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## AN EROTICS OF DETACHMENT: *MIDDLEMARCH* AND NOVEL-READING AS CRITICAL PRACTICE

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I read promiscuously. How could it be otherwise? I had no real guide, was obliged to feel my way into light. Yet perhaps there was a guidance, although indefinite and without distinctive aim.

—George Harrow, English bricklayer and trade unionist (b. 1833)<sup>1</sup>

Invariably the historical past was the tense that excited a kind of desire in her.

—Edmund White, *Caracole*

George Eliot's *Middlemarch* is perhaps the single most important document of the nineteenth-century English novel's aspiration to intellectual seriousness. Famously praised by Virginia Woolf in 1919 as "one of the few English novels written for grown-up people," *Middlemarch's* critical status—indeed, its status as a kind of criticism in its own right—has only increased in subsequent years.<sup>2</sup> In Barbara Hardy's assessment, Eliot's masterwork is "the first English novel to analyse the psychology of historical consciousness," and James Buzard has more recently argued that the book embodies the "autoethnographic project of grasping an English culture in its densely integrated and self-regarding totality."<sup>3</sup> But while *Middlemarch* is arguably the most perfect realization of the novel's ambition to present a historicized picture of the social whole, it is, more disturbingly, a book that seems reluctant to share these intellectual riches with its characters.<sup>4</sup> The critical consensus as to *Middlemarch's* achievement is haunted by a sense that this is a distinctly punitive novel, one that purchases its intellectual and critical authority at the expense of its fictional inhabitants. J. Hillis Miller, in a representative formulation, contends that "the narrator of [Eliot's] novels claims for herself precisely that all-embracing breadth of vision . . . which is denied to the characters."<sup>5</sup> Troublingly for an author whose highest value is the sympathetic imagination, Eliot

seems incapable of conceiving of characters who might be capable of conceiving of something like *Middlemarch*.

If Dorothea Brooke is the most poignant of Eliot's failed heroines, it is perhaps because her story is on the face of it a happy one. *Middlemarch* may be the first great English social novel, but it is also, as Joseph Allen Boone puts it, "one of the last great marriage novels to conform to the Shakespearean dictum that 'journeys end with lovers meeting.'"<sup>6</sup> But Dorothea's union with Will Ladislaw may be part of her problem; her romantic satisfaction, Eliot suggests, is an index of her intellectual failure. Dorothea, we are told, is possessed of a "passionate desire to know and to think," but it is precisely through her submission to the erotic that her passion loses its intellectual predicates and becomes a mere affair of the self.<sup>7</sup> It is Woolf who makes clearest that the erotic is the ground of Dorothea's exclusion from insight when she writes of "Dorothea seeking wisdom and finding one scarcely knows what in marriage to Ladislaw."<sup>8</sup> The comment suggests that if Dorothea can function as the narrative focal point of *Middlemarch*'s socio-historical understanding, she cannot be the bearer of that understanding—and more particularly that this inability is tied to her willingness to forsake her intellectual ambitions in return for a satisfied sexual desire.

Woolf's offhand remark gets at the heart of what concerns me in this essay, the fraught relationship between novelistic eroticism and social understanding. I have turned to *Middlemarch* to examine those relations because the novel's treatment of its desiring heroine seems to exemplify George Levine's recent claim that the refusal of desire is central to nineteenth-century narratives of scientific validity.<sup>9</sup> If Eliot is the most prominent English novelist to stake fiction's claim to status as a kind of historical sociology, this claim, we will see, appears founded on an abjecting of the desiring Dorothea. This essay interrogates the grounds on which that abjection occurs, in order both to reconceptualize the role desire plays in *Middlemarch* and to re-open the question of what critical capacities may be exercised in the practice of novel-reading itself. My contention is that the relations between character and narrator may only tell us a limited amount about the novel's function as critical discourse. Dorothea, it seems clear, can only lose out in any competition that pits her against her creator in a game of wits; but I want to suggest that it is as a figure for the novel-reader that Eliot's desiring heroine functions most powerfully as an agent and pursuer of knowledge. Dorothea's most pressing desire, I argue, may be to leave behind her starring role *in* fiction and achieve that peculiar participant-observer status proper to the consumer *of* fiction.

One of my aims is to confront a strain of erotophobia that has been oddly persistent in literary criticism's conception of its own object: from E. M. Forster's claim that love, "especially in its sex form, . . . has done [novels] harm and made them monotonous" to Ian Watt's complaints about fiction's "role as a popular purveyor of vicarious sexual experience and adolescent wish-fulfillment" to Georg Lukács's contention that it was fiction's increasing emphasis in the later nineteenth century on the "physical-sexual side" of love that led to the deterioration of the historical novel, the novel's most ardent partisans have shown a tendency to let that ardor wane when sex in the novel heats up.<sup>10</sup> Recent work in the history of print culture and of reading practices has shifted critical attention from the novel's content to the forms of its consumption and circulation.<sup>11</sup> But this change of focus from the text to the reader has left the novel's link to eroticism intact. In his important work on early fiction, William B. Warner has argued that the early modern novel of "amorous intrigue" founded the reception protocols for mass-distributed fiction by creating what Warner calls a general reader, a "perversely polymorphous being capable of being 'hooked' by many zones of readerly enjoyment."<sup>12</sup> In the work of Aphra Behn, Delarivier Manley, and Eliza Haywood, Warner argues, a thematic preoccupation with sex worked to accommodate this reader to an emergent print culture of commodified, repeatable pleasures. The consumption practices inaugurated by this fiction, Warner writes, continue to "haunt 'the' legitimate novel."<sup>13</sup> However far we may have moved from the fiction of amorous intrigue, novels are still produced and read in the context of a media culture that keeps readers rehearsing the desire-driven momentum cultivated by early fiction. The novel in this account thus stays tied to desire—and the association continues to inhibit the novel's critical possibilities: although his judgment of the mediated culture of appetite is less morally freighted than that of his predecessors, it is clear that for Warner novelistic desire, bent on the "seduction of the reader" and on "the appearance rather than the fact of novelty," is in the service of blindness, not insight.<sup>14</sup>

I will argue in what follows that this persistent critical sense of the incompatibility of desire and knowledge is prefigured in *Middlemarch*. But I also claim that Eliot's novel offers us a way to turn the connection between fiction and desire to new purposes. While most critical approaches see desire as the sign that the novel and social knowledge have parted company, *Middlemarch* helps us understand novelistic desire as the genre's point of access to the kind of objectivity that permits and encourages systemic critique. Eliot's novel reveals

something that the most influential literary critical accounts of fictional forms have overlooked: that novelistic eroticism is often figured not as an escape from the harsh truths of social reality but as an aspiration to their comprehension. Further, I argue that we can read Dorothea's desire for a distanced view as an ambition to accede to the position of the novel-reader, to leave behind her determinate locale in the novel's narrative and take up a detached but invested position slightly outside of the fictional space. It is common to understand fictional characters as aspiring to the condition of narrator, as hankering for the sort of control over their environment and fate that is exercised by the omniscient storyteller. But I am proposing that the texture of Dorothea's desire—its sense of promiscuous possibility, of seductive outsiderdom, of interest combined with objectivity—has more affinities with the activity of reading a novel than with that of narrating one. This essay thus picks up on the assumption implicit in the analyses of Watt, Lukács, and Warner that novelistic eroticism has implications for the critical status of the literary itself, but does so in order to reach very different conclusions about eroticism's effect on critical seriousness. All of these critics agree that desire is crucial to the question of fiction's critical possibility because it is in its immersion in erotic experience that the novel seduces its readers into supposedly uncritical attention. Further, as Warner makes particularly clear, desire links the content of the novel to its consumption: promiscuous eroticism offers us a way to talk both about what people do in novels and what people do with them. Because the novel's status as critical discourse is so closely tied to the eroticism of its content and consumption, I argue that reexamining our conceptions of novelistic desire can help us arrive at a better understanding of the critical aspirations embedded in fiction-reading itself.

The essay thus aims to bring a new perspective to persistent disagreements over how to characterize the readerly disposition encouraged by fiction. Recent studies make it clear that the novel has overwhelmingly been the most popular reading material since the eighteenth-century "revolution" in reading.<sup>15</sup> But confusion lingers over how to describe this voracious reading populace: are novel-consumers creatures of radical skepticism or of thoroughgoing credulity? Is the literary the "perfect consort of doubt," as one study has it?<sup>16</sup> Or should we say instead, following another recent account, that "readers were invaded by a text; they inhabited the text, identified with its characters, and applied the vicissitudes of its plot to real life"?<sup>17</sup> If both of these possibilities seem strangely persuasive, I want to suggest that this is because of an

inherent paradox in the way we think of desire in the novel and desire for the novel: the erotically gripped reader is understood, incoherently, to be both dilettantish and over-invested, both distracted and passionately identified. In what follows I hope to explore this paradox further, and to suggest that it is precisely this conflation of detachment and surrender, of inattention and over-attentiveness, that allows us to reconceive of novel-reading as a critical practice, a pursuit of insight into the structure of social reality.

In attempting to demonstrate the ways in which erotic immersion is a route to critical detachment, I will be turning to an analysis of two key passages of Eliot's novel, *Middlemarch*, that most self-announcingly intellectual of nineteenth-century fictions, might seem an odd place from which to argue that even the most degraded form of novel-reading should be recognized as a potential practice of critical sociology: as we have seen, one standard feature of *Middlemarch* criticism is to distinguish Eliot's novel from most other novels by virtue of its social-scientific seriousness.<sup>18</sup> But in focusing on a moment of promiscuous desire in the text, I want to portray *Middlemarch* as notable less for its distinction from its trashier fictional siblings than for its similarity to them. While I claim that *Middlemarch* suggests to us a picture of novel-reading as the pursuit of critical social knowledge, my case will rest not on Eliot's uniquely judicious account of a key moment in electoral reform or on her singularly detailed portrait of English provincialism but on her typically novelistic conception of the reader as overheated erotic consumer. In attending to a desiring moment in *Middlemarch* that threatens to float free of its plot, this essay contends that the novel figures its heroine (and its reader) as a promiscuous pursuer of social knowledge, a kind of erotically impelled researcher. In the process I hope to point to new ways to connect desire in the novel to desire for the novel.

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If the possibility of social critique is tied to historicism—the ability to recognize the contingency of the present—the realist novel would seem to be one of the least critical of genres. “A novel is a life in the form of a book,” Novalis wrote in one of the earliest and clearest linkages of this fictional form with the individual.<sup>19</sup> His definition highlights nicely the spatial and temporal boundaries of the life-book that is the novel. A life: not the lives that constitute a community, a society, or a nation; and a *life*: a merely human allotment of time, not the *longue*

*durée* from which we might survey broad historical shifts. The classic realist novel—and in particular the “domestic” or “marriage” variant of it—notoriously limits this already meager temporal span even further, lavishing most of its attention on that small portion of life in which its protagonist labors to find a mate. The domestic novel, the marriage plot, “a life”: all seem locked in a definitively ahistorical equation. The body that might threaten to break this circuitry—if only through the violence of its desire—instead seems to offer just another justification for this confining logic. For Pierre Bourdieu, the body as it is usually understood in Western culture is explicitly the enemy of a critical knowledge of social reality. In his *Pascalian Meditations*, Bourdieu quotes Heidegger to the effect that “[n]othing is more familiar to us than the impression that man is an individual living being among others and that the skin is his boundary,” and goes on to offer this commentary: “This spontaneous materialism, the most naive kind, which only wants to know what it can ‘handle’ (*das Handgreifliche*, as Heidegger puts it), could explain . . . the ‘personalist’ belief in the uniqueness of the person—the basis of the scientifically disastrous opposition between the individual and society.”<sup>20</sup> Once we conceive of the body as the private (and privatizing) container of subjectivity, any overt attention to the resolutely corporeal fact of eroticism becomes the worst of all possible routes of escape from the pettiness of the person. It is not difficult to perceive the traditional novel’s focus on love and desire as an individuating, personalizing limitation in just this sense, and therefore to understand the novel as partially responsible for this “disastrous” epistemological obstacle to achieving critical understanding of social forms.

If this obstacle is to be overcome—and as we have seen, *Middlemarch* has the strongest possible claim to having done so—the novel must discipline its traffic in desire. Although I will argue that this is not the only way to conceive of desire’s operations in *Middlemarch*, or in the novel in general, this anti-corporeal conception of knowledge in fact seems to inform Eliot’s framing of these issues in the two-page prelude to the novel. If Eliot’s chapter epigraphs encourage an alienated view of the diegetic material over which they hover, *Middlemarch*’s prelude functions as a kind of epigraph to the novel as a whole; as the clearest sign of the wider applicability of this “study of provincial life,” the prelude is the first mark of Eliot’s critical seriousness, her extra-novelistic ambition. And far from endorsing my claim that desire may be fiction’s point of contact with the terrain of critical knowledge, Eliot appears instead to say that the body is the site of the novel’s closure to

history and the possibility of critique. The prelude offers its account of the novel's desire- and body-bound temporality in powerfully synoptic form. Eliot's famous juxtaposition of Saint Theresa with her epigone Dorothea Brooke corresponds to an implied generic contrast: "Theresa's passionate, ideal nature," we read, "demanded an epic life: what were many-volumed romances of chivalry and the social conquests of a brilliant girl to her?" (3). The juxtaposition of the grandeur of epic with the pettiness of "many-volumed romance" already prompts the reader (two pages before *Middlemarch's* heroine is introduced) to predict that Dorothea's equally passionate nature will be met, in modernity, with a merely novelistic life—and to infer that this generic difference largely constitutes the pathos of her life-story. Eliot figures the happy Theresan coincidence of personal ambition and epochal opportunity as a "rapturous consciousness of life beyond self" (3), a formulation that implies the outpacing of temporal and corporeal limitations via a physically ecstatic historical sense that seems to partake strongly of the erotic even as it strains beyond it.<sup>21</sup>

Latter-day Therasas like Dorothea, by contrast, fail to find their epos, and fail in a way that accentuates these limitations: "Their ardour alternated between a vague ideal and the common yearning of womanhood; so that the one was disapproved as extravagance, and the other condemned as a lapse" (3). As we progress through the novel, it becomes all too easy to assimilate the failings of this general class of modern would-be Therasas to the specifics of Dorothea's marital trajectory, for she seems to fall prey to both of these fates sequentially: while Dorothea's disastrous marriage to Casaubon is a failure because it represents her straining after "vague ideal[s]," the apparently happy union with Will Ladislaw is here proleptically coded as a failure as well, a way of succumbing to the "common yearning"—the desire—that supposedly characterizes Dorothea's sex. This correlation of the prelude's nonspecific observations on a whole group of women with the facts of Dorothea's plot is further suggested by the way Eliot's phraseology evokes the erotic details of Dorothea's marriages: the vagueness surrounding the union with Casaubon has left generations of readers wondering whether or not the marriage was physically consummated, while the readers who have found the novel's closing unsatisfactory are in part registering distaste with the hint of commonness to a coupling so clearly founded on the heroine's desire for the flashing eyes and curly hair of the otherwise feckless Will.

Dorothea's achievement of domestic bliss is thus a failure, we might say, of epic proportions. As the foregoing discussion already suggests,

the generic difference between epic Theresa and novelistic Dorothea is also figured as a gendered difference. The prelude's final paragraph disputes the logic of female inferiority—"the limits of [women's] variation are really much wider than any one would imagine from the sameness of women's coiffure and the favourite love-stories in prose and verse"—but the context of this demurral is so equivocal as to undermine the point entirely (4). Saint Theresa's ability to navigate the Scylla and Charybdis of vague idealism and common desire is explicitly coded as a resistance to the feminine itself. As various critics have noted, Victorian medical and domestic ideologies understood these twinned perils as characteristic not only of modern life generally but more particularly of women's bodies and their proper social role.<sup>22</sup> Eliot's multiple references to the novel here ("multi-volumed romance," "love-stories in prose") cement the association of that form with feminine desire and set up a paradoxical but pointed comparison between novel-sized Dorothea and the epic-sized novelist who invented her; if Dorothea's hyper-femininity serves by contrast to excuse one famous woman (St. Theresa) from the taint of her gender, it also works to excuse another (Eliot herself) from the taint of her genre. Critics have not been slow to take Eliot's hint here, frequently noting that her own artistic accomplishment belies the prelude's dismal view of modern women's capabilities—even as it seems to remove Eliot from the category "woman" altogether. In a representative flourish, Kenny Marotta casts Eliot as the butch hero to Dorothea's damsel-in-distress: "[W]ho broke Dorothea's strength, who made her so memorable, so challenging a figure of heroic renunciation, but the conqueror George Eliot?"<sup>23</sup> Dorothea's broken strength (or "heroi[sm]") in these accounts—and it seems also to be Eliot's account—is coterminous with her womanhood, which in turn is equated with the genre in which she appears. Both are defined by an inability to escape from a constraining "ardour."

Eliot herself, then, posits her novelistic protagonist as exiled definitionally from true historicized insight—and exiled by desire. But if the prelude offers readers an account of the limitations of the book that lies before them, it is, ironically, from deep within the web of the novel that Eliot permits a glimpse beyond those limitations—and does so by means of a new, and less restrictive, conception of eroticism itself. *Middlemarch's* equation of its heroine's non-epic status with the supposedly limiting fact of her desire comes to a crisis in the key chapters in which Dorothea visits Italy after her marriage to Casaubon. These chapters bring Dorothea as close as she ever gets to the spectacle of

Theresa-like world-historical ambition, and this proximity is figured both as an encounter with a temporality that exceeds the individual human life-span and as an overwhelmingly erotic event. What these passages crucially introduce is the specter of an unappeasable eroticism, a desire incapable of being domesticated by the strictures of the novel's plot. "[A]fter the brief narrow experience of her girlhood, she was beholding Rome," Eliot writes, "the city of visible history, where the past of a whole hemisphere seems moving in funeral procession with strange ancestral images and trophies gathered from afar" (192). As the passage continues, Eliot asks her reader to consider

the gigantic broken revelations of that Imperial and Papal city thrust abruptly on the notions of a girl who had been brought up in English and Swiss Puritanism, fed on meagre Protestant histories and on art chiefly of the hand-screen sort; a girl whose ardent nature turned all her small allowance of knowledge into principles, fusing her actions into their mould, and whose quick emotions gave the most abstract things the quality of a pleasure or a pain; a girl who had lately become a wife, and from the enthusiastic acceptance of untried duty found herself plunged in tumultuous preoccupation with her personal lot. The weight of unintelligible Rome might lie easily on bright nymphs to whom it formed a background for the brilliant picnic of Anglo-foreign society; but Dorothea had no such defense against deep impressions. (193)

Dorothea's erotically saturated coming-to-consciousness—which is also an experience of temporal disequilibrium—is bluntly figured as a painful seduction or even a rape: the "deep impressions" left by the "thrust" of this city of "broken revelations" suggest metonymically the penetration of Dorothea's own body.<sup>24</sup> The apparent referents of this overheated prose are, on the one hand, Dorothea's discomfiture at the "deep degeneracy" of the Catholic "superstition" and, on the other, the "[r]uins and basilicas, palaces and colossi" that stand as evidence of the city's glorious past (193). But the metaphoric language of the passage proliferates in excess even of these grandiose objects, and in the process assures us that Dorothea registers these abstractions with tactile directness: "[A]ll this vast wreck of ambitious ideals, sensuous and spiritual, mixed confusedly with the signs of breathing forgetfulness and degradation, at first jarred her as with an electric shock, and then urged themselves on her with that ache belonging to a glut of confused ideas which check the flow of emotion. Forms both pale and glowing took possession of her young sense" (193). This language of aches and urges, of pulsing expansion and contraction, of heavy breathing and

sensual possession, makes what is after all a description of a mental event almost indistinguishable from a sexual one.

In accounting for this section's manifest eroticism, it is tempting to turn to the novel's marriage plot—to contain this overflow of sexual energy by assigning it a proper place in Dorothea's romantic trajectory. It is certainly possible to understand this account of Dorothea's soul in its "young nudity" (194) as, above all, a moment in her very private history of desire. The chapter in which the passage appears marks the narrative hinge between Dorothea's two consecutive love-plots: it is immediately before these paragraphs that the narrator has discovered Dorothea "sobbing bitterly" (192) in her room with the knowledge that her first marriage has been a mistake, and in a few pages Dorothea will begin her real acquaintance with Will and his "delightful," "irresistible" smile (205). On this reading, the passage would do little more than confirm the narrative arc laid out in the novel's prelude: from pathologized feminine abstraction (as Casaubon's secretary/housewife) to pathologized feminine desire (as Will's lover/secretary/housewife). Multiple critics who have recognized this scene as constituting an erotic awakening have been overly hasty to read it in terms of where the novel, and Dorothea, are going.<sup>25</sup>

But I would like to forestall for a moment the knowledge that Dorothea here is in the process of substituting a true object of desire for a false one, and note instead that the eroticism in the passage is, in an important sense, still objectless. "Dorothea had no distinctly shapen grievance that she could state even to herself" (192), Eliot writes near the opening of the chapter, when she first introduces Dorothea's stormy weeping, and the words should make us hesitate before giving clear characterological names either to her resentment or her longing. Dorothea is certainly suspended between Casaubon and Will at this juncture in the novel, and between the prelude's two designated failings of vague idealism and common yearning. But this moment of suspension, if bracketed off from the momentum of the plot, also marks the novel's point of contact with an alternative organization of desire. Dorothea's temporary drift between two points of attention, two possible ways of relating to the world's objects, can also be read as the novel's own momentary generic drift beyond the magnetic pull of the individuating body and the realist novel in which that body is contained. The suffuse eroticism of the above-quoted section suggests a carnal or bodily knowledge—an eroticism that proceeds from Dorothea's seemingly opposed tendencies to formulate abstractions from lived bodily experience (her "nature turned all her small allowance of knowledge into principles, fusing her actions into their mould")

and to lend abstractions bodily force (her “quick emotions gave the most abstract things the quality of a pleasure or a pain”). Dorothea’s feverishness here, born of a ceaseless shuttling between what we can describe as practices of deduction and induction—a constant testing of general precept against local datum—is no less erotic for being primarily intellectual.<sup>26</sup>

If we resist giving a name to the contradictory motions of Dorothea’s desire here—if we refrain from fastening a characterological handle to the intensity of her bodily experience—we can read the passage as describing Dorothea’s dawning awareness of her body as a canvas for the operation of a desire not necessarily subject to the demands of her particular story, a desire that, although born in “tumultuous preoccupation with her personal lot,” could become the means of escaping that preoccupation. Read this way, the episode emerges as a startlingly precise description of the desire to articulate individual experience to a larger frame of reference, and the difficulty of doing so. To employ some of the other terms this essay has invoked, we can describe this structure of feeling as the desire of the individual for a grasp of the contours of the social; or as the single life-span’s desire for access to a temporality that exceeds it; as the novel’s desire for epic; as fiction’s desire for social critique. The first term in each of these formulations is linked to the body as Bourdieu discusses it in the passage I have quoted above, the body as the mechanism of bad individuation, of a “scientifically disastrous” personalism. But the painful/pleasurable movement to the second term brings us closer to a different conception of the body’s function that Bourdieu goes on to offer. “[T]his body,” he writes, “which indisputably functions as a principle of individuation . . . is also . . . a principle of ‘collectivization’ [by virtue of its] property of being open to the world, and therefore exposed to the world, and so capable of being conditioned by the world, shaped by the material and cultural conditions of existence.”<sup>27</sup>

The erotic connotations of Bourdieu’s formulation—in which the body presents itself as available to penetration by “the world”—resonate powerfully with Dorothea’s experience. I want to raise the possibility that it is precisely the ability of the body to function as an agent of “collectivization” that Dorothea senses in these pages. The eroticism that suffuses these passages, in other words, is sending Dorothea beyond the self-obsessed misery she is at this moment most entitled to feel. That the background to this scene of fear and longing is occupied by monuments of the ancient past suggests as well that Dorothea is undergoing a version of what F. R. Ankersmit has identified as “sublime historical experience”—a “Gestalt-switch from

a timeless present into a world consisting of things past and present” that is affectively marked by “feelings of loss and love,” a “combination of pain and pleasure,” at the sudden awareness of vanished worlds.<sup>28</sup> The realist novel’s immersion in the conditions of lived experience, its unabashed concentration on the intensities of individual bodies, allows it to register with special force the difficulty of getting beyond Bourdieu’s personalism and Ankersmit’s presentism—and the desire to do so. This reading opens the possibility for an understanding of novelistic desire not as the mechanism of individuation but as a route to understanding the impediments to escaping it—that is, as a kind of knowledge. Desire here is the affective name for an apprehension of the structural obstacles confronting the subject in search of an historicized comprehension of the social. Far from concentrating the subject on her own petty preoccupations, desire challenges her to seek a grasp of what lies beyond them. Importantly, this desiring understanding occurs not through some transcendence of the femininely coded body, the individual “lot,” and the novel that contains and stands for them both, but by means of a thorough surrender to them.

It is possible, of course, to argue from the example of *Middlemarch* that novelistic form limits as well as affords this knowledge; even as she offers in this Roman episode a striking picture of a bodily desire floating free of a particular characterological object, Eliot will go on to put all of her formidable resources as a stylist and psychologist in the service of directing Dorothea’s amorphous desire to the person of Will Ladislaw (whose very name seems to signify the suturing of the errant individual’s volition to the inevitability of narrative law—and so to figure Will as the natural destination of Dorothea’s erotic energies). Indeed, the novel seems positively eager not to let Dorothea dwell too long in the space of erotic indeterminacy. When, several hundred pages later, Dorothea learns that Casaubon’s will has stipulated that she lose her fortune if she marries Will, the “violent shock of repulsion from her departed husband” is a figurative echo of that initial assault by Rome; but, rather than send Dorothea back to those erotically saturated images, the narrator informs us—in the very next sentence—of a “sudden strange yearning of heart towards Will Ladislaw” (490). The pattern is repeated when Dorothea, finally resolving to abandon her work organizing the notes to Casaubon’s “Key to All Mythologies,” superstitiously writes her dead husband an explanatory note (“Do you not see now that I could not submit my soul to yours, by working hopelessly at what I have no belief in?”). But rather than give herself up to the narrative coasting that this kiss-off

might warrant—much less conceive a passion for her own intellectual work—Dorothea (again in the following sentence) sets her sights on Mr. Right: “That silent colloquy was perhaps only the more earnest because underneath and through it all there was always the deep longing which had really determined her to come to Lowick. The longing was to see Will Ladislaw” (539). Drift is not tolerated. The narrative logic of the novel has been aptly described by Catherine Maxwell as “the slow but pressured adaptation of [Dorothea’s] visionary desire to the normative demands of nineteenth-century marriage and motherhood,” and in the context of that excruciating 800-page march to the middle, Dorothea’s Italian hour may indeed seem insignificant.<sup>29</sup> To the extent that the episode in Rome remains just that, an episodic hinge in a plot intent on superseding it, its usefulness as a spur to properly critical social knowledge would seem to be limited.

The most influential accounts of novelistic desire would confirm that any desiring energies summoned in the Roman sections are destined to be absorbed by the narrative’s eventual anchoring of that desire in the institution of marriage. René Girard and Leo Bersani, for example, approach the issue of novelistic desire from opposed ideological perspectives but offer strikingly congruent accounts of the structural role of desire in the novel—accounts that end by confirming the critical nullity of novel-reading. Girard celebrates the traditional novel for rescuing us from “the illusion of spontaneous desire,” while Bersani excoriates it for betraying the “heterogeneity of our desires,” but both critics understand the novel as ultimately working to defeat its association with the somatic intensity of eroticism.<sup>30</sup> For Bersani no less than for Girard, the novel—despite its capacious interest in the details of desire—is inevitably given over to the project of their exorcism; for both writers, the novel is the grave of a vagrant eroticism and the buttress of social quietism. The divergent agendas of Bersani and Girard find a point of agreement in their shared emphasis on closure as the location of narrative’s meaning; for these critics “closure” names an inevitably conservative site. In Bersani’s account, even the most perverse narrative texts find defeat waiting at the end of their daring experiments with psychological incoherence.<sup>31</sup> Girard, bringing a precisely opposed valuation to the same judgment, proclaims that “[t]he conclusion is the stationary axle around which the wheel of the novel turns. . . . Truth is active throughout the great novel but its primary location is in the conclusion. The conclusion is the temple of that truth.”<sup>32</sup> In this emphasis on the end, Girard and Bersani are representative of narrative criticism much more broadly. In *Reading*

for the Plot, for example, Peter Brooks adapts Freud's theory of the death drive to narratology to argue that closure binds the propulsive energies of narrative desire; just as in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* the plot of a life betrays a conservative tropism towards a finality that will emulate an originary motionlessness, in narrative for Brooks "the ultimate determinants of meaning lie at the end, and narrative desire is ultimately, inexorably, desire for the end."<sup>33</sup> More recently, Judith Roof has concurred on the conservative nature of narrative, arguing that "the imbrication of narrative and sexuality is a symptom of their common progenesis in a specific, already heterosexual, ideology"—or, as she puts it more flatly: "the sexuality of narrative is straight."<sup>34</sup> The title of Roof's study, *Come as You Are*, refers to the orgasmic aim supposedly determining readers' rush through narrative, and her pun's teleological orientation makes clear again that this image of narrative's conservatism depends on a critical emphasis on closure. The dominant accounts of novelistic desire would thus agree that I have exaggerated the significance of Dorothea's moment of unanchored somatic intensity in Rome.

But what warrant do we in fact have to emphasize the destination of Dorothea's desire rather than the routes it travels along the way? If traditional narrative analysis sees novelistic form as wedded to a socially conservative project of closing down problematic desires through the resolution of plot, this perspective in turn depends on training the critical gaze resolutely on the end of narrative. But the close fit these critics propose between narration and normativity is less a given of narrative forms than the result of a critical insistence on taking the end of the text as the end of analysis. Girard's suspicion of desire and Bersani's celebration of it, Brooks's textual psychoanalysis and Roof's queer pessimism—all depend on a formalism that understands the significance of novelistic structure as having everything to do with where individual novels leave us. My argument here is that this is an arbitrary point at which to terminate narrative analysis, and that we should recall that for the novel-reader, narrative consumption—far from ending with the conclusion of an individual novel—is an ongoing process, continually renewed. As recent histories of reading have demonstrated, the novel rarely subsists in the pristine singularity presumed by most formalist critics; the novel would instead be better characterized as *par excellence* the literary form of multiplicity. Since the early-modern explosion of the form, what has seemed most striking to commentators is precisely the repetition compulsion that seems to animate novel-readers. Roger Chartier, among many other historians

and critics, has drawn attention to the eighteenth-century “revolution in reading,” a seismic shift in habits of literary consumption in which “extensive” reading came to replace “intensive” reading. “The ‘intensive’ reader faced a narrow and finite body of texts, which were read and reread. . . . The ‘extensive’ reader . . . is an altogether different reader—one who consumes numerous and diverse print texts, reading them with rapidity and avidity and exercising a critical activity over them that spares no domain from methodological doubt.”<sup>35</sup>

Formalist critics of the novel have of course noted the avidity that characterizes novelistic consumption, but in training their gaze on the individual literary text, they have been too hasty to account for this compulsion in terms of their own methodological agenda, itself obviously in search of conceptual closure; such critics have assumed that if readers are addicted to racing through novels, this addiction must bespeak a hunger for resolution, an eagerness to assign desire to its proper objects in the forever-after allowed by novelistic closure.<sup>36</sup> But the very formal ingenuity of the accounts offered by Bersani, Girard, Brooks, and Roof may exaggerate the importance of formal structures to the desires that propel lay readers. Bourdieu, in a discussion of the ways intellectuals project their own hermeneutic procedures onto the social actors they study, warns against “giving as the source of agents’ practice the theory that had to be constructed in order to explain it.”<sup>37</sup> His words suggest that the image of novel-reading implied by theorists of narratology reflects the investments of their own formalist readings, concerned as they are to decode the structural dynamics of literary texts.<sup>38</sup> But what if we took the compulsion to open new novels not as evidence of the reader’s need to get to the next ending but instead as evidence of a desire to forget the last one? What if we understood readerly desire to be directed not toward the achievement of closure but instead toward an immersion in the details and complications of middles? Such a shift in emphasis could reveal that even when isolated novels are wedded to the project of containing the implications of their desiring energies, novel-reading as cultural praxis is committed to the re-opening of those problematic desires through the multiplication of narrative possibilities, the continued refusal to accept closure as offering the final word.<sup>39</sup>

If we are seeking reasons to dwell on the steamy middle of *Middlemarch*, then, we should note that over the course of a lifetime of novel-reading as this practice is socially lived, middles last longer than endings, and they recur just as frequently. These middles have a claim to be seen as an equally enticing object of readerly desire.

Dorothea's own intense, and intensely dispersed, erotic awakening in the indeterminate narrative space of her Roman holiday helps us see that this appetite for narrative middles is also a way of refusing the reduction of desire to a single object choice. If we conceive of the novel-reader on the model of Dorothea as we know her over *Middlemarch's* entire plot arc, we get an image of the reader as serial monogamist, committed until the end to a few cherished books. But this is perhaps a more fitting description of the literary critic with her pored-over volumes than of the lay reader, who, as George Harrow reminds us in my epigraph, is likely to be more of a heartbreaker. Like Dorothea in Rome, the compulsive novel-reader is engineering her own private pageant of characters and narrative possibilities. The reader's private chamber is the ultimate "city of visible history," and the novel-reading she undertakes there ensures a constant supply of deeply cathected objects—truly a "procession with strange ancestral images and trophies gathered from afar."

As I have already indicated, the very avidity with which Eliot seeks to close the Roman gap in Dorothea's erotic trajectory suggests that a profound disruption of realist coherence is at stake in the crucial passages we have examined. I want to suggest that the most alarming, and interesting, object of Dorothea's desire here may be to escape the contours of her plot—to engage in the restless promiscuity that characterizes the novel consumer, for whom there is always life after closure. In other words, it is Dorothea's ambition to abandon the position of novelistic character and accede to the position of novelistic reader that produces such violent imagistic disturbance in Eliot's text. And despite what appears to be Dorothea's resolve to put Rome behind her, the novel continues to ring with echoes of this passage, thereby ensuring that Dorothea remains haunted by an unappeasable desire that seems to place her beyond the reach of the text's closural logic. Late in the novel, Will's courtship is described as a "ghostly kind of wooing" (633), and a few pages later Dorothea's passion for him is sharpened by the idea that "it was as if a crowd of indifferent objects had thrust them asunder" (635)—both sets of images suggesting that what most compels her about Will may be less the promise of his rescuing her from the jostling phantasmatic eroticism of Rome than of his prolonging it indefinitely. Such echoes are particularly pronounced at the novel's climax, where the "vivid flash of lightning" which finally thrusts Will and Dorothea together with a "spasmodic movement" (810) demands to be read as a distant tremor emanating from the initial "electric shock" (193) Dorothea receives when confronted with the spectacle

of the Roman past—and so it could be argued that even in the moment the novel spectacularly achieves its own closure, it gestures to the earlier moment of erotic indeterminacy.<sup>40</sup> Eliot indicates as well that this restlessness persists beyond her protagonist's remarriage: the "strange associations" Italy transmits to Dorothea, we are told, "remained through her after years" (193). I am suggesting that the possibility that continues to haunt Dorothea is that of a more open-ended and virtual—that is, more readerly—relationship to her eroticism and its objects. As a consummately convincing realist heroine, Dorothea is indeed compelled to move on the track laid down for her by the novel's prelude—to find erotic interest only by abandoning the dry-as-dust Casaubon, whose very blood is said to consist of "semicolons and parentheses" (71). But Dorothea's reader, a being for whom such equivocating punctuation can be the very stuff of passionate investment, faces no such choice. That *Middlemarch* continues throughout its length to produce images of ghostly ardor indicates that, even in the arms of Will, Dorothea longs to return to the middle of her story, that moment when her desire-fueled indefiniteness approaches the potentially endless appetite of the novel-reader.

Once we acknowledge that novel-readers hunger as much for the indeterminacy of narrative middles as for the resolution of narrative closure, we can detect an element of potentially critical detachment precisely in Dorothea's moments of overwrought corporeality. Historians of reading alert us to the fact that the consumption of fiction is less an exercise of once-and-final immersion in an imagined universe than a series of repeated acts of consumption. While the heart-pounding investment in a virtual world might accurately characterize the reader in the grip of an individual novel, we obtain a different, and cooler, image of the novel-reader when we recall that tomorrow he'll be in the grip of another. Dorothea assaulted by an ambivalent desire for the crowding objects of history, as well as the novel-reader held by the fascination of proliferating stories, could be described as gathering data, conducting a kind of fieldwork in culture.<sup>41</sup> Described this way, these practices sound less like blind compulsion and more like a scientific method. But how to square this critically detached reader with the pleasure-addict Warner describes so compellingly? If we accept Chartier's characterization of "extensive" reading, we are confronted with the apparent contradiction that reading as a social practice begins to be marked by thoroughgoing skepticism at precisely the moment of the explosion of that literary form most given over to illusion.

I want to suggest that this cohabitation of credulity and skepticism, feverish, “feminine” surrender and critical, “masculine” detachment, is not a contradiction at all. Michel Foucault’s work has accustomed us to seeing sexuality as the fallacious anchor of the modern subject’s truth, the effect that most efficiently writes her into the discourses of power and knowledge. It would seem to follow that any narrative form (such as the novel) that takes fundamental inspiration from this “truth” would be ill-equipped to provide its consumer with insight into its factitious nature. But the effects of sexuality may not be as imperially far-reaching as Foucault sometimes suggested. In a recent essay, John Guillory claims that private reading is the primary remnant of those techniques of the self that Foucault so admired in classical culture and lamented as having been displaced in modernity by the reign of sexuality. “[R]eading is the *principal* ethical practice of modernity, the site where a practice of the self has not been entirely or easily subordinated to the moral code, or rendered solely an instrument of power/knowledge,” Guillory writes.<sup>42</sup> If private reading thus offers a space of resistance to the dominion of power/knowledge, the novel, far from being just another tool for the deployment of sexuality, might provide a kind of shelter from it: although the novel is traversed by desire’s powerful truth-effects, the consumption of the novel in the act of reading cultivates a practice of the self that wanders astray from those effects. Guillory’s account should make it less surprising that the imaginative form apparently most invested in the ideologies of modernity in fact—precisely by virtue of its status as a read form—permits some distance on those ideologies.<sup>43</sup> The foregoing analysis of the function of desire in the realist novel implies, more precisely, that where fiction most obviously solicits its readers’ “adolescent” fantasies is also where it encourages those readers in their most critical, even scientific, habits of mind. Taking *Dorothea in Rome* as an emblem of the reader’s amorphous but very real passion, we can recognize that desire in the novel in fact encourages a critical distance from the ideologies that have so powerfully shaped modernity. The ecstasy that novels both thematize and provoke deserves consideration as a technology of potentially critical self-estrangement.

I have used Eliot’s heroine as exemplary of this possibility, but she is by no means alone in her approach to a position of readerly detachment by means of desire. The nineteenth-century realist novel is replete with figures who experience a panoramic or alienated perspective precisely as a rush of erotic energy. Eliot’s own work, obsessed as it is with the transcendence of the self’s provincialism, depicts the will to

self-estrangement in terms of eroticism with surprising frequency. We might recall that in *The Mill on the Floss* Maggie Tulliver's languorous surrender to her desire for Stephen Guest takes place in a boat flowing downriver, beyond the familiar sights of St. Ogg's and into "far-stretching fields . . . that were entirely strange to her."<sup>44</sup> In Eliot's final novel, Daniel Deronda's first inkling that his plot might take him beyond the confines of England is sparked after a cruisy meeting with Mordecai on a London bridge, and the men begin to discuss Zionism with "as intense a consciousness as if they had been two undeclared lovers."<sup>45</sup> And, in a more painful example from the same novel, we might recall Gwendolen Harleth's confused but pressing attraction to Daniel himself—a character whose sexily detailed bookishness (we are instructed to imagine him "a boy of thirteen, stretched prone on the grass where it was in shadow, his curly head propped on his arms over a book") and air of interested detachment ("It was his habit to indulge himself in that solemn passivity . . . when thinking and desiring melt together imperceptibly. . . . He was forgetting everything else in a half-speculative, half-involuntary identification of himself with the objects he was looking at") make him into a desirable emblem of precisely the readerly distance that Gwendolen most desperately craves.<sup>46</sup>

Beyond Eliot, we might think of Lucy Snowe's wavering in *Villette* between erotic attachments to Graham Bretton, Ginevra Fanshawe, and M. Paul, and wonder whether the real point of Charlotte Brontë's exquisitely sustained obliquity isn't to license the alienated view that virtually defines Lucy's social role and narrative perspective. In Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*, Margaret Hale's realization that she wants to protect John Thornton from a crowd of striking workers is accompanied by "an intense sympathy—intense to painfulness—in the interests of the moment."<sup>47</sup> Can we say for certain whether this intensity describes a desire for John, pity for the workers he exploits, or her sudden accession to a proto-Brechtian vision of the social processes that connect all of them? When in *Sentimental Education* Frédéric Moreau is "seized with an indescribable feeling of retroactive lust" in the picture gallery at Fontainebleau, he quickly transfers this desire to the living body of Rosanette—but Flaubert's term suggests that the real object of his fascination is the broadened temporal perspective represented by the centuries-old portraits on which he gazes.<sup>48</sup> In *The Ambassadors*, does Lambert Strether's flirtations with Maria Gostrey, Chad Newsome, Mme. de Vionnet, Little Bilham—just about everyone in the novel, in fact—signal a defense against the erotic, or an ardent desire to savor his outsider's view of a Paris that "twinkled and trembled and melted" before him?<sup>49</sup>

What these characters all have in common is an encounter with a desire that seems only loosely tethered to the possible erotic objects in the plots they inhabit: the thirst, the yearning, the pleasure described in these books press these characters against the edges of the diegetic space they occupy. What they glimpse at that boundary is the possibility of a delicious outsiderdom, an alienated gaze rich with eroticized significance. The desiring characters of realist fiction—and the novel-readers those characters figure at their most ardent moments—are thus important exemplars of what Amanda Anderson has identified as the nineteenth-century investment in such notions as distance, objectivity, and disinterestedness. In *The Powers of Distance: Cosmopolitanism and the Cultivation of Detachment*, Anderson calls for the recuperation of detachment as an ethical and critical strategy. In asking us to explore, rather than simply dismiss, the Victorian interest in disinterest, Anderson aims to make a contribution both to cultural history and to contemporary critical practice: deeper attention to the Victorians' understanding of detachment as a lived ambition, she argues, will help move us beyond the currently prevalent suspicion of impartiality as always and only a ruse of power. Detachment is instead a very real "attempt to enact and own the impersonal," Anderson contends, and it valuably affords us the "cultivated distance from conventions, norms, and habits" on which so much systemic social critique depends.<sup>50</sup> Perhaps the most challenging aspect of Anderson's study is her insistence that we recognize detachment as a potentially interminable practice. Detachment is "the *aspiration* to a distanced view": not a known quantity one can complacently claim to possess, but a desirable goal to be worked at actively and endlessly.<sup>51</sup>

Even, perhaps, compulsively. If detachment can be desirable, we should also recognize how frequently erotic desires have detachment as their ultimate object. The behavior of an illusion-obsessed novel-reader or the wanderings of an erotically confused teenager on holiday in Rome might seem a far cry from the practices of the self Anderson recommends. But Anderson's concept of the detached cultural critic as a kind of "participant-observer" is uncannily applicable to the novel-reader, excluded definitionally from the represented space of the fiction even as she is imaginatively engulfed by it.<sup>52</sup> Her fundamental alienation from the world of the text may spur the reader to ever more feverish consumption of fictional forms, but we should not therefore infer that she remains trapped in a world of illusion. If we want to take seriously the idea that detachment is an ambition of concretely lived lives, we should recognize that ambitions are often

most keenly felt as compulsions of the flesh—that the pursuit of the freedom from personalism must, to be meaningful, involve the whole person, ardently. The desire-fueled repetition compulsion that characterizes novel consumption is precisely what qualifies this practice as a pursuit of critical consciousness, a truly pervasive and ongoing popular attempt to achieve a carnal knowledge of the contours of social reality. Recognizing that novel-reading combines passion and distance, eroticism and skepticism, affords a view of the critical coolness that dwells at the heart of novelistic desire.

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#### NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> George Harrow, quoted in Jonathan Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2001), 375.

<sup>2</sup> Virginia Woolf, “George Eliot,” *Times Literary Supplement*, 20 November 1919, in *The Common Reader* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1925), 213.

<sup>3</sup> Barbara Hardy, *Particularities: Readings in George Eliot* (London: Peter Owen, 1982), 108; James Buzard, *Disorienting Fiction: The Autoethnographic Work of Nineteenth-Century British Novels* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2005), 284.

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of Eliot’s fiction in the context of the emergent social sciences, see Steven Marcus, “Literature and Social Theory: Starting in with George Eliot,” in *Representations: Essays on Literature and Society* (New York: Random House, 1975), 183–213. Daniel Cottom offers a more critical analysis of what he considers Eliot’s “normalizing” ambition to represent social totality in *Social Figures: George Eliot, Social History, and Literary Representation* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1987), 57; see also 33–57.

<sup>5</sup> J. Hillis Miller, *Victorian Subjects* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1991), 82. For similar accounts of the relations between characters and narrator, see Woolf, 213–17; and Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture*, 2nd ed., trans. Albert Sbragia (London: Verso, 2000), 222.

<sup>6</sup> Joseph Allen Boone, *Tradition Counter Tradition: Love and the Form of Fiction* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1987), 141.

<sup>7</sup> George Eliot, *Middlemarch: A Study of Provincial Life* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994), 38. Hereafter cited parenthetically by page number.

<sup>8</sup> Woolf, 213.

<sup>9</sup> See George Levine, *Dying to Know: Scientific Epistemology and Narrative in Victorian England* (Chicago: Chicago Univ. Press, 2002).

<sup>10</sup> E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1927), 54; Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1957), 202; Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, trans. Hannah and Stanley Mitchell (Lincoln: Nebraska Univ. Press, 1962), 194.

<sup>11</sup> For a sampling of recent work on the history of reading practices, see *A History of Reading in the West*, ed. Guglielmo Cavallo and Roger Chartier (Oxford: Polity Press, 1999).

<sup>12</sup> William B. Warner, "Formulating Fiction: Romancing the General Reader in Early-Modern Britain," in *Cultural Institutions of the Novel*, ed. Deidre Lynch and Warner (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1996), 280–81. A version of this essay appears in Warner, *Licensing Entertainment: The Elevation of Novel Reading in Britain, 1684–1750* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1998), 88–127.

<sup>13</sup> Warner, "Formulating Fiction," 304.

<sup>14</sup> Warner, "Formulating Fiction," 303.

<sup>15</sup> The essays collected in *A History of Reading in the West* (especially Reinhard Wittman's "Was there a Reading Revolution at the End of the Eighteenth Century?" [284–312]) contain excellent discussions of the debates on periodizing reading practices; they tend to verify the idea of a shift in reading habits coinciding with the explosion of the novel's popularity. See also recent books by Jonathan Rose and Leah Price, which together confirm the prevalence of novels as the preferred object of modernity's reading regime and the novel's association with promiscuous reading. These studies reach diametrically opposed political conclusions: Rose's *Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* argues that "[f]ar from reinscribing traditional ideologies, canonical literature tended to ignite insurrections in the minds of the workers" (9); Price's *The Anthology and the Rise of the Novel: From Richardson to George Eliot* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2000) claims instead that when we take into account the ways editors and abridgers attempted to manage readers' behaviors, the novel's rise "appears less a populist challenge to social and sexual hierarchies . . . than, on the contrary, a means to stratify anew an expanding public" (156). Despite these differences, Price and Rose concur on the prevalence of the novel and the mode of reading it fosters. Rose's reconstruction of the material in Welsh miners' libraries, for instance, reveals that fiction far outweighed any other type of reading material. Rose also indicates that the most popular books among working-class readers throughout the nineteenth century were *Robinson Crusoe*, *Pilgrim's Progress*, and the Bible, followed closely by Dickens's novels. See Rose, 237–55, 106, 111. And Price's account of anthologists' efforts to slow readers down by waylaying them with "beauties" or "extracts" from well-known novels in fact confirms that "generation after generation of anthologists saw their campaign against speed-reading as a losing battle" (4). For both writers, the expansion of literacy thus means a world where people read novels and where the novel dictates how people read: rapidly and widely.

<sup>16</sup> Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt, *Practicing New Historicism* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2000), 168.

<sup>17</sup> Cavallo and Chartier, "Introduction," in *A History of Reading in the West*, 25.

<sup>18</sup> Price offers an excellent account of *Middlemarch*'s "generic extraterritoriality" (111) as a function of its suitability for decontextualization and excerption; the extractability of Eliot's maxims from her plot, Price argues, made her legible to critics less as a feminized purveyor of narrative interest than as a masculinized fount of life-lessons and "beauties." See Price, 105–56.

<sup>19</sup> Novalis, quoted in Marthe Robert, *Origins of the Novel*, trans. Sacha Rabinovitch (London: Harvester Press, 1980), 3, excerpted in *Theory of the Novel: A Historical Approach*, ed. Michael McKeon (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2000), 57.

<sup>20</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, trans. Richard Nice (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 2000), 131, 132.

<sup>21</sup> Hilary Fraser explores the sexual connotations of the Theresa comparison, suggesting Bernini's sculpture in Rome of *The Ecstasy of St. Theresa* as an inspiration for Eliot. As Fraser points out, Rome is also the location of Dorothea's erotic awaken-

ing; she sees this fact as cementing Dorothea's attraction to Will, who Fraser writes "conquer[s] Dorothea] with his sexual beauty as surely as ever the angel pierced St. Theresa with his spear"—a reduction of Dorothea's erotic awakening to her marriage plot with which I take issue below (Hilary Fraser, "St. Theresa, St. Dorothea, and Miss Brooke in *Middlemarch*," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 40 (March 1986): 409).

<sup>22</sup> Sally Shuttleworth reads the mind-body dichotomy outlined in the prelude in terms of the "new specialism in the diseases of women which suggested that women had a very different relation to the body than men" ("Sexuality and Knowledge in *Middlemarch*," *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 19 [1996]: 429). In Nancy Armstrong's influential account, Eliot exiles Dorothea—and the novel as a genre—to a "domain outside the political sphere" but at the same time claims for both a "much more important contribution" than a male-centered and epic-scale history have acknowledged (*Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* [New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1987], 48, 43).

<sup>23</sup> Kenny Marotta, "*Middlemarch*: The Home Epic," *Genre* 15 (1982): 418. Hardy offers a comparable encomium to Eliot ("whose tomb is visited") at Dorothea's expense (125). Catherine Maxwell gives a persuasive account of Eliot's "male-identified" narrator ("The Brooking of Desire: Dorothea and Deferment in *Middlemarch*," *Yearbook of English Studies* 26 [1996]: 118).

<sup>24</sup> In her recent book on lesbian public cultures, Ann Cvetkovich calls for an understanding of penetration that would "depathologize the relation between sexuality and trauma" without "necessarily refus[ing] it" and challenges queer critics to reject a logic that would claim that "if being penetrated is traumatic, the trauma is negative" (*An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality and Lesbian Public Cultures* [Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2003], 52, 60). Her comments provide a helpful vocabulary for recording the evidently traumatic nature of Dorothea's experiences here without dismissing their evident eroticism.

<sup>25</sup> See Fraser, 409. Fraser's comments are representative. Hardy also considers the erotic implications of the Roman sections. See Hardy, 15–36.

<sup>26</sup> In an essay on the phenomenology of fictional characterization which takes *Middlemarch* as its primary example, Catherine Gallagher claims that the eighteenth-century invention of fiction sought to lend cognitive density to a middle-ground between two types of particularity: that of the embodied real person and that of the cultural type. Between these two referential poles, fictional characters exist as a paradoxically graspable generality precipitated out of a constant movement of induction (from particular observable people) and deduction (from equally observable cultural types). Constantly in motion between these fixed sites, fictional characters thus become a way for the novel to "reflect on the fact that it is in the nature of examples generally to exceed that which they are supposed to exemplify" (Gallagher, "George Eliot: Immanent Victorian," *Proceedings of the British Academy* 94 [1997]: 161). Gallagher's conception of character as produced from the constant relay between induction and deduction recalls Dorothea's own mental practice in Rome as Eliot describes it; my analysis suggests that the ontological middle-ground Gallagher describes is not only constructed by the realist novel but portrayed in it as a fundamental object of the desire of fictional characters themselves.

<sup>27</sup> Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, 133–34.

<sup>28</sup> F. R. Ankersmit, *Sublime Historical Experience* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 2005), 9. For an analysis of this passage of *Middlemarch* in terms of the sublime, see Neil Hertz, *George Eliot's Pulse* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 2003), 34–38.

<sup>29</sup> Maxwell, 125.

<sup>30</sup> René Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1961), 28; Leo Bersani, *A Future for Astyanax: Character and Desire in Literature* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1969), 314.

<sup>31</sup> Thus, Bersani writes, “[t]he latter part of *Wuthering Heights* is a repudiation of its own radical difference from other novels” (222), and even Lautréamont’s restless self-invention winds up, in the sixth canto of *Les Chants de Maldoror*, in “a perfectly closed narrative, from which the contingent and the random have been eliminated” (224–25).

<sup>32</sup> Girard, 307. Girard’s understanding of the novel as a wheel turning around a still center is a striking spatialization of the temporal experience of narrative. Michel de Certeau has identified the tendency to use spatializing metaphors for temporal phenomena as typical of the ways “expert” accounts flatten and distort the tactics employed in everyday life (*The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall [Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1984], 35). Thanks to Sharon Marcus for discussing Girard’s metaphor with me.

<sup>33</sup> Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1984), 52.

<sup>34</sup> Judith Roof, *Come as You Are: Sexuality and Narrative* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1996), xxvii, xxvi.

<sup>35</sup> Chartier, *Forms and Meanings: Texts, Performances, and Audiences from Codex to Computer* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 17. The intensive/extensive paradigm was first articulated by Rolf Engelsing in “Die Perioden der Lesergeschichte in der Neuzeit: Das statistische Ausmass und die soziokulturelle Bedeutung der Lektüre,” *Archiv für Geschichte des Buchwesens* 10 (1970): 945–1002. Chartier notes the objections that have been made to this dramatic periodization, conceding both that there clearly existed “extensive” readers even in the earlier period and that the later period saw the sacralization—and thus an intensification—of the literary text’s status as an object of readerly contemplation. But he concludes that “these necessary precautions” do not invalidate the general historical point (17). For a qualification of Chartier’s connection of the explosion of literacy to radical doubt in the context of working-class readership, see Rose, 92–102. Rose’s own analysis demonstrates, however, that the frequent difficulty newly literate readers had distinguishing fact from fiction did little to modify the radical messages these readers took from novels.

<sup>36</sup> Similar assumptions orient the work of Janice Radway, whose groundbreaking *Reading the Romance* commends Harlequin romances for their attention to feminine desire but finds that these novels ultimately “close off the vista they open up” with their resolutely marriage- and monogamy-bound plots. She also finds a “contradiction” in the fact that a high percentage of romance readers report that they check the ending before reading a novel even though they also claim to be drawn by the excitement of the plots’ unfolding (Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*, 2nd ed. [Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1991], 16, 199). For Radway this practice aligns the consumption of romance with the conservative reassurance of myth, but I would argue that this conclusion results as much from Radway’s own conceptual frame as from her subjects’ narrative desire. It is only if we assume that romance readers read books for their endings that the practice of glancing at them in advance looks like a kind of false consciousness; if we posit that what interest readers are the detours and indeterminacies that dwell at the narrative center,

this practice of looking at the end loses much of its ideological importance. Lessening the stress on closure seems particularly important when examining a reading practice as self-consciously serial and repetitive as that of romance consumption.

<sup>37</sup> Bourdieu, *In Other Words: Essays Towards a Reflexive Sociology*, trans. Matthew Adamson (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1990), 60. For a related discussion, see Chartier, *On the Edge of the Cliff: History, Language, and Practices*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1997), 4.

<sup>38</sup> Rose argues similarly that “[literary] critics repeatedly commit what might be called the receptive fallacy: they try to discern the messages a text transmits to an audience by examining the text rather than the audience” (4). For a more focused discussion of “the mutual misrecognition of lay and professional reading,” see John Guillory, “The Ethical Practice of Modernity: The Example of Reading,” in *The Turn to Ethics*, ed. Marjorie Garber, Beatrice Hanssen, and Rebecca L. Walkowitz (New York: Routledge, 2000), 42.

<sup>39</sup> This point has been made most forcefully by feminist critics. For a collection of representative work, see *Ambiguous Discourse: Feminist Narratology and British Women Writers*, ed. Kathy Mazei (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1996). Robyn Warhol uses a feminist narratological approach to analyze the “indefinite open-endedness” and deferral of closure in soap-opera and other serialized narrative forms (“Guilty Cravings: What Feminist Narratology Can Do for Cultural Studies,” in *Narratologies: New Perspectives on Narrative Analysis*, ed. David Herman [Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 1999], 353).

<sup>40</sup> For an account of the difficulties *Middlemarch* has in closing down its narrating energies, see D. A. Miller’s *Narrative and Its Discontents* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1981), 175–94.

<sup>41</sup> The phrase is Nicholas Brown and Imre Szeman’s description of Bourdieu’s sociological practice, from the title of their collection *Pierre Bourdieu: Fieldwork in Culture* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000).

<sup>42</sup> Guillory, 39.

<sup>43</sup> Watt’s insight that “the division of labour has done much to make the novel possible” may also support this contention (71). While for Watt the novel is merely a by-product of the modern split in societal functions, my analysis suggests that its origins in the division of labor also makes it a form capable of critically understanding, rather than merely symptomatically expressing, that division. Amanda Anderson makes a related point in her discussion of Eliot’s ideal of utilizing the “negative and dislocating conditions of modernity [to] create the possibility for practices of reflection that enrich the individual precisely by spanning historical and cultural distances” (*The Powers of Distance: Cosmopolitanism and the Cultivation of Detachment* [Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2001], 13).

<sup>44</sup> Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), 589.

<sup>45</sup> Eliot, *Daniel Deronda* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995), 495.

<sup>46</sup> Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, 164, 188, 189.

<sup>47</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, *North and South* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), 230.

<sup>48</sup> Gustave Flaubert, *Sentimental Education*, trans. Robert Baldick (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964), 320.

<sup>49</sup> Henry James, *The Ambassadors* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), 118.

<sup>50</sup> Anderson, 179, 176. Levine’s *Dying to Know* and Buzard’s *Disorienting Fiction* are comparably important recent explorations—and partial defenses—of the much-abused concepts of objectivity and detachment.

<sup>51</sup> Anderson, 6.

<sup>52</sup> Anderson, 53. The concept of participant-observation is central as well to Buzard's conception of autoethnography in *Disorienting Fiction*.