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BOOK REVIEW
by Graham Handley

APPROACHES TO TEACHING ELIOT'S 'MIDDLEMARCH'
edited by Kathleen Blake.

(The Modern Language Association of America, 1990)

The editor quotes Gilbert Highet, who wrote 'Bad teaching wastes a great deal of effort, and spoils many lives which might have been full of energy and happiness'. Salutory words indeed, but what about those people who seem to have thought too much about it (Highet suggests that bad teaching results from not thinking enough about it) and too self-consciously at that? This book is a curious mixture of interesting and practical ideas on the one hand and inflated intellectual self-indulgence on the other. Kathleen Blake's introduction summarises the main concerns of the book and its trends. Here is an example: 'Miller's essay suggests some movement of deconstruction toward the new historicism that analyses texts in ideological and ultimately political terms.' It could have been written by someone like David Lodge, but we would have been aware of the laughter. This is deadly serious, but in all fairness there are sections in the Introduction, as in the rest of the book, which contain helpful approaches and profoundly interesting investigations. The style is frequently clichéd ('strategy' is one of the in-words), the jargon and terminology (when it is that) being a constant irritant. One of the good, positive sections is Carol A. Martin's 'Reading *Middlemarch* in instalments as Victorian Readers Did', with a more than useful Appendix on the serial reviews of the novel. The over-emphasis on pedagogy is undercut by the fresh enthusiasm of Alison Booth. There is an excellent *Middlemarch* chronology near the end of the book. But the overall effect is depressing. Some writers, one feels, have forgotten how to read for enjoyment, and are tied, like their students, to the straight-jacket of so many sessions, so many written pieces of work, so much required response. Few of these approaches here would stimulate, since they are enslaved by the variant theories. The book is about *Middlemarch* as exercises, not about *Middlemarch* as life, as imagination, as redolent of the deep truths of experience.