'A Being Apart': Sympathy and Distance in *Middlemarch*

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Moral philosophers have long observed that human beings strain to feel compassionate concern for people whose lives are distant from their own. Aristotle proposed in the *Rhetoric* that we tend to pity people who resemble us in age, character, habits, and social position because these likenesses make it easier to imagine that their misfortunes might befall us as well.¹ David Hume thought that contiguity, as well as resemblance, breeds sympathy.² Not just social distance, then, but also geographical and temporal distance weaken our ability to enter into the mind of another. We feel more powerfully stirred—to compassion, if not to altruistic acts—by suffering that is nearby than by more agonizing pain felt on remote shores, or endured by people long dead.

Many writers have proposed that literary texts can narrow the distance between ourselves and other selves by inviting us to imaginatively inhabit the lives of other people. The idea that literary works can strengthen our powers of sympathy—a view defended, in recent years, by thinkers as various as the philosopher Martha Nussbaum, the cognitive scientist Steven Pinker, the literary critic Elaine Scarry, and the historian Lynn Hunt—has strong nineteenth-century roots.³ The ‘development of sympathy’ claim for the value of literature found champions among many Victorian writers, including George Eliot, Henry Mayhew, Elizabeth Gaskell, and John Stuart Mill.⁴ In many nineteenth-century prefaces, essays, and aesthetic credos, we can observe authors claiming that they write out of a desire to extend their readers’ sympathies—such as Gaskell’s declaration, in her preface to *Mary Barton* (1848), that her novel aims to win sympathy for factory-workers in Manchester—and we can also observe public moralists lending philosophical support to that claim.⁵ Critics often associate the ‘development of sympathy’ claim specifically with George Eliot and her version of literary realism. But this claim was invoked alongside a wide range of literary modes in the Victorian period, including the industrial novel, the slave narrative, documentary journalism (such as Mayhew’s *London Labour and the London Poor*), the dramatic monologue, melodrama, and many forms of children’s literature—such as the obscure subgenre of doll tales, which featured dolls as protagonists and claimed to teach sympathy to young girls.⁶

I wish to contend that Eliot in *Middlemarch* (1871-2) frequently tries to attenuate the sympathy that we, her readers, feel for her characters, and that this process of attenuation relies on emphasizing, rather than diminishing, forms of distance between reader and character. She checks our sympathies through techniques of visual staging that press her characters farther away from us in our imagined fields of vision, and through philosophical commentary that emphasizes the commonplace nature of the yearnings and sufferings these characters experience, instead of allowing us to see those circumstances as highly particularized. Despite the standard moral-philosophical observation that sympathy is vulnerable to distance, despite the common rejoinder that literary works can mitigate the weakening effects of distance on our sympathies, despite Eliot’s prominent advocacy of this claim for literature’s value, and despite *Middlemarch*’s alleged position as the richest...
elaboration of her views on sympathy, Eliot continually inserts distance between reader and character at the very moments when the narrative seems most insistently to demand sympathetic proximity.

Throughout her career, Eliot was attuned to the ethical implications of social distance and the need for imaginative portraits of people unlike her largely middle-class readers—so much so that Henry James in 1866 described her as a chronicler of the ‘solid lower classes’. ‘[O]ur author’s sympathies are with common people’, James wrote, remarking on her habit of drawing protagonists from the working poor: Silas Marner the linen-weaver, Adam Bede the carpenter, Felix Holt the watchmaker, Hetty Sorrel the dairy maid. But Eliot’s dedication to chronicling the ‘lower classes’ was in fact inconsistent. In her first published fictional work, *Scenes of Clerical Life* (1858), Eliot’s narrator declares:

> my only merit must lie in the faithfulness with which I represent to you the humble experience of an ordinary fellow-mortal. I wish to stir your sympathy with commonplace troubles—to win your tears for real sorrow: sorrow such as may live next door to you—such as walks neither in rags nor in velvet, but in very ordinary decent apparel.8

This dedication to eliciting sympathy for ‘ordinary’ people remains fairly constant throughout Eliot’s literary career. Her understanding of who counts as ‘ordinary’, however, is less stable. Here, Eliot defines ordinariness with reference to a socioeconomic middle. Ordinary people—subjects for whom she hopes to win sympathy in the form of ‘tears for real sorrow’—fall between the very rich and the very poor. They walk ‘neither in rags nor in velvet’. By identifying the ‘ordinary’ with the socioeconomically intermediate, Eliot positions poor people below, or beyond, the ‘ordinary’.

In ‘Amos Barton’, the first story in *Scenes*, the narrator’s argument that ‘ordinary’ people make worthy literary subjects takes on a quasi-statistical quality. Addressing an imagined ‘lady reader’ who ‘prefers the ideal’—not the ‘real’—in fiction, Eliot’s narrator insists: ‘At least eighty out of a hundred of your adult male fellow-Britons returned in the last census, are neither extraordinarily silly, nor extraordinarily wicked, nor extraordinarily wise.’9 Eliot mimics the language of census statisticians by applying statistical reasoning to qualities that the census does not and could not account for, such as wickedness and wisdom. She not only equates ordinariness with a numerical majority (eighty out of a hundred Britons); she also identifies ordinariness with the middle range of a distribution. Barton, her commonplace hero, is ‘superlatively middling, the quintessential extract of mediocrity’.10 The view of normalcy propounded here invokes, and necessarily misses, the clarity of a statistical ‘normal’ distribution.

Earlier in her career, Eliot offered a different answer to this question of who counts as ordinary (and who, on the basis of that ordinariness, qualifies as a good candidate for representation in realist art). In ‘The Natural History of German Life’ (1856), she suggests that the working poor are not just ordinary—they are the essence of ordinariness. Making it clear that she has in view the very poor rather than the lower end of the middle class, Eliot contends that the ‘sacred task’ of the realist artist is to ‘paint the life of the People’.11 She positions the poor as metonymic of the population at large. Indeed, in Germany, Eliot claims, the peasantry literally embody the ‘historical type of the national physique’, bearing ‘the stamp of their race’ on their faces and bodies.12 The poor, she suggests, define the national type. Other population groups are deviations from their norm.
Middlemarch marks a shift away from the intimate focus on the poor that characterized much of Eliot’s earlier fiction. There is, indeed, an odd disjunction between Middlemarch’s status as the alleged pinnacle of Eliot’s philosophy of sympathy and the narrow social range of the sympathetic encounters the novel describes. The triumphs and failures of sympathy Eliot charts in Middlemarch occur mostly between well-off people in social proximity, often partners in a marriage. Think of Dorothea’s attempt to pass her hand through Casaubon’s arm, while he, struggling with the knowledge that his life will soon end, holds his hands rigid behind his back, or Rosamond failing to adjust her view of Lydgate as always ‘a being apart’, or the moment of compassionate silence between Harriet and Nicholas Bulstrode.13 Eliot, in the main, pins her evocations of sympathy to characters socially proximate to the middle-class reader. But she introduces other kinds of distance that invite us to examine our upwellings of sympathy even as we immerse ourselves in the concerns of the characters that populate the story. She scrutinizes the relationship between sympathy and distance through complications of perspective both visual and attitudinal. At pivotal moments she shifts between degrees and varieties of distance, zooming out to aestheticize the object of sympathy at hand or to show how a character stands, typologically, for other people and other forms of suffering. To see how Eliot’s manipulations of distance work, let us consider a sequence in which the novel shows us Dorothea twice in quick succession: first via an external, aestheticizing view, and then a private, ostensibly psychological view.

We first see Dorothea in Rome (where she and Casaubon have gone for their unhappy honeymoon) through the eyes of Will Ladislaw and his German companion Adolf Naumann. She stands by the statue of Ariadne in dreamy repose, becoming, Naumann thinks, an art object in her own right—a breathing, blooming statue that complements the Ariadne’s ‘marble voluptuousness’.14 Eliot writes of Dorothea:

one beautiful ungloved hand pillowed her cheek, pushing somewhat backward the white beaver bonnet which made a sort of halo to her face around the simply braided dark-brown hair. She was not looking at the sculpture, probably not thinking of it: her large eyes were fixed dreamily on a streak of sunlight which fell across the floor. (177)

Eliot tells us that ‘they’, Will and Naumann, see her. The narration does not allow us to decide whose gaze has priority: Will’s stare of recognition inflected with longing, or Naumann’s more detached look of aesthetic approval. The description is highly pictorial, billowing with adjectives and exact in its identification of colour, gesture, and texture. This verbal portrait evokes sympathy in part by aestheticizing Dorothea in a way that renders her momentarily unfamiliar. We are led to contemplate her because she is beautiful: her bonnet makes a ‘halo’, giving her exquisiteness a moral or spiritual valence; her hand rests ‘beautiful’ in its bareness. This description is sensitive to Dorothea’s psychological state, although the content of her thoughts remains vague. She is ‘probably not thinking’ of the sculpture, but we do not know what she is thinking of. Her thoughts seem vacant and distracted, her ‘large eyes […] fixed dreamily on a streak of sunlight’. That she is preoccupied amid Rome’s splendour may be enough to awaken our concern.

We see Dorothea again a few pages later, in an image neither precise nor aestheticized: ‘Two hours later, Dorothea was seated in an inner room or boudoir of a handsome apartment in the Via Sistina’ (180). All we learn now about her pose is that she is
seated. We hear that the apartment is ‘handsome’, suggesting some expense on Casaubon’s part, but we learn nothing about the qualities that make it so. Eliot leaves Dorothea’s location physically indeterminate—‘an inner room or boudoir’—while making clear the space’s psychological implications: here, Dorothea can find privacy. The one-sentence paragraph hangs suspended—as does Dorothea, who in our imagination remains motionless—until the image clicks into focus with the adjustment: ‘I am sorry to add that she was sobbing bitterly’ (180). The narrator’s first-person formal statement of regret leavens a potentially sentimental scene, the implication being as much ‘we could have predicted this’ as ‘how sad’.

Martha Nussbaum has argued that realist novels have a special power to induce sympathy by immersing us in the particulars of a person’s life and offering psychologically attentive descriptions that allow us to enter into other people’s thoughts and share, imaginatively, in their concerns and projects. Both of these depictions of Dorothea—her blank gaze in the gallery and her tears in the boudoir—admit and even encourage sympathy, but not through granting us psychological detail or by stressing the particularized nature of her circumstances. The glimpse of Dorothea in the gallery is external and denies us access to the content of her thoughts. We are invited to feel for her through an appeal to the aesthetic, accompanied by a sense of salient psychological detail withheld. That Dorothea’s thoughts seem inscrutable casts her beauty in a sombre light.

The subsequent glimpse of Dorothea in the boudoir relies on the narrator’s commentary to make her inner feelings legible. In this private room, the space of narration seems intimate; but the narrator is scrupulously generalizing. Eliot’s narrator invites us to consider how ‘a girl’ would respond to the ‘vast wreck of ambitious ideals’ that Rome presents (181). Rather than entering into Dorothea’s mind, the narrator reflects upon the ‘many souls in their young nudity’ who find themselves in similar straits (182). The address to the reader that follows prompts us to ask ourselves whether we sympathize with Dorothea despite, or because of, her situation’s typicality:

Nor can I suppose that when Mrs Casaubon is discovered in a fit of weeping six weeks after her wedding, the situation will be regarded as tragic. Some discouragement, some faintness of heart at the new real future which replaces the imaginary, is not unusual, and we do not expect people to be deeply moved by what is not unusual (182).

The narrator claims to suppose that the scene will fail to inspire sympathy because of its ordinariness. Moreover, the narrator describes Dorothea’s circumstances in terms so general that they could apply to nearly anyone: a ‘faintness of heart at the new real future which replaces the imaginary’ is not a response that belongs exclusively to marital distress. Where we expect to see Dorothea at her most distinct and particular, we in fact see her at her most typological.

We do not even know why, exactly, Dorothea is crying. Nor does she: Dorothea has ‘no distinctly shapen grievance that she could state even to herself’ (180). Some critics have read a particular grievance into this scene—a grievance that typically turns on Casaubon’s sexual inadequacy. This symptomatic reading may help insofar as it alerts us to an implication possibly plainer to an adult Victorian reader than to us. But positing a specific cause behind Dorothea’s tears loses sight of the ethical and aesthetic implications of Eliot’s generalizing turn in this scene. Eliot avoids reference to a particular cause of Dorothea’s distress (such as Casaubon’s implied impotence, or his unsatisfactoriness as a lover) to make
Dorothea, a participant in a vaguer and hence more commonplace form of suffering shared by many people. We receive here an education in sympathy that is less intimate than we might expect. Even in Dorothea’s inner room, the narrator holds us at a remove, gestures at a space that we cannot know (Dorothea’s mind), and brings us to feel a sympathy we cannot use, for a suffering we can neither name nor address.

The novel’s representations of Dorothea evoke sympathy for a character socially proximate to the ‘middling’ reader. Sympathy for the poor, unlike sympathy for Dorothea in this moment, would seem to lead more easily to remedial action. Whereas no bystander could repair Dorothea’s unhappy marriage, the least well-off have material needs that middle-class or affluent readers, Victorian or contemporary, could perhaps meet. Yet Middlemarch’s depictions of the poor manifest an awareness of other shortcomings the experience of readerly sympathy might possess. The novel suggests that sympathy may be a fundamentally inadequate response to poverty, an insufficient basis for the broader political and historical understanding required for poor people to attain lives of better quality.

In Adam Bede, Eliot demands of the reader: ‘do not impose on us any aesthetic rules which shall banish from the region of Art those old women scraping carrots with their work-worn hands [...] those rounded backs and stupid weather-beaten faces that have bent over the spade and done the rough work of the world.’ Dorothea echoes this aesthetic principle to her uncle, criticizing the idyllic pictures of rural life that hang in his drawing room. Yet rounded backs and weather-beaten faces make few appearances in Middlemarch, not because the novel engages in misrepresentation, but because the poor remain on the peripheries of the novel’s action. Often, Eliot alludes to the conditions of the poor not to draw attention directly to their suffering but to shed comparative light on the needs of the novel’s major characters. The novel introduces Dorothea as a ‘young lady of some birth and fortune, who knelt suddenly down on a brick floor by the side of a sick labourer and prayed fervidly as if she thought herself living in the time of the Apostles.’ The narrator’s ironic tone pulls our attention toward the oddness and performativity in Dorothea’s show of sympathy. Later, we see Dorothea’s desire to aid the poor tinged with greater self-awareness. Upon her move to Casaubon’s parish, she feels ‘disappointment, of which she was ashamed, that there was nothing for her to do in Lowick’, a parish of relative abundance with few poor tenants in need of help (71-2). Dorothea’s shame shows that on some level, she acknowledges that she is using the poor in order to make herself feel useful—that her reform efforts derive strength from not just compassion but also a somewhat egoistic longing ‘to make her life greatly effective’ (26). Dorothea’s sympathy is in this sense self-serving.

The narrator casts a sceptical eye on Dorothea’s instrumental use of the poor here. But the novel itself might be thought vulnerable to the same charge. Both Dorothea and the novel use the sick labourer instrumentally in the first scene just cited. The glimpse of Dorothea praying by a labourer’s bedside is part of a narrative effort to establish Dorothea’s character and to show how others in Middlemarch view her. Dorothea seize upon the labourer’s pain as an opportunity to exercise sympathy; the novel uses the unnamed labourer to illustrate Dorothea’s odd fervor. In both cases, the focus is not on the poor man but on Dorothea. The same narrative privileging of the socially advantaged occurs in other acts of characterization. Of Will, we learn that ‘in Rome he was given to ramble among the poor people, and the taste did not quit him in Middlemarch’ (435). Again, ‘poor people’ are left vaguely defined and abstract—a symbolic index of suffering that the well-off protagonists
might address rather than a potential source of fully formed characters. And again, Eliot uses a protagonist's engagement with the poor to flag an aspect of his personality: Will's ramblings with the poor indicate his offbeat, nonconformist sensibility. Similarly, Lydgate's habit of 'constantly visiting the homes of the poor' functions mainly as a way of indicating his reformist bent: the novel does not linger on the visits (552).

An important exception to this oblique narrative treatment of the poor is the sequence in which Mr. Brooke visits Dagley's homestead. Eliot represents Dagley's home in unsentimental terms, in deliberate contrast to the 'picturesque' depictions of poverty on Brooke's drawing-room wall (369). Her portrait of Dagley establishes him as a distinct character. When we meet him he wears a beaver milking-hat and his best coat and breeches, and is drunk off rum-and-water and 'muddy political talk' (370). Eliot's particularizing gaze sets Dagley apart from the anonymous poor described elsewhere: she records his speech and sketches his home, family, and dog. A later sequence, in which labourers with hayforks confront the railway agents and argue with Caleb Garth, is a similar exception. Old Timothy Cooper, 'who had his savings in a stocking-foot', emerges briefly, like Dagley, as a character with a name and a history (526). Yet even in these two scenes, Eliot reverts quickly to generalization. Poor people here offer a way for Eliot to track the effects of historical change on multiple sectors of society. Dagley tells Brooke that 'there's to be a Rinform', a reform that will send Brooke 'a-scuttlin' (372). Because of his age, Timothy Cooper is an even more authoritative witness to political upheavals: 'I'n seen lots o' things turn up sin' I war a young un', he tells Garth; 'the war an' the pe-ace and the canells [...] an' it 's been all aloike to the poor mon' (526). The railway is simply the next transformation that old Cooper and the rest of England's poor will live through.

Dagley and Cooper are stand-ins for the masses of poor people that for most of the novel go unseen. By positioning the poor as voices of historical change, Eliot is able to allude to broader structural shifts in technology, politics, and commerce that increase the suffering of the poor in some cases and diminish it in others—patterns of change too overarching to be much affected by a projection of sympathy from one person to another. These glimpses of comprehensive historical processes seem to demand a perspective, from the reader, that is oddly bifurcated: a point of view sufficiently distant to register long-term structural change, yet sufficiently intimate to attend to how such macroscopic processes sculpt and deform individual lives. In its fleeting representations of the poor, *Middlemarch* confronts the limits of sympathy both as a descriptor for the kinds of feeling literature evokes in us and as a prompt to action in the world. Eliot's generalizing in these scenes performs an act of distancing that recalls her descriptions of Dorothea in Rome; but the entrance of historical awareness places us beyond the steady drumbeat of ordinary life and into a larger timescale.

Near the end of the novel, Dorothea rises from a night spent sobbing on the floor and looks out the window, past the entrance-gates to her estate:

> there was a man with a bundle on his back and a woman carrying her baby; in the field she could see figures moving—perhaps the shepherd with his dog. Far off in the bending sky was the pearly light; and she felt the largeness of the world and the manifold wakings of men to labour and endurance. She was a part of that involuntary, palpitating life, and could neither look out on it from her luxurious shelter as a mere spectator, nor hide her eyes in selfish complaining. (741)
Gazing at the labourers on the road and in the field, Dorothea momentarily comprehends the social whole in which she is embedded. She and the labourers, she recognizes, belong to the same world, the same ‘involuntary, palpitating life’. Her distance from them, their smallness in her field of vision, does not impede sympathy. It instead aids the compassionate solidarity she feels with them. The workers are specks in her vision: ‘perhaps’ one is the shepherd with his dog. Because of the distance between her and the people she observes, her gaze is necessarily a generalizing gaze. Rather than projecting herself into sympathetic identification with a particular shepherd or a particular labourer, she abstracts from specific yet vaguely glimpsed workers to consider a larger social system.

The Stoics visualized our sympathetic attachments as a series of concentric circles, the first around the self, the next including the immediate family, and subsequent circles extending to people more socially and physically remote. Peter Singer has reframed this image into a single ‘circle of altruism’ that we must expand. Eliot, while recognizing our bias towards people who are socially, geographically, and temporally close to us, relates sympathy and distance in a less straightforward way. Her favored metaphor for society is not a smooth circle but a ‘tangled web’, filled with irregular, overlapping elements that make distance from one point to another less easy to determine.

Dorothea’s contemplation at the window reminds us of the necessity of recognizing the distance from others at which we operate: a critical distance that can be a precondition for understanding the sufferings and struggles that animate the lives of other people. Our capacity as literary critics to claim some ethical purpose for literature might not be bound up in elucidating literature’s power to help us better see the consciousness that flickers behind the exteriors of other human shapes. Or at least, literature’s ethical potential might not involve that task only. Middlemarch celebrates sympathy, but it also reminds us of the moments in which sympathy is transformed, in Raymond Williams’s words, ‘not into action, but into withdrawal’. That sympathy does not cure all ills, and that there exists suffering that we cannot fully enter into or understand: these limitations, in the end, might be precisely what Eliot’s novel of sympathy can teach us.

Notes


10 Ibid., p. 45.


19 Ibid., p. 9.

