questions that Dorothea asks, and, perhaps, takes them further. "The role of the reader . . . is to question and restructure the 'cultural and intertextual frames' in which the character operates and is made foolish" (Bauer 12). Bauer indicates here that the reader is necessarily an active participant in making meaning, that the reader involves herself in a dialogic encounter with the text.

When one figures the text as dialogic, it follows that the reader brings her own world view, encoded in her language and interpretive strategies, into play with the voices in the text. The reader might not align herself with a particular character or point of view (I include the narrator, here), but rather she can occupy a position that shifts in relation to particular scenes in the text. I think it important to make this point, especially in connection to Middlemarch, because the novel has so often been criticized for not leaving the reader a position from which to resist the authority of the narrator.⁶ From a dialogic point of view, the reader necessarily participates in making meaning, and does not need the permission of the narrator (or the critic) to engage in the text. As I will argue later, both Middlemarch's narrator and the narrative itself invite participation throughout, but I raise the issue now because of the implications for reader response implicit in dialogism.

Patricinio P. Schweickart, in an essay that investigates a feminist theory of reading, notes that one of the main questions in reader response theory has been whether the text or the reader controls the experience of reading (36). She proposes instead a "dialectic of communication" as a feminist model of reading (53). And while she does not specifically refer to Bakhtin, she also calls her model "dialogic" (52). This is the kind of model I propose for reading Middlemarch: one in which the reader converses with the characters and the narrator, a conversation which neither the reader nor the narrator controls, but instead an experience that functions as a dialogue.

The reader, to return to Bakhtin's terms, is another dialogizing force: she contributes her voice to the discussion. This is an important point, because the reader is ultimately the site of the struggle between dialogized voices. She articulates the world views in the text, and tests her own voice against them. So, just as the characters test their views against others', the reader tests herself against (or with) the narrator. In other words, there is a continuing analogy between the activities within the text and between the text and the reader. To some extent, the reader echoes what the characters do as they struggle to interpret their world: they interpret according to their language, the narrator sometimes offers

interpretations, and the reader interprets these, and weighs them against her perceptions of the world outside the text.

The reader thus becomes the site for reflection on languages and world views. I would argue that a feminist reader takes a position against the monologic/patriarchal authority George Eliot depicts in the novel. She (the reader) recognizes her allegiance to the characters and incidents that seek to break down monologism; she does this based on her own marginalized position. This has everything to do with understanding through relations and contexts, because her reading is necessarily based on her own context.

There is a sense in which this kind of reading goes back to the traditional reading of Middlemarch as a plea for empathetic understanding. Empathy is based on feeling with the other: readers have long understood the novel to argue the necessity of acknowledging the "equivalent centre of self" in another person. But before that kind of acknowledgement is possible, one has to have a sense of self--a sense of the position from which the "I" speaks. Reading Middlemarch is a process of articulating the reader's "I," as well as the "I's" of the (female) characters. The point of articulating "I" is necessarily rooted in discourse, and this is as true for the characters as it is for the reader. Thus, we return to the levels of conversation: the reader reads the characters articulating (or silencing) themselves, and the reader finds her position

in her conversation with the text, with the narrator. The following chapter explores the reader's conversation with the languages and subjectivities of Mary, Rosamond, and Dorothea, and shows how these characters critique patriarchal language.

CHAPTER TWO

VOICES READING: MARY, ROSAMOND, AND DOROTHEA

I never called everything by the same name that
all the people about me did. . . .

Dorothea Brooke

Gilbert and Gubar suggest that for literary artists "self-definition necessarily precedes self-assertion . . ." (17). I would add that this is true of speakers in general: "'I AM' cannot be uttered if the 'I' knows not what it is" (Gilbert and Gubar 17). One of the general assertions of The Madwoman in the Attic is that uttering "I" is a different proposition for a woman than it is for a man, and while Gilbert and Gubar make this point particularly about women writers, it is also true of the characters these writers create. This chapter analyzes the ways in which Mary Garth, Rosamond Vincy and Dorothea Brooke assert themselves as "I"; it describes the costs and compromises the characters make in uttering "I."

Since the contexts of the three characters differ, so do the problems they face in defining themselves and finding positions from which to speak. Each of the three speaks a different language; as Bakhtin puts it, each is an "image of a language" that speaks a different world view (336, his emphasis). Thus, each of the three languages becomes a

potential arena for struggle with patriarchal monologic authority, through either overt or covert challenge. And among themselves, the three languages converse about what it means to be a woman.

The three languages resonate against the political background of the Reform Bill, significant because, as Robert Kiely points out, "in periods of social disorder and incoherence, language is one of the structures that falters" (104). In Middlemarch, parliamentary politics serve as only one aspect of patriarchal society open to challenges, but the need to reform parliament signifies the need to revise other oppressive systems. So, the positions of the characters toward the Reform Bill inform their languages and world views on other issues as well. While the three female characters challenge patriarchy as a whole, they differ in their positions toward national politics. Mary Garth sides with the more conservative elements in the text: her father works on the land, and is the keeper of old values and traditional morality. Rosamond Vincy, whose father is both a politician and manufacturer, also holds up conservative values, but hers are different from Mary's: Rosamond's position is based on the description of life offered by romance novels, and consequently she does not concern herself with questions of national politics. Dorothea, on the other hand, seeks to reform whatever she can: her desires are guided by her need to do good. The differing

positions of the three toward national politics and their various class backgrounds make all the more effective their challenges to patriarchy: despite their positions, and the effects those positions have on their languages and senses of self, their voices are marked by gender, and by a desire to break down the systems that oppress them.

The "Prelude" of Middlemarch begins to address questions of women and self-hood with its discussion of Saint Theresa. Her "passionate, ideal nature demanded an epic life," and while at first denied this by "domestic reality in the shape of uncles," she went on to find her "epos" (25). What Saint Theresa had, and "later-born Theresas" lack is a "coherent social faith and order which could perform the function of knowledge for the ardently willing soul" (25). In other words, Saint Theresa's actions resonate against a recognizable background: she knows who she is in relation to those around her. "Later-born Theresas" have nothing that "perform[s] the function of knowledge" for them: the narrator articulates both the need for self-knowledge and its link to a character's perception of "reality."

At the same time, the narrator suggests that the "ardently willing soul" may have to substitute something that merely acts as though it were knowledge, rather than being knowledge itself. The question, then, becomes epistemological: it concerns how women know, what they know,

and to what use that knowledge is put. Looked at from the outside, the question is also how we know women. The narrator indicates that "the sameness of women's coiffure and the favourite love-stories in prose and verse" are inadequate measures of "knowledge" about women--these measures merely perform the "function of knowledge" (26). Women's coiffure and favourite love-stories constrain rather than enrich: they limit perceptions of and responses to women, so that any who overstep the boundaries of the confining definitions are suspect. As the narrator puts it, "[sane] people did what their neighbours did, so that if any lunatics were at large, one might know and avoid them" (31). Within this oppressive system, coiffures and love-stories come to serve as "reality."

In effect, coiffures and love-stories offer a "script" by which women are judged. Instead of looking at women's particularized experience as a way of knowing them, the scripts come to replace the necessity of experience. Alexander Welsh points out George Eliot's interest in the relationship of knowledge and experience, and he suggests that she believes, with George Henry Lewes, that "[no] amount of knowledge in general suffices to replace particular experience" (Lewes, emphasis his, quoted in Welsh 227n.25). The three female characters do not have the access to experience they need to replace general knowledge (coiffures and love-stories). "Authoritative" definitions

serve instead of experience. So, the narrator questions the adequacy of the definitions of women: she notes that "the limits of variation are really much wider than any one would imagine . . ." (26). Thus she underscores the importance of experience: she indicates that, in order to know women, one must recognize particular experience.

Mary, Rosamond and Dorothea are the primary characters through whom the narrator explores definitions of women. Contrasts abound, but so do similarities. Like Saint Theresa, they are all beset by "domestic reality" in the shapes of both uncles and other assorted males, yet their ways of dealing with those around them differ enormously. The narrator establishes their contexts carefully, and pays close attention to how they use and interpret language. Taking each in turn, I will explore the differences and similarities in their ideological positions, and show how they challenge patriarchal control through language.

I begin with Mary Garth for a number of reasons. She receives much less critical attention than Rosamond or Dorothea, and critics tend to understate her importance.⁷ However, her plot, as one of the "Three Love Problems," comments significantly on the stories of the other two. Despite the fact that Mary does not receive the same amount of attention in the text as Dorothea and Rosamond do, her love story progresses alongside the others, and significantly, hers is the last to be resolved: the final

numbered chapter deals with her engagement to Fred, and in the "Finale," the reader learns that she and Fred "achieved a solid mutual happiness"--the only one of the three couples to receive that end (890). So, even if she has less textual space, the placing of her story is important, as is the comment on her life in the "Finale."

On the surface, Mary and Rosamond have similar backgrounds: they are cousins, and they have the same education (though, as an articulated pupil, Mary presumably did without the extras "such as the getting in and out of a carriage" offered by Mrs. Lemon's school) (123). But Mary has "the aspect of an ordinary sinner" to Rosamond's "angelic" fairness, and Mary has "not attained that perfect good sense and good principle which are usually recommended to the less fortunate girl . . ." (140). While shrewd, Mary has "a streak of satiric bitterness continually renewed and never carried utterly out of sight" (140). Her "reigning virtue" is honesty, and "she neither tried to create illusions, nor indulged in them for her own behoof . . ." (140). The narrator's description of Mary is largely positive, but Mary's bitter streak qualifies the portrait, even though the narrator explains its origins.

The narrator describes Mary as "plain" and accounts for the bitter streak in that way:

Plainness has its peculiar temptations and vices quite as much as beauty; it is apt either to feign amiability, or, not feigning it, to show all the repulsiveness of discontent: at any rate, to be

called an ugly thing in contrast with that lovely creature your companion, is apt to produce some effect beyond a sense of fine veracity and fitness in the phrase (140).

The narrator explains part of the construction of Mary's sense of self: Mary is (necessarily) affected by how others name her. The language in this passage is telling:

"plainness," "repulsiveness," "ugly thing"--this kind of naming is, as the narrator says, likely to have an effect on the one thus named. The controlling definitions of beauty and plainness are part of Mary's sense of self: she names herself in terms not her own, and interprets those around her through the same terms. Mary is an "ugly thing" only in contrast, but because she is never out of the social context, with all its definitions, she cannot escape these names.

Mary responds to those around her--her audience--largely in kind, as she says herself: "I am not magnanimous enough to like people who speak to me without seeming to see me" (141). Thus, when Mrs. Waule speaks of Mary in the third person in front of her, Mary contradicts her immediately (significantly, these are the first words she speaks in the novel): "No . . . I dislike hearing scandal too much to wish to repeat it" (133). The first time the reader hears Mary, she begins with a negative, then asserts herself (her "I") in firm opposition to her interlocutor. It is also significant that Mary refuses Mrs. Waule's

"permission" to repeat the "scandal" about Fred Vincy: Mary will not participate in the kind of social control that Mrs. Waule's tales represent. Mary's first speech subverts an attempt to control Fred (and Mary) through language; when she rejects both Mrs. Waule's authority and her permission, Mary places herself against a socially sanctioned means of keeping people in their places.⁸

Mary seeks power, just as Rosamond does over Lydgate, and she finds that power--and her identity--in controlling the unsteady Fred. Having little will of his own, Fred would not have refused his father's demand that he enter the clergy, but for Mary's emotional blackmail. Mary's propensity for this kind of manipulation shows one of her similarities to Rosamond, who manipulates Lydgate to further her own ends. Mary's "goodness" is compromised because she and Rosamond need to use the same kinds of manipulation to achieve their own goals.

In terms of the novel, this is less a criticism of Mary than it is a comment on the kind of society that forces women to assert their senses of self through others--and that makes marriage a woman's only vocation. Mary is the sole wage-earner of the three main women: she earns her keep as a housekeeper/nurse for Featherstone, and after his death, looks for another teaching situation. But Mary draws clear distinctions between how she makes money and her vocation--her job is one thing, but her vocation is to

improve Fred, and to instill in him a sense of integrity and an appropriate vocation. In other words, she lives vicariously; her selfhood is defined in making a success of Fred.⁹ Gilbert and Gubar comment on Mary's influence on Fred as follows: "[by] shaping Fred's life and values, in fact, she demonstrates the elevating effect of a woman's influence, even as she reminds us of the deceit practiced by the woman who functions as a power behind the scenes" (513).

The sense of deceit is also heard in the kind of doubleness of Mary's language, especially when she speaks with Fred. Mary responds to what Fred says to her, as Rosamond is always careful to do with Lydgate, but where Rosamond's language emphasizes form over content, Mary speaks with a doubleness where content belies the polite form, and allows her both to state clearly her position and to manipulate Fred. When Fred comes to her to confess that he put the Garths in financial trouble, Mary responds as follows:

As if it were any pleasure to me to think ill of you. . . . As if it were not very painful to me to see you an idle frivolous creature. How can you bear to be so contemptible, when others are working and striving, and there are so many things to be done--how can you bear to be fit for nothing in the world that is useful? And with so much good in your disposition, Fred,--you might be worth a great deal (288).

This speech embraces and speaks from Caleb Garth's work ethic; it judges and condemns Fred in terms that are not his own. Moreover, the speech is infused with a sense of

maternal disappointment, with the tone of a mother berating a wayward child along the lines of "this hurts me more than it hurts you." Thus we hear both Mary's parents in this speech, but with an "accent" that is Mary's own--her bitterness and anger show in her rather strong choice of words ("idle frivolous creature," "contemptible," "fit for nothing"). At the same time, Mary qualifies her condemnation with her conditional "you might be worth a great deal." This phrase works as manipulation, and what I earlier called "emotional blackmail." It implies that Mary might marry Fred if he fulfills her expectations, which is to say, become more like her father.

Mary's speech places her ideologically: she shares the conservatism of her parents with an accent of anger and bitterness that they lack. The novel places Mary in the "pastoral plot," to use Kucich's term, which further complicates her position (Kucich 58). Kucich implies with "pastoral" that the novel shows a certain nostalgia for the simpler lives of the Garth clan, but at the same time the text recognizes that this past is no longer viable: their conservatism no longer suffices in a country where reform looms so large. Moreover, the novel places a great deal of emphasis on money and financial concerns, and Caleb Garth is an inept money manager--the family is recovering from his bankruptcy.

Mary speaks her father's language, but since his position is no longer viable, and since Mary's gender does not "fit" this language, Mary's position is problematic. Her gender precludes succeeding her father in "business" (and note that none of his sons plan to take up "business"), so she translates his vocation as a manager into her own version of it: she manages Fred. Caleb and Mary work to make Fred into a responsible citizen and a manager of the land--in other words, a version of Caleb. For Mary, selfhood comes in the success she has in making a new version of her father, and with self-definition comes the ability to assert herself.

As I mentioned earlier, Mary positions herself in opposition to others, as with her contradiction of Mrs. Waule. With Fred, before he is "saved," Mary also asserts her own view of the world, contradicting Fred's, as when he suggests that John Waule is in love with her:

I am not aware of it. And to me it is one of the most odious things in a girl's life, that there must always be some supposition of falling in love coming between her and any man who is kind to her, and to whom she is grateful. I should have thought that I, at least, might have been safe from all that. I have no ground for the nonsensical vanity of fancying everybody who comes near me is in love with me (165).

Mary uses a first person pronoun no less than seven times in this speech, and all of it asserts her own world view; she tests her voice, rejecting both Fred and what she calls "the ways of the world" (166). She places Fred with "the world"

in this speech, and criticizes the limitations of the way the world interprets young women. Interestingly, she exempts herself (or feels she should be exempt) on the basis, presumably, of her position and her looks: having no "ground" for vanity puts her in a marginal position, and she views the world as one very much outside its ways. She is, in other words, a critical reader, and refuses Fred until he too moves outside his world, by becoming what the world might call "downwardly mobile."

Mary's voice from the margins establishes a political relation to her interlocutors. While her project is to "improve" Fred, as in the speech above, on the level between the reader and the narrator, Mary's rejection of the "ways of the world" exposes and proscribes the conventional interpretations of young women. The "world" assumes that any relationship between unmarried men and women signifies courtship: the "world" does not have another way of reading such interaction. Mary challenges the limits on such narrow readings. Her voice interacts dialogically with the "world," through Fred, and she interprets the "world" in a way that asks it to change. And again, while her interpretation is local (she wants to change Fred), the implications of her interpretation are much wider: the language that defines and confines women needs to be changed.

Mary's critique of the ways of the world extends to her reading of texts: she reads voraciously and cites novels as her "experience" further in the conversation from which her speech above is taken. Fred speculates that "[it] is always some new fellow who strikes a girl," and Mary responds as follows:

I must go back on my experience. There is Juliet --she seems an example of what you say. But then Ophelia had probably known Hamlet a long while; and Brenda Troil--she had known Mordaunt Merton ever since they were children; but then he seems to have been an estimable young man; and Minna was still more deeply in love with Cleveland, who was a stranger. Waverley was new to Flora MacIvor; but then she did not fall in love with him. And there are Olivia and Sophia Primrose, and Corinne --they may be said to have fallen in love with new men. Altogether, my experience is rather mixed (167).

Jennifer Uglow points out that Fred's suggestion is trite, and that Mary "makes fun of people who take their analyses of sexual behaviour from literature and, moreover, only from one kind of plot . . ." (207-8). Mary attacks quite directly those who "know" women through "favourite love-stories in prose and verse." She becomes a resisting reader who challenges not so much the texts themselves as those who take the texts as definitive knowledge about women. But, Mary's analysis of her "experience" is complicated by the fact that her reading is her only experience of romance--this is her only language for romance--and it does not suffice. As Uglow points out, Mary rejects this model of sexual behaviour, but the only other available text comes

from her parents, so she constructs her relationship with Fred along those lines.

Mary's union with Fred results in her gaining as much power and as much ability to assert herself as is possible in the novel. As Jeannie Thomas puts it, Mary

chooses the match where her power is most direct. She mothers Fred, and he loves it, while in the Farebrother household she would join three other women, already established, to whose traditional power structure she would have to adapt (62).

Mary achieves her "solid mutual happiness" with the now-steady Fred. But her story, with its traditional happy ending, raises a number of questions about women's ways of being.

In the first place, although Mary is quick thinking and intelligent, she does not aspire beyond what she sees as reasonable expectations. Her expectations become limited by her language: she cannot imagine what more she can be or do. She bears three boys, two of whom look like Vincys while the other "features the Garths," as Mrs. Vincy puts it (891). Her legacy thus runs through men, and these particular men represent families whose way of life is either disappearing (Garths) or who cannot quite succeed (his position as mayor notwithstanding, Mr. Vincy is not successful as a manufacturer). Despite her (still limited) power, Mary's happiness does not ultimately signify. She issues no female copies, only a book called Stories of Great Men, taken from Plutarch from which her boys can learn about "great men."

She speaks from a position within patriarchy, with her sense of self determined by the men around her. Ultimately, her "happily ever after" is a heavily qualified success.

In Middlemarchers' terms, Rosamond Vincy, unlike Mary, is in all respects an attractive young woman, and ideal matrimonial material. The first the reader hears of her, from Mr. Chichely on the occasion of a dinner-party in honour of Casaubon and Dorothea's engagement, is that she is well-placed on the marriage market: "Between ourselves, the mayor's daughter is more to my taste than Miss Brooke or Miss Celia either. If I were a marrying man I should choose Miss Vincy before either of them" (115). Subsequently, and before the reader actually "meets" Rosamond, the narrator says that Lydgate thought she possessed "true melodic charm" and that she was the "flower of Mrs. Lemon's school" (121; 123). Thus prepared by the narrator to meet a character acclaimed for "mental acquisition and propriety of speech," the reader finds Rosamond correcting her mother's word choice and quarrelling with her brother (123).

The narrator first shows the reader Rosamond among her family: far from being either "melodic" or like a "flower," she works at making her family conform to her own image of what they should be. Critics often take this kind of behaviour as evidence of Rosamond's ego, but in fact "ego" is the wrong term.¹⁰ She imports her sense of self and of others from her reading, so her "ego" is not really hers.

What she does have is a very strong will: she is determined to model her life after her books. Rosamond, like Mary, wants the power to control her world and her place in it. And like Mary, Rosamond manipulates those around her in order to achieve it.

Rosamond interprets and responds to her society in terms of the plot she has copied from the "love-stories." The narrator tells the reader that Rosamond "had woven a little future" for herself, for which "a stranger was absolutely necessary" (145). Rosamond's "social romance" adapts after Lydgate arrives in Middlemarch so that "of late, indeed, the construction seemed to demand that [the stranger] should somehow be related to a baronet" (145). Anything that does not fit with her romance, she ignores or alters. Her courtship with Lydgate proceeds (she thinks) as she has planned it: she "had registered every look and word, and estimated them as the opening incidents of a preconceived romance--incidents which gather value from the foreseen development and climax" (195). She "reads" her relationship to Lydgate in the context of her "preconceived romance," and fills in the bits Lydgate leaves out, just as Dorothea does with Casaubon. The narrator states that during their courtship, Dorothea's "faith supplied all that Mr. Casaubon's words seemed to leave unsaid: what believer sees a disturbing omission or infelicity?" (73-4). Similarly, Rosamond's foundation for her romance had the

"usual airy slightness" of the "few imaginative weeks called courtship" (146; 227).

As a "believer" in "social romance," Rosamond attempts to order her world to the terms of romance; it is the language through which she knows herself and those around her. In Bakhtin's vocabulary, it is her internally persuasive language: as Bakhtin says, "it organizes masses of [her] words from within . . ." (345). She takes the language from her reading and then adopts more of it as it comes her way; thus when Captain Lydgate visits, she finds his "good accent" pleasing, and his "stupidity" notwithstanding, "caught many of its phrases" (629).

Like Mary, Rosamond is a reader, but unlike Mary, Rosamond cannot read critically. Rosamond finds time to read "the best novels, and even the second best, and she knew much poetry by heart" (196). She relishes the works of Lady Blessington and L.E.L., "but she [does] not readily commit herself by admiration" of them in front of Lydgate (304). In other words, Rosamond privately absorbs the "favourite love-stories in prose and verse" that the narrator refers to in the "Prelude." Her uncritical assimilation of the narratives they offer resonates against Mary's much more critical approach: where Mary ridicules those who take the narratives as experience, Rosamond spends her time trying to reify those same narratives. The language she takes from them does not fit her experience,

but in the absence of access to experience through which she can learn another way of being, Rosamond attempts to form her world according to the terms of romance.

Rosamond defines herself as a romantic heroine, and the narrator tells us, acts the part perfectly: "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" (144). And later, when Rosamond responds to Mrs. Bulstrode's questions about Lydgate, Rosamond has "a great sense of being a romantic heroine, and playing the part prettily" (331). Along with all the other Middlemarchers, Rosamond deceives herself about her character, to the point where she becomes--even for herself--an image, a form without content, except as much as her beholders (including herself) want to see.

With romance "performing the function of knowledge" for her, Rosamond begins to use language as simple form, rather than content; since the content does not match her experience, she concerns herself with appropriate phrases. As things get worse in Rosamond's married life, she comes to rely almost entirely on form. When Rosamond thwarts Lydgate's plan to move to a cheaper house, she responds to his anger by becoming "all the more calmly correct, in the conviction that she was not the person to misbehave, whatever others might do" (709). Earlier, when Lydgate asks for her help in dealing with the debts, she responds with

utter "propriety of speech" and complete lack of content, as the narrator tells the reader:

"What can I do, Tertius?" said Rosamond, turning her eyes on him again. That little speech of four words, like so many others in all languages, is capable by varied vocal inflexions of expressing all states of mind from helpless dimness to exhaustive argumentative perception, from the completest self-devoting fellowship to the most neutral aloofness. Rosamond's thin utterance threw into the words "What can I do!" as much neutrality as they could hold (640).

The narrator's extensive commentary on the potential of "that little speech" emphasizes all the more strongly Rosamond's lack of involvement in the world outside her romance. That "little speeches" like this exist "in all languages" (in Mary's and Dorothea's languages, along with other national languages), and that the speeches depend on quality of voice--on vocal inflexion--suggest the importance of the relationship that an utterance implies. Rosamond's "thin utterance" negates her relationship with Lydgate: she accepts no responsibility for their situation. The narrator underscores Rosamond's rejection of Lydgate by using a paradoxical verb: "Rosamond's thin utterance threw into the words . . . as much neutrality as they could hold." The contrast between the violence of the verb and the word "neutrality" makes Rosamond's speech all the more harsh. Moreover, Peter Garret points out that Lydgate expects Rosamond to respond as though she were Dorothea, whose "'Advise me--think what I can do . . .'" seems to Lydgate

the "voice of deep-souled womanhood" (638). Dorothea's concern for Casaubon makes Rosamond's "chilling inversion" of the speech horrifying for Lydgate--and for the reader (Garrett 149).

Since Rosamond defines herself and her world in such particular terms (and flexibility is not her strong point), she loses her sense of herself when her romance collapses. Her subjectivity is so tied to the language of romance that she has no way to relate to things that happen outside her scripts. Rosamond "had been little used to imagining other people's states of mind except as a material cut into shape by her own wishes . . .," so when Will Ladislaw upbraids her so violently, she is startled into the realization of another's consciousness--one that is emphatically an outsider to her plot (834). When it becomes patently obvious that Will is not the "captive" admirer she had written him as, she finds herself "almost losing the sense of her identity, and . . . waking into some new terrible existence" (475; 836). Will forces her out of her language, and she is lost: "her little world was in ruins, and she felt herself tottering in the midst as a lonely bewildered consciousness" (837). Her identity jeopardized, she can only restore it by "saving" Dorothea.

Rosamond explains the scene Dorothea witnessed in terms that are new to Rosamond. The language of romance has taken a severe blow, and Rosamond finds herself under the

influence of Dorothea's powerful sympathy, rather than the animosity Rosamond expected. Rosamond finds herself adrift:

Rosamond, taken hold of by an emotion stronger than her own--hurried along in a new movement which gave all things some new, awful, undefined aspect--could find no words, but involuntarily she put her lips to Dorothea's forehead which was very near her, and then for a minute the two women clasped each other as if they had been in a shipwreck (856).

Nothing in Rosamond's experience prepares her for Dorothea's kindness; in Rosamond's lexicon, important relations occur between men and women, not between women alone. Abandoning a language that does not suffice, Rosamond succumbs to Dorothea's emotion and responds with an action that is more usual of Dorothea than it is of Rosamond. In a sense, this is something of a typical response for Rosamond, because it looks back to her earlier characterization as a kind of mirror--she reflects what Dorothea wants to see. The difference, of course, is that the strength of Dorothea's emotion affects Rosamond far more deeply than any she has previously experienced.

Infused with a new (and foreign) way of seeing, Rosamond grapples with a language appropriate to it; she responds with vague and broken syntax.²² "You are thinking what is not true," she says, then follows that with "When you came in yesterday--it was not as you thought" (856). Her words avoid direct reference to Will, and her syntax suffers under the weight of foreign emotions. Even the use

of three "you's" in eighteen words signifies a new language for Rosamond, who usually speaks in "I's." Her broken phrasing continues throughout her explanation to Dorothea, and her confession comes the closest to speaking plainly (that is, without artifice) that the reader ever sees Rosamond attempt.¹²

Once the context for this break in Rosamond's willfulness disappears, so does the (incipient) new language. As the narrator puts it, "Poor Rosamond's vagrant fancy had come back terribly scourged . . .," but it does come back, and grows back to its previous strength over time (858). Lydgate's premature death allows Rosamond to pursue what she considers due her: the fairy tale ending that she could not achieve with Lydgate. Jennifer Uglow points out that in Middlemarch, as in others of George Eliot's works, "[the] fairy-tale ending is seen as a pernicious dream," and that Rosamond is "doomed" because she "absorbs the fantasy . . ." (79). It is not, of course, that Rosamond is in her own eyes doomed: she does not have the vocabulary to learn from her momentary fall from romantic "heroicism." When she achieves the happiness (read "happily ever after") that she desired all along, she "often [speaks] of her happiness as 'a reward'--she [does] not say for what . . ." (893).

Where Mary Garth sometimes openly challenges the authority of patriarchy, Rosamond's manipulations of patriarchy are almost more subversive because never overt.

Instead, Rosamond takes the model patriarchy offers her in romances and turns the model against itself. Time and time again, Rosamond is described as an angel: she is accomplished in all the sanctioned areas, and never

showed any unbecoming knowledge and [is] always that combination of correct sentiments, music, dancing, drawing, elegant note-writing, private album for extracted verse, and perfect blond loveliness, which made the irresistible woman for the doomed man of that date (301).

This description of Rosamond signifies her subversiveness: she is exactly what she is supposed to be. As a character, Rosamond undermines patriarchy simply because she is a pure example of womanhood: she has complied with everything society asks of her. While at first glance, her strength of will might seem to be outside conventional expectations of a woman's personality, the text makes it clear that she is willful insofar as she doggedly seeks to reify what she has been taught to think of as her "story"--the plot inscribed in romances. She uses it so well that she turns the plot against itself (and, inadvertently, against herself--her first marriage is a disaster), but, undaunted, Rosamond re-enacts the plot with the rich doctor.

Thus, Rosamond is as she thinks she is: beyond reproach. That her society does not fall into line with her expectations cannot be her concern, since she has dutifully performed her role. She is the strongest critique of patriarchy because she is its purest product: she speaks its

language and is imbued with its world view. Rosamond is also profoundly a victim. Like Dorothea, Rosamond has no medium in which to thrive, much less to determine her own story, so she becomes a monstrous victim of the story written for her. And also like Dorothea, Rosamond is a "sad sacrifice."

I turn to Dorothea last because I want to invert the idea of using Dorothea as a centre against which other characters are judged, and place her instead on a more equal--or dialogic--footing with her sister heroines. But of course it is with good reason that Dorothea appears to be the centre of the text: the reader has more access to her thoughts and feelings than those of the other two, and Dorothea more overtly challenges the systems that constrain her.

The text opens with Dorothea struggling against the language that binds her; she feels her present knowledge inadequate to her aspirations. Like Mary and Rosamond, Dorothea seeks power, but not Rosamond's ambitions for power over others: Dorothea seeks the "truth," the power to understand her place in the world. Her desire to learn Latin and Greek stems from her perception that those "provinces of masculine knowledge" are "a standing-ground from which all truth could be seen more truly" (88). And while these languages are a kind of key, alone they will not provide the knowledge she seeks. Of the three female

characters, Dorothea is the most reflective. She tries to understand, but her texts and her strategies for reading them are limited. (If Mr. Brooke's library is any reflection of his personality, Dorothea's options are haphazard at best.¹³) Dorothea is constrained by the lack of access to any experience that could mediate the "knowledge in general" (Lewes' term) she gleans from her reading.

But unlike Mary and Rosamond, Dorothea is aware of a lack in her knowledge, in her language. Dorothea's strong sense of the inadequacy of her language contrasts with Rosamond's equally strong faith in the adequacy of hers, and the contrast between the two subjectivities explores the "limits of variation" in definitions of women. The dialogue between their voices, their languages, questions the authority of patriarchal language and its limits from almost opposite positions on the margins.

The narrator quickly establishes that Dorothea is an anomaly in her neighbourhood: she is "too unusual and striking" in her religion for her neighbours to be quite at ease (31). Dorothea has this same sense of being out of place: she does not speak the language. Her pursuit of self-knowledge is, so to speak, suspended, since her own language does not "fit," and she has not yet learned a new one. But she does assert a kind of self: as Derek Oldfield points out, "[the] overwhelming majority of her sentences

have as their subject the personal pronoun 'I' (77). Rather than asserting an "I" who knows what it is, to paraphrase Gilbert and Gubar, Dorothea's "I" flies out in reaction to others: the "I" comes not from a coherent sense of self, but from a desire to learn what her "self" means.

Bakhtin argues that "[one's] own discourse and one's voice, although born of another or dynamically stimulated by another, will sooner or later begin to liberate themselves from the authority of the other's discourse" (348). In Dorothea, the reader sees this process at work. She asserts her "I," in opposition to almost everyone but Casaubon, as a way of testing the strength of her own discourse. She defines herself and her language as "other" to the voices--particularly Brooke's, Celia's, and Chettam's--around her. What she cannot yet realize, of course, is that in aligning herself with Casaubon, with "masculine knowledge," her voice will be all but silenced.

While Rosamond accepts the story written for her, Dorothea attempts to write a new one for herself. Her nature is "ardent, theoretic, and intellectually consequent" and therein lies the difficulty (51). Instead of importing an entire plot from reading, as Rosamond does, Dorothea imports abstractions. She aspires to "truth," "goodness," and "duty," but she has neither the experience nor the education to ground such abstractions. Similarly, Rosamond lacks the experience to ground her abstracted plots, and

while she lacks Dorothea's sense of inadequacy, Rosamond's ardour in pursuing the romance plot almost equals Dorothea's passion for wisdom.

Like Rosamond, Dorothea is not a very critical reader. Dorothea bases her interpretations on her inadequate lexicon, so she fills in blanks as they appear, and misinterprets chronically. Her judgment of Casaubon, for example, is based on the label "scholar" and on her preconceptions of what that label signifies. Even before he arrives, she feels "venerating expectation" for the man whose "very name carried an impressiveness hardly to be measured" (33). Her misinterpretations continue even to Will: as Dorothea Barrett puts it, "Dorothea's misinterpretation of Ladislaw's feelings and motives, especially during their conversations in Rome, shows her propensity, once again, to attribute excellence where, the narrator steadily informs us, there is only mediocrity" (126).

Dorothea's inability to perceive mediocrity does not change, but through her marriage to Casaubon, she learns a language in which she might express her own view. Dorothea's sense of disillusionment with both marriage and Casaubon leads her to a language in which she can articulate her sense of self more clearly, even as marriage teaches her to suppress her newly acquired language. Where she had earlier defined herself in opposition to Celia and company,

she feels a "new companionship" with the miniature of Aunt Julia, "who had known some difficulty about marriage" (308). Dorothea does not know the full story of Aunt Julia's life, but the little she has been able to discover leads her to a sense of sisterly solidarity. Instead of trying to compose a narrative for her life from an abstraction, Dorothea takes Aunt Julia's plot, and compares it to her own experience. Dorothea looks at the other woman's portrait "as if she were . . . talking to a figure in front of her," and through the conversation between the two experiences, Dorothea interprets and judges her life (308). Words like "unfortunate," "oppression," and "bitterness" enter her vocabulary from concrete experience (307-8).¹⁴

Rosamond critiques patriarchy unaware, and in the case of Casaubon's will and similar issues, so does Dorothea. But like Mary, Dorothea also articulates her objections to the "ways of the world," as she does with her questions about Aunt Julia's disinheritance. And where Mary ultimately sides with conservatism (she finally settles for local changes in the world's ways), Dorothea continues her resistance, both consciously and unconsciously. As Dorothea's abstractions grow more concrete, her sense of self grows stronger. Rosamond is never able to revise her plot, nor is Mary, but Dorothea grows, learns, and applies her knowledge.

As I said above, Rosamond is shocked into the realization of the consciousness of others, but Dorothea learns to recognize it much sooner. Early in her marriage, Dorothea realizes that Casaubon "had an equivalent centre of self, whence the lights and shadows must always fall with a certain difference" (243). Dorothea's acknowledgement of another's perspective is, moreover, ground in particulars, in another concrete person with a different point of view; the realization is "an idea wrought back to the directness of sense . . ." (243). Dorothea carries this knowledge through to question conventions about marriage, but her knowledge also informs the way she learns to relate to people. Early in the text, Dorothea responds to others through simple opposition, but she later responds through imaginative engagement, through recognizing the other's point of view (even though she may still oppose her or him). Thus she is able to intervene on Lydgate's behalf, and to infuse Rosamond with the emotion I discussed earlier.

Dorothea's new ability comes at great cost, for only through pain does she learn to articulate herself. With Casaubon, she feels indignant and angry, but she does not develop an "inward articulate voice pronouncing the once 'affable archangel' a poor creature"; rather, she responds "with a dumb inward cry for help to bear this nightmare of a life in which every energy [is] arrested by dread" (317; 410). After Casaubon's death, she affirms the combination

of guilt and anger she experiences by writing her note to Casaubon. Dorothea writes: "Do you not see now that I could not submit my soul to yours, by working hopelessly at what I have no belief in?--Dorothea" (583). This note is one of the few utterances Dorothea commits to paper, and in it, she gives her refusal to the final submission of her soul--she refuses to compromise her integrity, her self, to a dead man. Asserting her "equivalent centre of self" in writing liberates her voice--for the moment, at any rate.

Dorothea's love for Will, and her sense of betrayal when she sees him with Rosamond, give rise to another cathartic and self-defining process. Dorothea had thought that she and Will shared "the vibrating bond of mutual speech" (844). But in fact the feeling for Will she had "kept alive from a very little seed" is another instance of her misreading (844). As Barrett points out, the seed image "suggests the amount of imagination there is in her love for Will" (136). As Rosamond does with Lydgate, Dorothea takes the conversations she has with Will in Rome and builds a narrative on them, and again like Rosamond, Dorothea's narrative suddenly collapses.

Dorothea discovers her passion for Will "in the unshrinking utterance of despair" (844). But she is also deeply angry, and rejects Will's "cheap regard and lip-born words" (845). Where Rosamond's world lies in ruins around her, Dorothea revises her way of being. She awakes "with

the clearest consciousness that she was looking into the eyes of sorrow," but instead of crippling her (as happens to Rosamond in her analogous situation), Dorothea feels that "her soul [has] been liberated" (845). She takes her grief and makes it "a lasting companion," "a sharer in her thoughts" (845). As Karen Chase puts it, Dorothea "grows by making room for painful emotions" (174, her emphasis). The pain and her ability to assimilate--indeed, use--it, signifies the change in her: she can now "say 'I' with some emphasis: I want, I need, I must" (Ermarth "Teaching Middlemarch" 37). And while "emphasis" is appropriate, here, I think one could add that the assertion of "I" has much to do with the "I" knowing what it is, in Gilbert and Gubar's terms, and, finally, Dorothea knows who she is.

Dorothea once again realizes the extent to which others (other "equivalent centres of self") are implicated in her life; she sees that it was not her event only, to paraphrase the text. With her declaration of "I," she recognizes the "you's" involved--Rosamond and Lydgate (Will, too, of course, but at this point Dorothea is not concerned about him). When Dorothea re-tells the event to herself, she includes the point of view of Rosamond: "vivid sympathetic experience [returns] to her [Dorothea] as a power: it [asserts] itself as acquired knowledge asserts itself" (846). While it is rather ironic that Dorothea's final realization stems from (yet another) misreading, her new

knowledge does show the extent to which she has abandoned the abstractions that formerly "performed the function of knowledge" for her, and she learns instead by naming and using her own concrete experience.

But for Dorothea, knowing who she is does not entirely change her sense of powerlessness. Dorothea retains the "feeling that there was always something better which she might have done, if she had only been better and known better" (893). The narrator goes on to emphasize the degree to which she has been sacrificed:

Many who knew her, thought it a pity that so substantive and rare a creature should have been absorbed into the life of another, and be only known in a certain circle as a wife and mother. But no one stated exactly what else that was in her power she ought rather to have done . . . (894).

Dorothea is absorbed into Will's life: she supports his career as an "ardent public man," and becomes a "sad sacrifice" (894; 896). Lee Edwards points out that "ardent" is Dorothea's adjective and argues that Will becomes a version of Dorothea, as "a social reformer who finds a vocation which can use his romantic vision . . ." (235). Even if Will is successful in advocating the cause that was first Dorothea's, that does not make the reader any more contented with her sacrifice.

Instead, and despite the narrator's report that Dorothea is content with her lot, the text gives the reader another version of womanhood, one that is as unsatisfactory

as Mary's and Rosamond's. Because of their lack of access to experience, and the lack of the language that translates experience into knowledge, the three women continue to apply scripts that are inadequate to their lives. According to conventional scripts--conventional language for the lives of women--the three attain "happy endings," but this only serves to point up the inadequacy of the whole story.

"Favourite love-stories in prose and verse" cannot express the lives of these three women.

Dorothea's story is characterized by pain, and while she comes to a position (still contextual and contingent) from which she asserts a "genuine" sense of self, the reader is left to wonder whether or not it was worth what it cost her. Rosamond continues to live her copied story, as Mary does (copied from her parents), but Gilbert and Gubar point out that Rosamond is caged, albeit in "one all flowers and gilding" (Gilbert and Gubar 516; George Eliot 893). Mary is the wife of a tenant farmer in Stone Court (lifeless, barren); Mary looks after and lives through her men.

The conversation the three portraits offer describes and proscribes what passes for knowledge about women. The conversation exposes the extent to which women are constrained by the lack of access to experience, to education, and to vocation. The three women offer three languages for challenging would-be monologic authority, but there is no language in the text for dismantling the system

that confines Mary, Rosamond and Dorothea. Instead, the text offers "variations" on languages that are usually silenced: in a strategy that Dale Bauer identifies as feminist dialogics, George Eliot brings these languages "back into the dialogue . . ." so that they resonate against, and thereby question, the language of patriarchy (Bauer 4).

CHAPTER THREE

VOICES REFLECTING: THE READER AND THE NARRATOR

Who shall tell what may be the effect of a piece
of writing?

Narrator

I began the last chapter discussing the complexities of uttering "I" for Mary, Rosamond, and Dorothea. This chapter extends the argument to the relationship between the reader and narrator: the complexities of language and subjectivity obtain in this relationship as much as they do among the characters. And just as the female characters' "I's" are determined in no small measure by gender, in the relationship between reader and narrator gender is central.

The questions about patriarchal language that the narrator raises in the plots and characters remain the topic of conversation between the reader and narrator. In Middlemarch, the act of reading engages the reader in a dialogue with the narrator, and through her¹⁵, with the characters. For a feminist reader, the act of reading is political: as Patrocínio Schweickart puts it, "[the] point is not merely to interpret literature in various ways; the point is to change the world" (39, emphasis hers). The conversation with the narrator puts the reader's world view, her politics, into play with those of the narrator, so that

reading becomes "an important arena of political struggle, a crucial component of the project of interpreting the world in order to change it" (Schweickart 39). Much of George Eliot's strategy in her three heroines revolves around "interpreting the world in order to change it"; this strategy is equally as pronounced between a feminist reader and the narrator.

Since the construction of female subjectivity is so central to the plots and characters, it follows that a feminist, if not just female, reader will find herself scrutinizing, as the narrator does, her own (that is, the reader's own) position as a speaking subject. As the reader hears characters coming to consciousness of the positions of their voices, the reader reflects on her own voice: she measures it against the voices of the characters and the narrator. In other words, she emulates the process of the characters (especially Dorothea) by hearing her own voice resonating (thus becoming more clear) against the backdrop of all the other languages and voices in the novel. As Bakhtin reminds us, "[a] language is revealed in all its distinctiveness only when it is brought into relationship with other languages . . .", which is as true for the reader as it is for the characters (411). Out of the relationship between reader and narrator, the reader is brought to reflect on her own voice--the reader's voice, in effect, becomes part of the novel's project.

The novel presents several versions of conversation between reader and narrator. The plots themselves converse: the structure of the novel focuses the reader's attention on the importance of seeing "relationally," as the plots signify in and through relation to one another. This conversation between plots is an oblique approach to the issues the narrator raises when she discusses point of view, and its relationship to self and other. Through her discussion, she undermines her own authority and establishes a mutual relationship with the reader. From this position of mutuality, the narrator offers her own commentary on the individual characters, and she invites the reader to interpret and judge them with her.

These conversations form a discourse not available to the characters themselves. The reader and narrator have a global perspective on issues that the characters can only see locally. Where, for example, Dorothea holds a conversation about her experience with a portrait of a dead woman, the reader and narrator participate in many conversations. The limited opportunities for conversation among the characters mean that they can only catch glimpses of what constrains them, and while they recognize discontent, they have no means of formulating what might be adequate to their lives. In experiencing all of them, the reader and narrator have an enriched and positive view of

the characters' potential, where the characters themselves remain limited in their grasps of other "centres of self." The reader comes to recognize other "centres of self" first through the conversations between the plots.

As I suggest in Chapter Two, the novel presents different versions of the same basic plot: the courtships and marriages of three women. And while the three characters live the suspect "happily ever after" closure, none of them finds a world view, a language, that fits the narrator's notion of what they might be under a system less defining and constraining than patriarchy. The narrator is careful to point out the way the women approach marriage: for Dorothea, the "really delightful marriage must be that where your husband was a sort of father," where Mary seeks (paradoxically) both a son in Fred and a version of her father (32). Dorothea's error in seeing her prospective husband as a father is qualified by Mary's choice of Fred as father/son: Dorothea envisions herself without authority, but Mary sees herself as both (relatively) powerful and powerless, as both mother and daughter. The accented language of Mary's father's conservatism, anachronistic even as she speaks it, also contributes to the limitations of her view of marriage. Like Rosamond's, Mary's power can only come through manipulation, and Mary's potential is thus compromised by the necessity of constructing herself by constructing Fred.

Mary and Rosamond approach marriage with a desire for power over their husbands: the models they have access to suggest power over another as the appropriate conjugal relationship. Dorothea seeks to renounce her self in favour of her husbands' selves (she offers the sacrifice to Casaubon and to Will). Again, this model is the only one available to Dorothea; she bases this one on a revised version of Milton's daughters. The narrator emphasizes again and again the costs, both of the desire for power (primarily through Rosamond) and of self-renunciation (through Dorothea)--the two poles qualify each other.

While Dorothea and Mary choose husbands of whom their society disapproves, Rosamond, on the other hand, chooses an "appropriate" mate: Lydgate is more or less of her standing, and the match receives general approbation. But society's version of "appropriateness" proves empty, as both Dorothea's and Rosamond's marriages become more and more damaging to them. The reader cannot rely on conventional notions of "correct" marriages--any more than the characters can--the terms do not signify in this text.

Mary does not adapt her language: the reader meets her with her sense of self positioned in such a way as to attain her desires. But Rosamond and Dorothea undergo severe challenges to their languages, and they suffer more or less simultaneously. While Rosamond restores the only script available to her, Dorothea revises hers to include other

points of view. However, Dorothea's revisions do not signify: the middle road Mary settles for leads her to more contentment than Dorothea achieves.¹⁶ If the three had more access to each other, and to experience, their scripts might have altered, but only the reader, in her dialogue with the narrator, can see the kinds of qualifications the text places on the lives of the three women: despite the differences among them, in all aspects (language, class background, family, husband), none of the three finds a way out of patriarchal scripts.

As I suggest in Chapter Two, the text implicitly asks how the limitations patriarchy places on women's lives can be changed: the text asks the reader to reflect on the possibility of circumstances in which a woman can articulate her self and be articulated in a less constraining way. The narrator uses point of view both to illustrate these questions and to suggest an approach toward answering them. Moving through the three female characters, the narrator reflects to a lesser or greater degree the point of view of the character at hand. The shifting perspective indicates that a single point of view is inadequate to the topic: the concept of a key to all women is just as empty as a key to all mythologies. Rather than beginning with an abstract definition of women ("the sameness of women's coiffure and the favourite love-stories in prose and verse," for example), the narrator chooses to move through concrete

examples of women, and she proceeds by emphasizing the importance of each character's view of the world.

The shifting point of view and the separate plots on the same themes become a means of questioning the "limits of variation." Peter Garrett suggests that

structure in Middlemarch is defined as a set of relations between minds and [that] the need to represent a multiplicity of minds multiplies both perspectives and lines of development. Each character becomes, in principle, an equivalent center with his own point of view and his own story; each redefines the meaning of the whole narrative 'with a certain difference.' But while we are asked to recognize these numerous possible points of view, the shifting focus also stresses the limitations and distortions each produces (137).

The narrator becomes "an embracing consciousness" with the ability to move from character to character, thus acknowledging the "equivalent centre of self" in all characters (Garrett 137). And with the narrator, the reader moves from one point of view to another, also acknowledging the "equivalent centres" of the characters. However, as Garrett points out in the last sentence of the passage quoted above, each point of view limits and distorts. And like the characters and the reader, the narrator has her own point of view; she does not exempt herself from passages that describe the limitations of seeing.¹⁷

In Chapter Two, I point out some of the limitations the characters' languages place on their points of view; Rosamond, for example, cannot see beyond the script of the

romantic novel, and thus misconstrues what happens around her. While it is simple to point out the ways in which the characters are limited, it is more difficult to articulate the limitations of the narrator. However, she herself refers to the difficulty of interpreting, and thus to her own limitations. This serves to undermine the authority of her discourse: she places herself on the more equal footing of being limited, just like the reader.¹⁸

The narrator makes clear the relationship between subjectivity and point of view in the most famous "point of view" passage in Middlemarch: the parable of the pier-glass.

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 (297).

The narrator goes on to apply the "parable" to "the egoism of any person now absent" (297). A number of critics suggest that this image reflects on the narrator, as well as on Rosamond and the other characters.¹⁹ And as D.A. Miller points out, to say "present company excepted" is to implicate the present company in the generalization. Thus, Miller asks, "who is more present at the moment than the narrator himself? And what is he doing other than centering

the novel? And what else does he center it on but an insight that undermines the validity of centers?" (157). If egoism is the "centre" for each point of view, both the reader and narrator must keep in mind the arbitrary nature of seeing, of making sense of what is seen. But Ermarth notes that while the parable "suggests the limits of egoism . . . at the same time, [it] suggests the crucial importance of ego, without which there is no focus or pattern" ("Teaching Middlemarch" 37). Distorting though they may be, without point of view and ego, neither the narrator nor the reader--not to mention the characters--can make sense of what they see.

The narrator points out a fundamental similarity between herself and the reader: we are both necessarily limited by our egos. But the necessary limitation creates a paradox: while our egos limit, they also protect.

If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence. As it is, the quickest of us walk about well wadded with stupidity (226).

Without the "wadding" of stupidity, "we should die": if we had access to everything, we could make sense of nothing. But at the same time, the narrator argues the importance of seeing beyond our own "stupidity." As we recognize our necessary limits, paradoxically, we are asked to move beyond them.

In pointing out the similarity of our limiting egos, the narrator also implicitly raises the equally basic difference between self and other. As soon as the narrator points out that one's self, one's ego, limits what is seen, she also implies that each sees differently, thus including self and other in both seeing limits and seeing beyond them. Michael Holquist points out that in Bakhtin's thought, "consciousness of self is possible only if it is experienced by contrast" ("The Irrepressible I" 34, emphasis his). The pronoun "I" acknowledges the difference between the speaker and the listener (in this case the reader), between self and other, and consciousness of the relationship between self and other pervades the narrative. Ermarth states that "[the] difference between self and other is what defines both; they exist in mutual reciprocity. . . . [There] can be no sympathy and no clear personal integrity either, without clear perception of fundamental differences" (Realism and Consensus 232). Ermarth also notes that "[the] principle of separation is thus the first principle of connectedness" (231). The limits of egos also indicate how those limits can be reconceived: once the reader recognizes the limits, she takes the first step toward imaginative engagement with the other, by imagining the "equivalent centre of self" of the other. As the narrator states in the "Finale," "[every] limit is a beginning as well as an ending" (890).

While the narrator does not imply that boundaries between egos can (or should) be entirely overcome, she urges her reader to recognize and attend to limitations. But the fact that the limits are also beginnings creates a shifting boundary between self and other. Rather than preserving a static, authoritative "border," each acknowledgement of the other's self re-negotiates where one ends and the other begins. Sense of self is in process, and is positioned and re-positioned.

In the midst of these shifting boundaries, the narrator cannot control how the reader responds to the narratives, since the reader's "I" is as egotistical as the narrator's. As I suggest above, in acknowledging her own candle in the pier-glass, the narrator also recognizes the presence of the reader's candle. And for the reader, the primary "other" is the narrator herself. The first exchange between self and other takes place between reader and narrator: both are on the same slippery ground, with the same constraints on points of view, and the same limitations on authority. I have access only to my reading of the narrator; she, similarly, can address only her version of the reader.

But while this ground is slippery, it is not so treacherous as to defeat the reader (or the narrator) entirely. The knowledge that the narrator and the reader share the existence of constraints closes some of the distance between writing and reading, and lessens the

limitations of egoism implied in the pier-glass image. When the reader recognizes the narrator as her other, the reader also sees the "equivalent centre of self" in the narrator. As Stwertka puts it, "[the] 'I' of the narrator functions as our 'you,' the reader's opposite and mirror image, both speaker and listener; thus each self is seen also as an other, each other as a self" (186).

In effect, when the narrator points out the dangers of the ego/candle, she gives the reader the tools to counteract it, if only by being aware of it. The play of reflections between self and other in the pier-glass allows both reader and narrator to acknowledge and negotiate boundaries between them. As Holquist points out, each utterance has as its primary element the relationship between speaker and audience: each implicit "I" from the narrator reflects the "you" of her audience, which acknowledges the "I" in the "you,"--it is a series of reflections that recognizes difference and similarity at the same time (Dialogism 38). Thus the reader, even more than the characters (who do not have access to the narrator's wisdom), can allow for the distortion her own ego creates, and she can strive to maintain a sense of her other's (the narrator's) self.

In showing the reader the importance of "equivalent centres" of others, the narrator indicates the kind of readers she proposes her characters should become. Her model of reading is based on mutuality--on exchange, and on

conversation. Elizabeth A. Flynn offers a similar idea as a feminist model of reading:

self and other, reader and text, interact in such a way that the reader learns from the experience without losing critical distance; reader and text interact with a degree of mutuality. . . . Self and other remain distinct and so create a kind of dialogue (268).

Dorothea is the only character who recognizes the "equivalent centre" in another (in Casaubon), but the reader, learning both from the narrator and from the characters' misreadings, can establish a mutual relationship with the narrator. The mutuality makes the conversation: it establishes gossip's pattern of narrative, interpretation, and judgment (Spacks 13).

The decentred structure of the novel and the narrator's articulation of her own limits both serve to establish mutuality between narrator and reader, and the narrator frequently reinforces the idea of self and other through even something as simple as her choice of pronouns. She uses tags like "For my part I am very sorry for him [Casaubon]" in order to give the reader room to measure the reader's own sense of the character. Every time the narrator says "I," she implies the reader's "you" in a way that encourages the reader to evaluate and formulate her own voice, her own position on the issue at hand.

The narrator includes models of readers as another method of encouraging the reader's awareness of self and

other. Mary, Rosamond, and Dorothea are such models, certainly, but the narrator also writes in several versions of readers. Wolfgang Iser uses the term "implied reader" to designate "a textual structure anticipating the presence of a recipient without necessarily defining him . . ." (34). The implied reader exists in the text, and is distinct from the actual reader, who may be (quite often is) very different. The narrator of Middlemarch is aware of this distinction between readers and makes use of it. She writes in an implied reader who is easily cowed and rather helpless; Cicely Palser Havelly, for example, reads a passage about Will as follows:

The Will the author insists on . . . seems more than 'strange'; but the reader who doubts the 'fact' must be prepared to be labelled ordinary and vulgar, and has probably already meekly submitted to the coercive 'we' and accepted that he or she is 'well-wadded with stupidity' (314, emphasis hers).

I am not concerned here with the particulars about Will, but rather with Havelly's image of the reader, who is "meek," can be "coerced" by a pronoun, and dares not dispute the "author's" presentation of the facts. And while I do not dispute the presence of this implied reader in the text, I cannot agree that this is the only implied reader. (Havelly does not suggest the presence of other versions of readers, but it might be well to point out that she herself does not conform to the image of the reader she describes.) Another

implied reader is a good deal more sagacious than Havelly's characterization allows.

Alongside the meek reader is a reader who recognizes her difference from the meek one. As D.A. Miller argues, "[surely] the reader for whom this intimidatingly wise novel is written cannot be the benighted creature presupposed in the narrator's addresses. . . . The caricature exists precisely so that the reader may disaffiliate himself from it" (159). The second implied reader, the more sophisticated one, recognizes and rejects the "benighted creature" as a model. In offering several versions of readers (not to mention all the models of misreaders in the plots), the narrator gives the reader the opportunity to define herself, to explore her own limitations as a reader, against all the other models. Thus, the reader echoes the process the female characters go through in defining their own voices.

While the narrator offers other versions of readers, against whose voices the actual reader tests hers, the narrator also offers her own judgments as "sounding-boards" for the reader. In the following exchange between Dorothea and Chettam, where the ostensible subject is Dorothea's plan to renounce riding, the narrator invites the reader's participation in defining a proper "lady." Chettam begins by stating that

"Every lady ought to be a perfect horsewoman, that she may accompany her husband."

"You see how widely we differ, Sir James. I have made up my mind that I ought not to be a perfect horsewoman, and so I should never correspond to your pattern of a lady." Dorothea looked straight before her, and spoke with cold brusquerie, very much with the air of a handsome boy, in amusing contrast with the solicitous amiability of her admirer (44).

The exchange offers two opposing definitions of womanhood: Chettam argues the importance of accompanying a husband in his pursuits, while Dorothea rejects this "pattern" in favour of renouncing sensual pleasure (and Chettam's notion of wifehood). But the narrator's comments open the issue to debate with the reader: Dorothea rejects Chettam's "pattern" so much that she comes to lose her gender--she resembles "a handsome boy," which makes an "amusing contrast" with Chettam. The point is the amusement: since both Dorothea and Chettam are quite serious, the amusement can only be the narrator's response to the contrast, and to the exchange itself. And by mentioning her own response, the narrator invites the reader's as well--it is an implicit "I," so to speak. Thus the passage holds the potential for four languages about women: the two characters', the amused narrator's, and the reader's. If the narrator's solicitation of the reader's response seems oblique in this exchange, it is of course much less subtle in passages that are purely narratorial.

In Chapter Two, I describe the care with which the narrator shows Rosamond to be a perfect example of society's

definitions of womanliness. After describing Rosamond as "the irresistible woman for the doomed man of that date," the narrator addresses the reader directly:

Think no unfair evil of her, pray: she had no wicked plots, nothing sordid or mercenary; in fact, she never thought of money except as something necessary which other people would always provide. She was not in the habit of devising falsehoods, and if her statements were no direct clue to fact, why, they were not intended in that light--they were among her elegant accomplishments, intended to please. Nature had inspired many arts in finishing Mrs Lemon's favourite pupil, who by general consent (Fred's excepted) was a rare compound of beauty, cleverness, and amiability (301).

The narrator begins with an imperative, which, as Mary G. De Jong points out, tells the reader "to see a fair amount of evil" in Rosamond (97). The narrator not only invites the reader to see evil, but the definition of "fair" is left up to the reader. In order to come to some conclusion about Rosamond, the reader must decide what is "fair." By this point in the text, the reader is well acquainted with the limitations Rosamond's romantic languages place on her plots (again the judgment of "wicked" is left to the reader); the reader is also aware of Rosamond's disinterest in money, except as a convenience. The narrator uses what sounds very much like Rosamond's own language to satirize her lies ("why, they were not intended in that light") and completes the passage by invoking society's approval of Rosamond. The idea of "general consent" gives the reader a further forum for setting her own way of naming of Rosamond against that

of society's. The implicit "I" in this passage, while clearly satirizing Rosamond, does not speak for the reader, or coerce her into a particular view: the value judgments are left to the reader's discretion.

But in the description of Rosamond, the narrator also involves the reader in exposing the language that constructs Rosamond. The "elegant accomplishments, intended to please" that are perceived as appropriate for women come under scrutiny: the narrator shows them to be destructive, both to Rosamond, and to the society that demands them. "Nature" may have inspired the "arts," but they are now artifice. The reader sees the "rare compound of beauty, cleverness, and amiability" as a collection of suspect adjectives, definitions of which resonate hollowly against the background of the Rosamond with whom the reader is acquainted.

In her description of Mary Garth, as well, the narrator uses the language of "general consent" to undermine its authority.

If you want to know more particularly how Mary looked, ten to one you will see a face like hers in the crowded street tomorrow, if you are there on the watch. . . . [Fix] your eyes on some small plump brownish person of firm but quiet carriage, who looks about her, but does not suppose that anybody is looking at her. If she has a broad face and square brow, well-marked eyebrows and curly dark hair, a certain expression of amusement in her glance which her mouth keeps a secret of, and for the rest features entirely insignificant--take that ordinary but not disagreeable person for a portrait of Mary Garth (442-3).

This description of Mary is as interesting for its suggestions to the reader as it is for its description. The narrator's use of "if" leaves choices up to the reader: the reader may or may not take the advice. But the terms in which the narrator describes the hypothetical woman on the streets emphasize the language with which women are categorized and evaluated. This person is "ordinary but not disagreeable," her features are "entirely insignificant," and she is a "small plump brownish person." The reader will only notice her if she is "on the watch": the narrator suggests that the reader has already passed any number of Mary Garths on the street. "Ordinary" becomes suspect, as "beauty" does with Rosamond, since the reader knows Mary to be complex and interesting. This is not simply a matter of "judging appearances"; rather, it questions the language society uses to judge women's value. Since "general consent" values Rosamond's "beauty" and passes by Mary's "ordinariness," and since the reader knows that neither adjective adequately expresses the character's subjectivity, the terms lose their authority.

Both "beauty" and "ordinariness" serve to keep Rosamond and Mary as "others." In another context, the narrator refers to "that mysterious influence of Naming which determinates so much of mortal choice" (268); in patriarchal society, naming the other in terms that preserve otherness is indeed a "mortal" choice--it kills communication. By

showing the damage the terms of otherness do to the female characters, and by showing their "equivalent centres of self," the narrator invites the reader to locate her own "self" in the conversation about women.

The conversation gives the reader an opportunity to reflect on herself as a reader, to hear her own voice resonate against the other voice, and to articulate questions that are implicit in the portraits of the female characters. What may begin as a conversation between points of view and plots expands to a philosophical inquiry into the linguistic borders between self and other. Once the narrator's method is clear, each pronoun sets off a chain of reflections among the characters, the reader, and the narrator. Through the reflections, the language patriarchy uses to categorize and evaluate women is opened to the reader, who takes it, reflecting on it and on her sense of self.

CONCLUSION

"EVERY LIMIT IS A BEGINNING"

I protest against any absolute conclusion . . .

Narrator

The narrator begins formulating questions in the "Prelude" about women's roles when she mentions the "limits of variation" among female natures. In the "Finale," the narrator offers three versions of femaleness: Mary, with her solid mutual happiness; Rosamond, a basil plant flourishing on the brains of a murdered man; and Dorothea, "feeling that there was always something better which she might have done . . ." (893). For all three, the question is one of appropriate medium: under what circumstances would these three have found their "epos," as Saint Theresa did? And while all three perceive themselves as more or less happy, the narrator suggests throughout that they have not achieved as full a sense of themselves, of their voices, as they could have: Rosamond was poisoned early on, Mary espouses anachronistic values, and Dorothea, the most reflective of the three, is aware of a lack in her sense of herself.

This study has argued that a conversational approach to Middlemarch reveals both the thematic and the structural concerns for the ways in which women's position in society

is constructed in and through language. The issues of subjectivity, gender, voice, interpretation, and audience arise equally in discussions of characters and between the reader and the narrator.

In a metaphorical conversation, the three female characters offer different versions of the same scripts. But all three lack strategies to do more than misread their scripts: with limited access to the experience that might give them languages to change the plot, they are left to take as authoritative a plot written from inadequate knowledge about women's "equivalent centres of self." And while the characters occasionally catch glimpses of the extent to which they are constrained, without access to the kinds of conversations the reader and narrator have, the characters are unable to act.

In a series of reflections, the reader and narrator continue conversations about women and language. The narrator creates a mutual relationship with the reader by continually expressing the limitations on narratorial authority, and by soliciting the reader's participation at every turn. As the reader and narrator expose the plots of patriarchal language, the narrator invites the reader to compare the reader's own experience, and to explore the ways in which the reader constructs her own sense of self through language.

But the narrator does not envision a society where the "limits of variation" among women are known and celebrated; to have done so would have been to prescribe, and her project is "a study of provincial life"--it describes. Her method is to include as many languages, as many limiting definitions, as she can. But as the limiting definitions sound against each other, and against the voices of the reader and narrator, the definitions become more and more hollow. The institutions of patriarchy--marriage as vocation, Lydgate's exclusive science, Casaubon's kind of scholarship--are opened to reform, because they are opened to questioning. The narrator begins the "Finale" by saying that "Every limit is a beginning as well as an ending" (890). In the spirit of the conversation I describe throughout, this seems to me a cue to the reader to take up the narrator's project of questioning, to use the limits of the novel as a "standing ground" from which more questions arise.

Middlemarch, with its musical Prelude and Finale, becomes a chorus for many voices, and while the chorus contains both point and counterpoint, the voices, the selves, all become "equivalent centres." As a dialogized text, Middlemarch empowers its reader by testing her voice: the narrator's challenges, questions, and descriptions offer the reader a re-defined, or refined, sense of self.

NOTES

¹My reader will have noticed by now that I have chosen to use a feminine pronoun for "the reader" of Middlemarch. My decision is based on the awareness that the reading of the novel this study offers arises from my (gendered) experience as a reader. Thus, I speak for myself--where a male reader finds "equivalent centres of self" in the text is up to him.

²One could make an argument for including Celia Brooke in this group of characters, since she goes through courtship and marriage just as the others do. However, the narrator pays much less attention to her than to the others, and her plot is subordinated to her sister's. D.A. Miller points out that even events in Celia's life tend to appear in subordinate clauses, and are thus made a "non-story" (128).

³Among the critics who make this charge are the following: Spady suggests that the reader is unlikely to dissent from the narrator's point of view (72-3); Warhol notes that "the narrator requires the narratee to become realigned with the narrator" (29); Armstrong says that when the narrator "asks a question--as she frequently does--it usually demands the answer 'Yes' . . ." (122); and Havely describes how the reader becomes "conditioned" to rely on the narrator's interpretation, instead of reaching an independent one (318).

⁴Johnson, according to Patricia Meyer Spacks, used "conversation" to denote "competitive self-display, in which one person necessarily triumphs," rather than exchange, or casual talk (97).

⁵There are many versions of patriarchy: broadly speaking, a patriarchy is "government by the father" (OED), characterized by the importance of hierarchy, status, and power. It is not a unitary system, but it is authoritarian, and while different men have different kinds of access to power, men nevertheless have more access than women. Middlemarch shows the provincial version of patriarchy, where, as the narrator says, "[a] man's mind--what there is of it--has always the advantage of being masculine . . . and even his ignorance is of a sounder quality" (44).

⁶See references in Note 3. I will also expand on the question of narratorial authority in Chapter Three.

⁷John Kucich calls the Garth family the "pastoral plot," while Alexander Welsh asserts that the Garths "enjoy

the nearly unqualified admiration of the novelist . . ." thereby separating the Garths from the narrator's usual treatment of characters (Kucich 58; Welsh 231). Welsh suggests that the Garths are the most conservative and least modern of the characters, and that Caleb and Mary Garth's "main action is to keep well clear of the other heroes and heroines and to rescue from the incongruous effects of a classical education one Fred Vincy, in order to perpetuate their conservative race" (231). And while Caleb may enjoy the "nearly unqualified admiration" of the narrator, Mary does not, as I shall argue later.

⁹See for example Spacks' discussion of gossip as social control in Gossip (172); see also J. Hillis Miller on Mrs. Cadwallader--another great controller through gossip ("Teaching Middlemarch" 57).

⁹At least St. Theresa can give her life for a divine being--Mary has to settle for considerably less than that.

¹⁰A few of the critics who mention Rosamond's egoism are Leavis (67); Harvey (59-60); Barrett (144); Ermarth ("Teaching Middlemarch as Narrative" 37); and D.A. Miller (140).

¹¹D.A. Miller makes a similar point (but to a different end): he says that Rosamond's speech "is all in dashes" (181).

¹²Kiely points out that early in the novel Rosamond equates plain speech with vulgarity (116).

¹³Like Maggie Tulliver, Dorothea takes as her authorities texts that are accidental; and also like Maggie, Dorothea uses them to "perform the function of knowledge" because she has no alternatives.

¹⁴Gilbert and Gubar point out that Dorothea's affinity with Aunt Julia causes several overt rebellions. "It is telling that her first defiance of Casaubon's deathly will is made to right the wrong done to Aunt Julia, whose disinheritance represents her own dispossession, powerlessness, and invisibility" (Gilbert and Gubar 506). They go on to point out that Aunt Julia is the reason Dorothea comes "to question the economic basis of patriarchy, specifically Casaubon's right to determine his own will and fix the line of succession in spite of his past familial obligations" (511). This is similar to the linguistic change I noted: Dorothea moves from the abstraction of "morally good" to a very particular proper noun--Aunt Julia. Instead of starting with the abstraction and working down, she starts with a particular, concrete

instance, and weighs out the principles involved for herself.

¹⁵I have chosen to use a feminine pronoun for the narrator for a number of reasons. On the most basic level, one faces the necessity of choosing a pronoun, and I choose to engender the narrator in keeping with the dialogue of women's voices I describe throughout this study. Moreover, the narrator's sensitivity to women's experience indicates that she shares it. Contrary to the view of J. Hillis Miller, I do not see how "the fiction of the male narrator is still maintained in Middlemarch," nor do I accept that "[to] speak of the narrator as a 'he' allows the reader to keep firmly in mind the distinction between the author . . . and the created role of the storyteller . . ." ("Optic and Semiotic" 130). I might accept the latter argument if it were conventional to use feminine pronouns for the apparently ungendered narrators in novels by men.

¹⁶As Dorothea Barrett says, "it is clear from the entire canon that George Eliot believes that intellectual and spiritual depth create rather than solve problems" (124).

¹⁷J. Hillis Miller puts this idea quite succinctly: "Seeing is always interested" ("Teaching Middlemarch" 52).

¹⁸In suggesting that the narrator's point of view is limited, as is the reader's, I am also suggesting that the narrator is not the authoritative figure she is sometimes seen to be. There are two critical camps on the issue of narratorial authority: in Note 2, I list a few of the "authoritative" camp; among those who argue for undermined authority are Ginsburg (542-558), J. Hillis Miller ("Optic and Semiotic" 143-4), and Lodge (53). Ginsburg argues the point in part through demonstrating the ways in which the narrator makes her characters' voices as authoritative as her own. Miller uses his analysis of visual metaphors to suggest the limits of the narrator's vision (thus also authority), and Lodge argues for the narrator's awareness of the indeterminacy in human communication--including her own.

¹⁹David Lodge (55), D.A. Miller (157), and J. Hillis Miller ("Optic and Semiotic" 141) are a few of the critics who make use of this point.

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