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Review of The Ladislaw Case

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We live in an age of prequels and sequels either in book form or in television serials, with nineteenth-century novelists providing the majority of the material for contemporary writers to develop or elaborate. It was perhaps only a matter of time before one of George Eliot’s novels was to form the basis for such treatment. In this case the novel is probably her greatest, *Middlemarch*, and the sequel, *The Ladislaw Case*, is the first major work of a young Swedish graduate of Lund University, Imke Thormählen.

Twelve years after the conclusion of *Middlemarch*, Will Ladislaw, now married to Dorothea (Brooke, Casaubon) with two young sons, is a rising young Liberal MP living in London. The Ladislaws have maintained their friendship with Dr Tertius Lydgate, the Middlemarch doctor and his socially ambitious wife, Rosamond; and Dorothea’s sister, Celia, Lady Chettam, is a regular visitor. Ladislaw has also found a strong financial sponsor, a businessman, Sir Henry Walford who is married to a young, attractive wife around whom there appears to be some mystery. However he has a political opponent, a wastrel, blackmailing philanderer, Francis Courdroy, who after revealing his character in threats to both Ladislaw and the Walfords, is found murdered. The theme of the novel thus becomes the solution of the question Who murdered Courdroy?

The novel takes the form of a series of lengthy statements or depositions concerning the events surrounding the murder by Ladislaw, Dr Lydgate, and Lady Chettam. The imaginative feature of this procedure is that these statements are all made, not to the detective, Inspector Green, who is formally in charge of the investigation, but to the distinguished detective, Inspector Bucket, Dickens’s great creation, brought in following his success in unmasking the lawyer Tulkinghorn’s murderer in *Bleak House*. Although now officially retired, he is invited in to find a solution. This he ultimately does but has to concede that the murderer can never be brought to justice.

Although the town of Middlemarch is frequently mentioned in the novel and events that took place there years ago loom large (there are even two significant letters between Lydgate and the Reverend Farebrother who still lives near the town), the setting here is London and, because of the format adopted by the author, the events recorded by the correspondents take place in the homes of the Ladislaws, the Walfords, and Courdroy, with one excursion to the theatre. The atmosphere is therefore somewhat claustrophobic befitting the nature of the relationships portrayed and the circumstances of the murder.

The characterization of the main protagonists in the story is generally consistent with that created by George Eliot, but Ladislaw has become less attractive and more selfish than earlier, Lydgate is even more aware of the fact that he has failed to achieve his earlier idealistic ambitions as healer and is still a prisoner in an unsatisfactory marriage to the socially ambitious and restless Rosamond. Lady Chettam is still the pleasantly satisfied wife of a baronet and still protective of her beloved Dodo. And Dorothea herself remains a strangely peripheral figure, still calm, still idealistic and still respected.

Characters impress us or repel us by what they say. There is no difficulty here in recognizing their voices: the clear sombre voice of the disappointed Dr Lydgate; the excessively polite voice of Rosamond, so quick to criticize her husband and add to his sense of failure in his professional and social life; the irritable and yet self-critical voice of the young
politician Ladislaw; the certain tones of Lady Chettam secure in her social position, correcting her sister ‘Dodo’ and yet always caring for her. To these we can add the unpleasantness and sexual vulgarity of Courdroy, the changeable tones of the volatile Sir Henry and his mysterious, loyal yet occasionally sharp wife, whose eyes still linger on the last page. And of course there is the calm, determined, respectful, yet no-nonsense voice of Inspector Bucket, always polite but rarely hoodwinked. The one voice we miss however is that of George Eliot. There is no wise narrator to stand outside the story and provide comments on the characters and their actions: – yet in a ‘Who-dun-it?’ novel, how could there be? Another speaker whose words might have enriched the story is what we may call the artist of the natural world, as the action is almost always indoors. For most of the time we feel as trapped as the characters – denied the freedom of fresh air, changing weather, the colours of earth and sky. This is a claustrophobic novel filled with voices.

This leads us to what may be one of the problems of the story: the length and complexity of the dialogue. We are reading the testimonies of three of the main participants in the events surrounding the murder of Courdroy as presented to Inspector Bucket. Yet throughout the book the various participants in the events are quoted at surprising length by the three witnesses. Thus in chapter three Sir Henry speaks for fifteen and a half lines about the town of Middlemarch, in chapter sixteen Rosamond delivers thirteen and a half lines to her husband about her affection for Ladislaw, in chapter twenty a conversation between Lydgate and Sir Henry consists of over forty lines from the latter with only about eight lines of casual response from the Doctor, while in chapter twenty-two Lady Walford defends her husband to Lydgate in a speech of twelve lines. An extreme example occurs in chapter eighteen where Ladislaw’s statement records the reactions of a Mr Lambston, ‘a good-humoured, modestly wealthy landowner and a die-hard Tory’ whose dislike of Courdroy he makes very clear in several lengthy paragraphs. One is compelled either to question or marvel at the retentive memories of the witnesses! But perhaps the unfolding of the story would sufficiently hold the reader’s attention for this to be a distraction.

There are a few ‘longeurs’ in this four-hundred-page book, but this is not necessarily a serious flaw. If the reader has also devoured Middlemarch, he or she will be eager to meet old friends, to be reminded of some of the darker strands of that story, and ultimately, tense with expectation, excited to discover the murderer. We are kept guessing until very near the end and for most readers the revelation will be a real surprise.

A last word on the translation: it is unusually skilful, sounding so natural that it is hard to realize that the translator is not English. Marianne Thormählen is the mother of the author and herself a distinguished writer (in English) on English literature, including the works of George Eliot.

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