

# Middlemarch And Me

*What George Eliot teaches us.*

**By Rebecca Mead** **The New Yorker** February 14 & 21, 2011 Issue

The first time I read George Eliot's "Middlemarch," I was seventeen years old, and was preparing to take the entrance examination for Oxford University. For several hours every weekend, I would join three or four classmates to discuss the novel, which was published in 1872, at the home of a benevolent teacher who lived on the outskirts of Weymouth, the English seaside resort where I grew up. Weymouth is in Dorset, a rural county in the southwest of the country; its rolling farmlands are traversed by narrow roads and hedgerowed lanes that discreetly delineate the ancestral holdings of landed families. A quarter century ago, as I looked out from my teacher's living-room window at hills that seemed perpetually sodden, my domain felt hardly less provincial and remote than the Midlands of the eighteen-thirties, which Eliot had described in her novel.

I identified completely with Dorothea Brooke, the ardent young gentlewoman yearning for a more significant existence, even though my upbringing was barely similar. Dorothea lives at Tipton Grange, a large estate equipped with household staff; my family—a few generations from being household staff—occupied a modest house, built in the nineteen-fifties, with a carefully tended patch of garden. Dorothea, who at the novel's outset is nineteen, disdains her suitor, Sir James Chettam, an amiable, pink-faced baronet whose land is adjacent to the property that any future son of hers will inherit. Instead, she makes a spectacularly unwise marriage to Edward Casaubon, the pedantic scholar laboring on the interminable "Key to all Mythologies"—"Our Lowick Cicero," as a dismissive neighbor calls him. Ultimately, she is united with Will Ladislav, a passionate, idealistic lightweight, a journalist turned politician.

I relished the satire in Eliot's "study of provincial life," as the book is subtitled, with its amused depictions of minor characters like Celia, Dorothea's more earthbound sister, whose marriage to the passed-over Sir James produces baby Arthur—"the infantine Bouddha"—whom everyone is obliged to adore. But I missed, more or less completely, the irony in the portrayal of Dorothea, with her righteous aspirations. (Her love of riding is so great that "she felt that she enjoyed it in a pagan sensuous way, and always looked forward to renouncing it," and she imagines, when anticipating life with Casaubon, "It would be like marrying Pascal.") I also failed to notice what Leslie Stephen, an early critic, described as "a slight touch of stupidity" about Dorothea. Rather, her formless desire for a life of the mind, and a life of meaning, struck not so much a chord with me as a symphony.

In my Penguin English Library edition, I marked what seemed to me particularly salient passages with a fluorescent yellow pen; the highlights have faded now to an almost imperceptible citrine. From Chapter 37, as Will enlightens Dorothea about Casaubon's intellectual inadequacies: "Now when she looked steadily at her husband's failure, still more at his possible consciousness of failure, she seemed to be looking along the one track where duty became tenderness." From Chapter 64, where Lydgate—the high-minded, ambitious young doctor whose trajectory the novel charts in parallel with Dorothea's—is in dire financial straits, and his relations with Rosamond, his willful, empty-headed wife, are at their most strained: "In marriage, the certainty, 'She will never love me much,' is easier to bear than the fear, 'I shall love her no more.' "

On the brink of adulthood—not knowing where I would study, where I might live, what men I would love, whether I would have children—I felt that everything I might need to know about marriage, about love, about life itself, was encompassed in the novel's eight hundred and fifty pages. When I finally went for my interview at Oxford, I met with a senior tutor whose study was furnished with low-slung easy chairs upholstered in mustard-colored corduroy: one could either perch on a chair's edge or sink into its depths, and I shifted uncomfortably between one inappropriate position and the other while talking passionately about "Middlemarch." A few months later, when I received a letter telling me that I had been offered a scholarship to

read English at University College, it was the first time that George Eliot had a hand in determining the direction of my life.



*In ordinary lives Eliot perceived human nature's "deep pathos, its sublime mysteries."* Illustration by PIERRE MORNET

In the subsequent decades, just about every love affair I had was refracted through "Middlemarch." I spent far too much of my twenties helplessly, if resentfully, in love with a preoccupied man nearly two decades my senior—a distinguished professor who studied the classics and once told me that one of his greatest fears was to discover that *he* was Casaubon. It might have been like marrying Pascal, but the professor eventually decided that I was not fit to receive a proposal of the type that Casaubon, in an excruciatingly stilted letter, offers Dorothea: "I have discerned in you an elevation of thought and a capability of devotedness, which I had hitherto not conceived to be compatible either with the early bloom of youth or with those graces of sex that may be said at once to win and to confer distinction when combined, as they notably are in you, with the mental qualities above indicated."

Some years later, I gave an otherwise well-read boyfriend a copy of "Middlemarch," on the principle that if he wanted to understand *me* he needed to read *this*; two years later, he still had not cracked its considerable spine, which should have made our parting less painful than it was. Soon after we broke up, he—of course—got around to reading it, and told me how much he admired the climactic scene of Will and Dorothea, hitherto kept apart by the terms of Casaubon's will and by their own discretion, clutching each other's hands, at last, as a thunderstorm rages. I find this the book's one overwrought note, and his admiration confirmed that things would never have worked between us. When I did eventually marry, at the age of thirty-seven—older even than Eliot when she eloped with George Henry Lewes, the exuberant, omniscient critic who became her beloved companion for the next quarter century, despite being married to someone else—it was to a man who prized "Middlemarch" as much as I did, and whose name, by what I hope is only happy coincidence, is George.

I have gone back to "Middlemarch" every five years or so, my emotional response to it evolving at each revisiting. In my judgmental twenties, I thought that Ladislav, with his brown curls and his callow artistic dabbling, was not entirely deserving of Dorothea; by forty, I could better measure the appeal of his youthful energies and Byronic hairdressing, at least to his middle-aged creator, who was fifty-three when the book was published. My identification with Eliot's heroine and my dismissal of her simpler sister was shaken when I became the besotted mother of a son. (To a friend, a professor of English literature, I giddily wrote, "All these years I've thought of myself as Dorothea, and now I've turned overnight into Celia.") And as I grew older the unfolding of Dorothea's life became less immediately poignant to me than the story of Lydgate, who at the start of the book has the bold aim to "make a link in the chain of discovery," but who, thanks to his own misguided marriage, becomes a society doctor known for a treatise on gout—"a disease which has a good deal of wealth on its side," in Eliot's pointed observation.

Rather than limning the inchoate hopes of youth, "Middlemarch" seemed to be about the resignations that attend middle age. It became a primer to the limitations on accomplishment that are, for the most part, the lot of even the most ardent and aspiring among us. (Lydgate dies at fifty, believing himself a failure: "He had not done what he once meant to do.") The fate of Dorothea, who becomes a supportive wife and mother, sits ill with some readers, particularly those reared with feminist preconceptions about autonomy and success; they chafe at her lack of scope. But with each reading I became only more grateful for Eliot's wise, consoling grace, and only more admiring of the quiet celebration of the unremarkable that infuses the book's unforgettable conclusion: "The growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs."

A bronze statue of George Eliot stands in the center of Nuneaton, the market town in Warwickshire near her birthplace: she sits on a low wall, her eyes cast down, a book at her side. When I visited, last spring, someone had left half a cookie resting by her hand, giving her a sad, neglected air. The statue, which is almost life-size,

shows Eliot with strong features, thick hair, and a slim waist; but nobody really knows how accurate the likeness is. Mary Ann Evans, as she was christened at birth, in 1819, was undoubtedly plain, and as a young woman she made unfunny jokes, in letters to friends, about her ugliness. Henry James described her as “deliciously hideous” after he met her in 1869, when he was twenty-six and handsome. She only ever posed for one photographic portrait: aged thirty-nine, she sits, long-chinned and large-nosed, with a forced simper on her face.

The statue was erected by the George Eliot Fellowship, a literary society based in Nuneaton. The society was founded eighty years ago by a local newspaper editor, A. F. Cross, who was determined to rectify the neglect that the author had suffered since her death, in 1880. In the society’s early years, celebratory dinners were held, and lectures given by scholars such as the Reverend Charles Gardner, the author of “The Inner Life of George Eliot,” who addressed its members in 1931. (Gardner was apparently interested only in the outermost reaches of Eliot’s inner life; he wrote that she was bedevilled by a “secret source of trouble,” but added, “as she has not revealed what it was, it would be impertinent to be over-curious.”) The fellowship languished after the Second World War, during which Nuneaton was badly bombed, as was nearby Coventry, where Marian Evans, as she was calling herself by then, moved at the age of twenty-one. She began her intellectual life in earnest there, in the company of the open-minded industrialist Charles Bray and his wife, Cara. The Brays introduced her to liberal theology, phrenology, and Ralph Waldo Emerson. “The first *man* I have ever seen,” she described him in a letter to a friend.

The hundred-and-fiftieth anniversary of George Eliot’s birth, in 1969, occasioned a revival of interest in her, and by 1980 the fellowship had persuaded the authorities at Westminster Abbey to honor her in Poets’ Corner, with a memorial stone. In the nineties, the fellowship’s ranks were modestly swollen by what the British papers called “Middlemarch mania,” following the BBC’s dramatization of the novel; at its height, the fellowship had more than six hundred members, including a Japanese chapter, based in Osaka. These days, there are about four hundred members—a figure that compares unfavorably with the popularity enjoyed by Jane Austen, whose society in North America alone has four thousand members, and whose works are the inspiration for bankable spinoffs, from “Clueless” to “Pride and Prejudice and Zombies.”

Austen’s greater current popularity is understandable: she wrote crystalline, comic novels of medium length. Eliot’s work was more varied in its attainment, and more verbose: one publisher recently released a volume called “The Mill on the Floss: In Half the Time,” an abridgment for those unable to countenance a six-hundred-page book. Even among Eliot’s devotees, many will agree that once is enough for reading “Romola,” her often tedious excursion into Renaissance Florence. Eliot admired Austen: she and Lewes read Austen’s novels aloud to each other in 1857, when she was embarking upon her own first effort at fiction—the stories that became “Scenes of Clerical Life.” But George Eliot, as she became known when that collection was published, went on to surpass her precursor. She is as adept as Austen at the ironic depiction of high and middle-class society: Mr. Brooke, Dorothea’s muddle-headed uncle, is a not too distant cousin of Mr. Bennet; and Mrs. Vincy, the exquisitely banal mother of Rosamond, might easily have found her way to Middlemarch via Highbury. But Eliot’s satire, unlike Austen’s, stops short of cruelty. She is inveterately magnanimous, even when it comes to her most flawed characters; her default authorial position is one of pity. Rosamond Vincy is foolish and intractable—her husband refers to her in his later years as his basil plant, because it was “a plant that had flourished wonderfully on a murdered man’s brains.” But the sequence of chapters in which self-involved, trivial Rosamond realizes that Will Ladislaw is in love with Dorothea, not her—she is “taken hold of by an emotion stronger than her own, hurried along in a new movement which gave all things some new, awful, undefined aspect”—is a masterpiece of sympathetic imagination. A reader marvels at Jane Austen’s cleverness, but is astonished by George Eliot’s intelligence.

The current chairman of the fellowship, John Burton, is a retired high-school English teacher. An energetic man in his sixties with a soft Midlands accent, he has focussed on encouraging a revival of interest in Eliot among

the populace of Nuneaton and Bedworth, a neighboring town where there is an impressive nineteenth-century almshouse, if little else. I first met Burton at Griff House, Eliot's childhood home, which is an elegant Georgian brick building with an ivy-covered façade on the outskirts of town. George Eliot's father, Robert Evans, was the land agent for Francis Parker Newdigate, the proprietor of a large country house, called Arbury Hall, a mile and a half away. As a girl, Eliot often went to the big house, where she was given free range of the library. Eliot's performance at the age of thirteen in English composition at school was so far in advance of her peers' that it was "reserved for the private perusal and enjoyment of the teacher, who rarely found anything to correct," according to a memoir written by the daughter of a classmate. Of the young Mary Ann Evans the classmate added, "Her schoolfellows loved her as much as they could venture to love one whom they felt to be so immeasurably superior to themselves."

Griff House is now cut off from Arbury Hall by a highway and an industrial estate. A few years ago, the house was bought by Whitbread, a former brewery turned hospitality company, which appended a sprawling pseudo-Georgian hotel to its rear. In what was the front hall and parlor, there are now slot machines and a pool table. It is hard for even the most imaginative visitor to envisage the domestic life of Eliot, the youngest of five children, who, like Maggie Tulliver, in "The Mill on the Floss," often retreated to the attic for solitude. ("Here she fretted out all her ill-humors, and talked aloud to the worm-eaten floors and the worm-eaten shelves," Eliot writes of Maggie.) Burton, conducting me around the property, said, "I've tried to get the manager to do more things related to George Eliot, but it's difficult." He pointed out a tumbledown barn, which he could imagine as an arts center, and other missed opportunities. "Whitbread is more interested in profits from beer," he said with a sigh.

#### ADVERTISEMENT

A few months earlier, I had written to Burton to ask about the fellowship's activities; he had immediately invited me to address a forthcoming "study day," an annual springtime gathering of Eliot aficionados, which this year was to celebrate the hundred-and-fiftieth anniversary of the publication of "The Mill on the Floss." The study day took place in a conference room at Bedworth's Civic Hall, and when I arrived, on a Saturday morning, a number of members had already assembled. I had the increasingly unfamiliar experience of being the youngest person in the room. "We're very well-behaved. We don't heckle," Anne Pavitt, a former auditor who had become hooked on Eliot after retirement, told me thoughtfully. "Well, there's one lady that shows up sometimes—she's a bit rude. But we're a fellowship. We're open to everyone."

It was an unseasonably hot day, and many of the ladies were in longish floral skirts, as if they were trying out to be cast as villagers in a dramatization of "Adam Bede." That book, Eliot's first full-length novel, was published in 1859, and in it she expresses a conviction that informed all her fiction: "The way in which I have come to the conclusion that human nature is loveable—the way I have learned something of its deep pathos, its sublime mysteries—has been by living a great deal among people more or less commonplace and vulgar." It was hard not to stare at a notable exception to this maxim: a tall woman, no longer young but still striking, who had upswept blond hair and wore teetering heels and a gash of red lipstick. She turned out to be Brenda McKay, the author of a book with the daunting title "George Eliot and Victorian Attitudes to Racial Diversity, Colonialism, Darwinism, Class, Gender, and Jewish Culture and Prophecy." She was a veteran of many literary gatherings. "There's the Dickens Society, the Trollope Society," she said. "James Joyce, of course. They're all kind of hippie types, with long beards. They seem like heavy drinkers, pot smokers." She was shortly going to a conference that was being held by the members of the Brontë Society. "They have very contentious meetings," she said, with some satisfaction. "There are always fists flying."

The first speaker, Marilyn Orr, a professor at Laurentian University, in Canada, argued that "The Mill on the Floss" marked Marian Evans's self-severing from the landscape of her youth: Maggie Tulliver has to die so that George Eliot might live. Next, Melissa Raines, who teaches at Liverpool University, gave a paper in which she examined the emotional valence of Eliot's punctuation and pointed out that Maggie's speech tends to devolve

into dashes when she is most susceptible to the influence of Stephen Guest, her seducer, but maintains the discipline of periods, colons, and semicolons when her better nature is dominant. Raines was a proofreader before she became an academic.

The audience members, many of whom turned out to be teachers or professors who had been immersed in Eliot's work for decades, listened intently, and questioned the speakers with English deference. "I wonder how this fits in with George Eliot's view of David Strauss?" one proposed, referring to the German theologian. "Could I ask about martyrdom?" offered another. The questions seemed designed to prompt fruitful discussion, not simply to demonstrate the inquirer's own erudition, and I felt as if I were back in my schoolteacher's parlor, learning how to talk about books and how to love talking about them

George Eliot's own parlor—at the Priory, the London home that she shared with Lewes for fifteen years—is re-created at the Nuneaton museum. It has wainscoting, dark-green wallpaper, and a table draped in lace, set with an oil lamp and a tea cake. Life-size models represent Eliot, in a silk-and-jet gown with a notepad in her hand; George Henry Lewes, standing by red curtains and holding a cup of tea; and John Cross, the couple's business manager, sitting in an armchair and looking stricken. Eliot's relationship with Cross was the subject of a talk by Brenda Maddox, Eliot's most recent biographer, and the third speaker of the day. Maddox focussed on Eliot's surprising late marriage, after the death of Lewes, to Cross, who was twenty years her junior and had been known fondly in the Eliot-Lewes household as "Nephew." The marriage was brief—Eliot died within a few months—but it was marked by one indelible incident: while the newlyweds were on their honeymoon in Venice, Cross threw himself from their hotel room into the Grand Canal. The reasons for the leap are unknown, though Maddox conjectures that Cross was unable or unwilling to perform his nuptial duties. (He was rescued, unharmed, by a gondolier.)

Cross, Eliot's first biographer, has been given scant respect by subsequent scholars, not least because he destroyed many of her documents, deeming them too personal. But his proposal granted Eliot the status she had been denied for the previous quarter century: that of a married woman. Even her long-estranged brother Isaac, who had disapproved of her alliance with Lewes, wrote with his congratulations. Barbara Bodichon, an early feminist and Eliot's close friend, seems to have understood the odd couple's motivations, writing warmly to the author of her approval: "Tell Johnny Cross I should have done exactly what he has done if you would have let me and I had been a man."

I was the final speaker, and my subject was a quotation attributed to George Eliot that I had recently been coming across: "It is never too late to be what you might have been." The first time I saw the phrase was on a refrigerator magnet, where it was set in sans-serif type on an aquamarine starburst background—design choices that seemed evocative more of the New Age than of the Victorian age. After hunting around, I discovered the quotation in other contexts. Marianne Williamson, the best-selling author of spiritual books, included it in "The Gift of Change: Spiritual Guidance for a Radically New Life." Tom Peters, the best-selling author of "In Search of Excellence," cited it on his Web site. It appeared on many personal blogs, and seemed particularly popular among middle-aged women. One author, BJ Gallagher, had even taken the quote as a book title. "You only go around once in this life, so why not live a life you love?" Gallagher wrote. "You were put on this earth to be the best YOU that you can be. If you don't do it, nobody else can."

It was an appealing notion: who doesn't want to believe that there's still time to do what hasn't yet been accomplished? (Certainly not the author of one blog I found, titled "Older than George Eliot": "I'm older now than she was when she became a published writer, so I'd better start typing and stop dreaming if I ever want to make it.") But the sentence didn't sound to me like anything George Eliot would say—at least, not *my* George Eliot, whose finest moments were often compassionate depictions of characters not quite coming up to the mark. It did not sound like the Eliot who had written of her most subtly drawn heroine, "Dorothea herself had no dreams of being praised above other women, feeling that there was always something better which she might

have done, if she had only been better and known better”; or the Eliot who, in creating Casaubon, had avoided the easy path of ridicule, and instead had shown a frail creature tortured by the knowledge of his own insufficiencies. Eliot had no faith in a limitless capacity for self-reinvention. Once, when she was asked which real-life person had been the inspiration for Casaubon—a man whose “soul was sensitive without being enthusiastic; it was too languid to thrill out of self-consciousness into passionate delight; it went on fluttering in the swampy ground where it was hatched, thinking of its wings and never flying”—she tapped her own breast.

George Eliot is an author whom dilatory writers can point to with some optimism: she didn’t start writing fiction until she was thirty-six, and then only at the encouragement of Lewes, who suspected that she might have a talent for “concrete description,” as she wrote later in an essay titled “How I Came to Write Fiction.” When Eliot met Lewes, she was already the translator of Strauss’s “Life of Jesus,” and a brilliant, if underappreciated, editor and critic at the *Westminster Review*. There, in 1856, she produced an acid essay about the weaknesses of current popular fiction, titled “Silly Novels by Lady Novelists.” She mocked the typical heroine of such books: “Her eyes and her wit are both dazzling; her nose and her morals are alike free from any tendency to irregularity.” The next year, Eliot started creating heroines of her own; an early one, Janet Dempster—the abused, alcoholic wife at the center of “Janet’s Repentance”—was so irregular that her publisher, John Blackwood, at first declined the story.

Eliot’s imaginative life blossomed with the arrival of domestic and conjugal happiness. At the end of 1857, when she was thirty-eight, she wrote, “My life has deepened unspeakably during the last year; I feel a greater capacity for moral and intellectual enjoyment; a more acute sense of my deficiencies in the past; a more solemn desire to be faithful to coming duties than I remember at any former period of my life. And my happiness has deepened too; the blessedness of a perfect love and union grows daily.” She added, “Few women, I fear, have had such reason as I have to think the long sad years of youth were worth living for the sake of middle age.” But “Middlemarch” is not about blooming late, or unexpectedly coming into one’s own after the unproductive flush of youth. “Middlemarch” suggests that it is *always* too late to be what you might have been—but it also shows that, virtually without exception, the unrealized life is worth living. The book that Virginia Woolf characterized as “one of the few English novels written for grown-up people” is also a book about how to *be* a grownup person—about how to bear one’s share of sorrow, failure, and loss, as well as to enjoy moments of hard-won happiness.

Eliot’s contemporary admirers spoke approvingly of her moral and intellectual authority. Lord Acton, the historian, wrote, a few days after her death, “In problems of life and thought, which baffled Shakespeare disgracefully, her touch was unfailing.” Such an elevation in regard was, predictably, followed by a falling off: in 1922, the critic Edmund Gosse wrote dismissively of Eliot’s “ponderous moral aphorisms and her didactic ethical influence.” (He also disparaged her late start in fiction, when she was already a “storm-trying matron of thirty-seven.”) But in her lifetime her moral aperçus were held in such high regard that they were anthologized independently of the stories in which they were originally embedded. In 1871, a young admirer named Alexander Main published a collection titled “Wise, Witty, and Tender Sayings in Prose and Verse Selected from the Works of George Eliot.” Seven years later, Main produced another collection, “The George Eliot Birthday Book,” which provides a quotation for every day of the year. Eliot gave her blessing to both books, though she evidently saw the limitations of the enterprise: she referred to birthday books as “the vulgarest thing in the book stalls” in the same letter to her publisher in which she granted Main the authority to compile one.

Main might have been expected to include an insight as succinct as “It is never too late to be what you might have been,” but the quotation does not appear in either book, or in a later anthology, “A Moment Each Day with George Eliot,” which was edited in 1902 by Ella Adams Moore, a lecturer at the extension school at the University of Chicago. (For Eliot’s birthday, November 22nd, Moore chose a line from “The Mill on the Floss”: “If you want to slip into a round hole, you must make a ball of yourself.”) The “never too late” quotation was not merely overlooked by Main, I discovered on rereading her novels; it is nowhere to be found in Eliot’s

fiction. Nor is it a paraphrase of a sentiment that registers in her work. In “Middlemarch,” when the newly wed (and newly disappointed) Dorothea defends Casaubon’s sterile intellectual efforts by declaring, “Failure after long perseverance is much grander than never to have a striving good enough to be called a failure,” she is expressing a notion that is at the center of much of Eliot’s work: that individuals must make their best efforts toward a worthy end, but it is the effort toward a goal, rather than the achievement of it, that makes us who we are.

Scholars haven’t turned up the quotation, either. Rosemary Ashton, a professor at University College, London, who is the author of a substantial biography of Eliot, told me, “It doesn’t sound like George Eliot to me—too simplistically phrased and too pat, and too brief!” Rosemarie Bodenheimer, the author of “The Real Life of Mary Ann Evans: George Eliot, Her Letters and Fiction,” who teaches at Boston College, was ninety-nine per cent sure that George Eliot never uttered the phrase. Bodenheimer said, “It is the opposite of what she thought: in all her novels it’s clear that certain choices will determine the course of a character’s career, as well as his or her emotional and moral capacities in the future.” William Baker, of Northern Illinois University, who edits the journal *George Eliot–George Henry Lewes Studies*, told me he believed that the quotation had been misattributed to Eliot by a greeting-card company, and had subsequently been disseminated into popular culture.

BJ Gallagher, the author who took the quote as the title of her self-help book, lives in Los Angeles. She admitted that she had never really read George Eliot, though in high school she had made it through “Silas Marner”—a fable in which a miserly, reclusive weaver is robbed of the gold he has been hoarding, and is then redeemed by his adoption of a golden-haired orphan. Gallagher had found the book “not very cheery.” She admired what she knew of Eliot’s biography, though. “What I like about her is that reinventing herself—wanting to be taken seriously, so she disguised herself as a man,” she said. (Eliot’s disguise was restricted to her nom de plume, and she discarded her anonymity within two years, after a nonentity named Joseph Liggins let it be thought that *he* had written Eliot’s debut story collection.) Gallagher wasn’t sure where she’d first found the quote—on a refrigerator magnet, quite possibly—but it offered solace as her sixtieth birthday loomed.

“I was putting on my makeup one day, and I was going, ‘Oh, it’s too late, sweetheart, you are going to be sixty next year and you are still single after all these years, and you are still overweight and you are still not rich,’ ” she told me. “I was depressed for a few days, and then I remembered the quote.” The possibility that George Eliot hadn’t actually said the words did not diminish their resonance. “We tend to like wisdom when it comes from famous people,” Gallagher said. “But even if it was just George Eliot’s next-door neighbor, who was a seamstress, it’s still valid.”

In her journals, which were not published in their entirety until twelve years ago, Eliot writes with anguish about her limited accomplishment, and a sense of too often falling short of her capacities. “Horrible scepticism about all things—paralyzing my mind,” she wrote in 1864. “Shall I ever be good for anything again?—ever do anything again?” In 1868, the year before she embarked upon “Middlemarch,” she wrote, “I am not yet engaged in any work that makes a higher life for me—a life that is young and grows, though in my other life I am getting old.” In response to the enthusiastic reception of the first volume of “Middlemarch,” Eliot wrote, “Hardly anything could have happened to me which I could regard as a greater blessing than this growth of my spiritual existence when my bodily existence is decaying. The merely egoistic satisfactions of fame are easily nullified by toothache, and *that* has made my chief consciousness for the last week.”

For all the satisfaction that her success provided her, she was periodically haunted by the question of whether it was too late to be all that she might have been. “As the years advance there is a new rational ground for the expectation that my life may become less fruitful,” she wrote on December 31, 1877. The previous year, she had published “Daniel Deronda,” her final novel, in which she portrays the new international social scene—prefiguring the work that Henry James went on to produce—and gives the first serious rendering in

fiction of European Jewry. (The novel also depicts with flawless psychological comprehension one of the most awful marriages in literature, that of Gwendolen Harleth and Henleigh Grandcourt: “One belief which had accompanied her through her unmarried life as a self-cajoling superstition, encouraged by the subordination of every one about her—the belief in her own power of dominating—was utterly gone. Already, in seven short weeks, which seemed half her life, her husband had gained a mastery which she could no more resist than she could have resisted the benumbing effect from the touch of a torpedo.”) In her plaintive journal entry, Eliot went on, “The difficulty is, to decide how far resolution should set in the direction of activity rather than in the acceptance of a more negative state.” She had “many conceptions of works to be carried out,” she wrote, “but confidence in my own fitness to complete them worthily is all the more wanting because it is reasonable to argue that I must have already done my best.”

Nevertheless, the compulsion to work, and the awareness of the gratification to be derived by working well, remained irresistible. “My mind is embarrassed by the number and wide variety of subjects that attract me, and the enlarging vista that each brings with it,” she wrote. To think of the mind of George Eliot embarrassed by its own range is almost unbearably poignant, in its uneasy balance of aspiration and diffidence. By the time she wrote those words, Eliot had become better than anyone at what she did; but she could not have done so any earlier, or any more easily. It took all that she had been to make her all that she was.

I half hoped that someone at the study day would provide me with the missing citation for the quotation, but nobody seemed to know where it came from. (“It might be in ‘Romola,’ ” Brenda McKay suggested. It isn’t.) But while I was in Nuneaton I received an e-mail from Leah Price, a professor at Harvard, who has written about the anthologizing of Eliot during her lifetime—the sifting of “Eliot’s reusable wisdom from her ephemeral plots.” If anyone had come across the quotation, it might be Price.

“I’ve always assumed it was apocryphal,” she wrote. “It shows up nowhere in full text searches of G.E.’s work. What’s strange is not that the attribution is so persistent but that it starts very early.” She sent me a link to an article in a New York periodical called *The Literary News*, published in 1881, less than a year after George Eliot’s death. There, the quotation—“It is never too late to be what you might have been”—is one of seventy-one winning entries in a readers’ competition to nominate “Gems from George Eliot.” The terms of the competition were outlined in an issue of the journal from a couple of months earlier: readers were asked to “quote the most striking passage known to you from George Eliot’s writings: not to exceed thirty words.” The quotation is No. 23 on the list, between a line from “Middlemarch” (“A woman’s choice usually means taking the only man she can get”) and one from “Adam Bede” (“I’m not denyin’ the women are foolish: God Almighty made ’em to match the men”). But there was no reference to the source. Had the competition entrant come across the quotation in a review? Misremembered it? Made it up? Or found it somewhere that I had yet to discover? Could George Eliot really have said it? I had no way of proving otherwise. Like Lydgate, I had aspired to make a link in the chain of discovery, and had failed.

John Burton and his wife, Lynda, had invited me to join them that evening at the sixtieth-birthday party of a neighbor of theirs in Barnacle, a village outside Nuneaton. It would offer a glimpse into local life, Burton suggested. I agreed to go, although, having grown up in provincial England, I thought I knew what to expect. Lynda was a comfortable-looking, gray-haired woman of Burton’s age. I assumed that they’d been together for decades; but as she drove me from Griff House to the village she told me that they’d been married for only four years.

“We met through local history,” she said, with unexpected sauciness. “John founded the Bedworth Society, and I did a tour of the almshouse. Within three weeks, I was on the committee.” She paused as if finished, and I asked how that had turned into marriage. “Both our marriages split up,” she went on. “And then for a while it was just commiserating.” The rest of the story hung in the air, unspoken and inevitable, and I imagined late love blooming in Bedworth over weak coffee and crumpled agendas. I also thought of something that Dorothea tells

Rosamond toward the end of “Middlemarch,” as she struggles toward her own comprehension of the complexity of intimate human relations: “Marriage is so unlike everything else. There is something even awful in the nearness it brings.” It was a sentence that had puzzled me on my first reading, when being married seemed far off; twenty-five years later, I was beginning to understand it.

Barnacle, a village of ninety-six houses, was tucked away amid patchwork fields. A placard on the roadside offered leeks and duck eggs for sale. (“You can get leeks and duck eggs, and not much else, in Barnacle,” Lynda observed.) It was a mild evening, and the twilight air was soft when we arrived at the village hall, where the party was taking place. By the time we got there, half the village had shown up. There were older men wearing stiff tuxedos, and teen-agers looking like bridesmaids, with complicated hair and lots of makeup. A band was energetically playing pop classics, fronted by a singer who had been a member of a sixties-era group that even I was mercifully too young to recall.

Not far from Barnacle lies the village of Bulkington, which George Eliot drew upon for her depiction of Raveloe, in “Silas Marner.” By the time she wrote the novel, in 1861, she had exiled herself forever from the Midlands: once she had started her romance with Lewes, she was too controversial to go home. In “Silas Marner,” Eliot describes an annual village dance, and her nostalgia is evident: “Already Mr. Macey and a few other privileged villagers who were allowed to be spectators on these great occasions, were seated on benches placed for them near the door; and great was the admiration and satisfaction in that quarter when the couples had formed themselves for the dance, and the Squire led off with Mrs. Crackenthorp, joining hands with the Rector and Mrs. Osgood. That was as it should be—that was what everybody had been used to—and the charter of Raveloe seemed to be renewed by the ceremony.”

The dance in Barnacle seemed not so distant from the world that George Eliot honored and left behind, and something also seemed renewed there. The hostess was a tanned, handsome woman in a bright-yellow dress, whose neighbors—the contemporary equivalents of the Squire and Mrs. Crackenthorp—cheered when she thanked them all for coming. As the sky darkened outside, I sat and watched as, one by one, villagers young and old took to the floor to dance together, in merry celebration of the unremarkable. ♦