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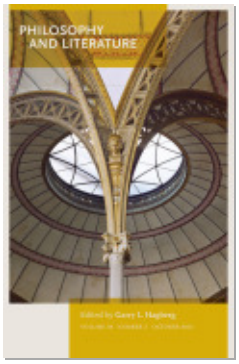

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MARTHA NUSSBAUM AND THE MORAL LIFE OF *MIDDLEMARCH*

> We are all of us born in moral stupidity,
> taking the world as an udder to feed our supreme selves.
> George Eliot, *Middlemarch*

I

As is well known to readers of this journal, Martha Nussbaum emphasizes in her essays on fiction as moral philosophy that the philosophical significance of novels is found, not in whatever theories or principles they might overtly discuss or dramatize, but in their literary form and their prose style. In particular, she finds in the late novels of Henry James an alternative to the reductive, pseudoscientific prose of contemporary analytic philosophy, which she argues inhibits the range of possible answers to the basic ethical question "How should one live?"[1] James's prose shows "attention to particulars, a respect for the emotions, and a tentative and non-dogmatic attitude to the bewildering multiplicities of life" (*LK,* p. 27), and thus it exemplifies the Aristotelian ethical conception she advocates.

In this essay I want to disentangle Nussbaum's theory of the ethical significance of fictional form—which I endorse—from her preoccupation

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with James—which I do not. Far from being, as she believes, egalitarian, humane, and morally responsible, the Jamesian consciousness Nussbaum would have us emulate is elitist, exclusionary, and morally inert; further, in its commitment to indeterminacy, mystery, and obscurity, the Jamesian model is in fact profoundly *anti*-philosophical.[2] I propose instead George Eliot's *Middlemarch* as exemplary of fiction's potential contribution to "the job of moral philosophy" (*LK,* p. 138). Nussbaum may admire the subtlety and density of *The Golden Bowl*, but I will argue that in its narrative strategies and its integration of novelistic perception and philosophic reflection, *Middlemarch* proves a better ethical guide and a better example of literature that is also philosophy.

In making this argument, I will rely on the terms set by Nussbaum herself for the ethical evaluation of fiction. Unlike other philosophers who invoke literature only as a "rich source of examples awaiting illumination by philosophy," Nussbaum insists that analysis of a text's literary properties is the essential methodology of ethical criticism.[3] Every aspect of form and style "expresses a sense of life and of value, a sense of what matters and what does not" (*LK,* p.5). We discover this "sense of life" through close reading; "our *engaged experience line by line*," as Wayne Booth says, reveals the character of the implied author, the would-be friend urging on us a particular "pattern of desires."[4]

On Nussbaum's reading, James's prose is ethically exemplary because it is "the prose of Aristotelian perception":

> It depicts in its cadences the moral effort of straining to see correctly and to come up with the appropriate picture or description; its tensions, obliquities, and circumnavigations express the sheer difficulty of finding the right description or picture for what is there before one. If, as James says, to "put" is to "do," showing this is showing moral activity of a valuable kind. (*LK,* p. 88)

But Nussbaum ends up at James because her alternative moral theory begins there, not because moral philosophy that is literary inevitably sounds like James or supports Aristotle.[5] As Nussbaum's gestures towards a more general theory of the role of "the novel" in philosophy indicate, novels may share generic features which complement or correct conventional philosophical discourse, but investigating other novels in this way may also lead us to other, non-Aristotelian, non-Jamesian ethical conceptions. My commentary on *Middlemarch* presents one such alternative. First, however, I will consider our "engaged experience" of *The*

Golden Bowl, a key example for Nussbaum, to show more particularly why we ought to be cautious about accepting James's late style as exemplary for moral philosophy, despite Nussbaum's passionate advocacy. What kind of friend do we meet there, in that world full of indeterminacy, obliquity, and circumnavigation? What kind of guidance in practical reasoning do we get from this implied author—what "ought" emerges from the Jamesian "is"?

Perhaps because, as Nussbaum admits, her work on fiction as moral philosophy emerged "out of a longstanding love" for *The Golden Bowl* (*LK,* p. 146), she fails to scrutinize the novel as she suggests the ethical critic ought to: her account of the novel is at best naïve and at worst misleading about moral problems arising from the very elements of fiction on which she would have us found our philosophical interpretation. In the first place, Nussbaum's advocacy of James's narrator as ethically exemplary rests to a large extent on her belief that he has renounced the special privileges stereotypically associated with his Victorian predecessors in realist fiction—omniscience and omnipotence.[6] In support of this belief, she cites James himself: "It's not that the muffled majesty of authorship doesn't here *ostensibly* reign," he writes in the preface to *The Golden Bowl*, "but I catch myself again shaking it off and disavowing the pretence of it while I get down into the arena and do my best to live and breathe and rub shoulders and converse with the persons engaged in the struggle."[7] Through his narrative self-effacement, James rejects "a tradition in the English novel for having created, in the authorial voice, a persona who is not humanly finite and who therefore does not show us a way to the understanding of our own finitude" (*LK,* p. 144). This democratic attitude is, Nussbaum argues, crucial to the effort to live a moral life with the help of fiction, for which we need "texts we can read together and talk about as friends, texts that are available to all of us" (*LK,* p. 48).

The idea that fiction does its best ethical work when a "community is formed by authors and readers" (*LK,* p. 48) seems unobjectionable; as Nussbaum says, fiction with such a bonding effect stresses that "living together is the object of our ethical interest" (*LK,* p. 48). But does *The Golden Bowl* really epitomize this egalitarian approach? And can we really take James's word for it that his authorial majesty is "disavowed" in what one critic calls "the most unsparingly extreme of James's major fictions"?[8] Nussbaum's chief evidence is "the ubiquity of 'we' and the rarity of 'I' in James's later novels" (*LK,* p. 48), but I suspect that few readers are deceived by the plural pronoun into believing themselves

equals with James's narrator, not only because of what Nussbaum herself admits is the "sheer difficulty" of the style (*LK,* p. 144), which I discuss more fully below, but because the artifice of *The Golden Bowl* is so perfected that the overwhelming impression in the novel is of total authorial control. James's narrator is rarely intrusive in the manner of Fielding's, Thackeray's, or George Eliot's, but his power is evident in every aspect of the book, from the careful management of point of view to the elegant balance between its several parts. Mark Krupnick argues compellingly that James's attempt to free the novel from the "intrusiveness of the omniscient narrator" actually "reinstat[ed] authorial dominance to a greater degree than ever."[9] Only the overt signs of control are truly "disavowed."

This submerged but total narrative control presents at least two problems for the Nussbaum-style ethical critic. In the first place, precisely because his operations are covert, this implied author presents a façade of objectivity in contrast to the persistent metacommentaries on realism introduced by both the presence and the observations of intrusive narrators. Secondly, while James's use of limited points of view is technically impressive, the absence of alternatives, including the alternative perspective provided by overtly mediating narration, makes it nearly impossible for us to exercise our own judgment. In a way, James's effacement of authorial responsibility allows him to avoid moral responsibility: his commitment to subjectivity as an aesthetic perfection precludes the activity of negotiation crucial to ethical decision-making.

James's refusal to move outside the complexities of the individual consciousness—with all of its confusions, uncertainties, errors, and biases—towards moral prescription becomes, for Nussbaum, itself a moral prescription: "See clearly and with high intelligence. Respond with the vibrant sympathy of a vividly active imagination. If there are conflicts, face them squarely and with keen perception. . . . Never for a moment close your eyes or dull your feelings" (*LK,* pp. 134–35). But surely, in real life as well as in fiction, the risk of valuing perception (even the perception of "high intelligence") above the self-assertion required of moralizing is inertia or paralysis. By refusing to offer his readers either his own judgment or sufficient information to exercise theirs, James presents *The Golden Bowl* as an aesthetic object impervious to or isolated from the actual demands and entanglements of life: all we can really do is admire its artistry. And yet, as Richard Lansdown points out, the "more deeply immersed we are in the messy impure world of human particularity . . . the more urgently we wish . . . to have the

thing come to some sort of 'commensurable' conclusion."[10] Thus for a century readers have debated *The Golden Bowl* in just the moralizing terms that the novel itself, through its form, attempts to preclude: Who is right? Who is good? Trapped as we are within what Krupnick nicely describes as a "bejewelled but airless consciousness," we ought to expect no clear answers, any more than we can ever hope to know what "really happens" in that most elusive—and thus morally paralyzing—fiction *The Turn of the Screw*.[11]

Adopting James as the model for the moral philosopher, then, precludes judgment of just the sort that ethics actually requires: James's "is" may be every bit as rich in perception and insight as Nussbaum believes, but his "ought" is either absent or inaccessible. Robert Reilla notes that the true Jamesian "does not care that James's people have no bodies, or at most bodies like gold to airy thinness beat,"[12] but I think the moral philosopher and the ethical critic must care, must seek a fiction that values and aids action as much as perception. For "without decision," as Geoffrey Harpham points out, "ethics would be condemned to dithering."[13] We may learn much about moral problems from reading *The Golden Bowl*, but with James as our guide we will advance at best part way towards the goal Nussbaum accepts as the goal of moral philosophy.

A further obstacle to accepting *The Golden Bowl* as paradigmatic for these purposes is the novel's prose. Paul Armstrong comments of James's late style generally that it "may disorient the reader so persistently that it may interfere with the pleasure and instruction its hermeneutic challenge offers,"[14] and critic after critic places *The Golden Bowl* at the top of even the Jamesian hierarchy of difficulty, describing its prose as "difficult," "baroque," "obscure and elliptical," "ambiguous," "daunting," and "impenetrable."[15] Robert Pippin suggests that "James piles on layer after layer of possible meaning and ambiguity and uncertainty, as if just to see how far he could go."[16]

Generally, such comments are not intended as criticisms; indeed, they usually introduce highly laudatory, almost eulogistic, accounts of James's achievements that support Reilla's view that to the Jamesian "other fiction seems fumbling and accidental, or easy and obvious, or simply gross."[17] Clearly Nussbaum shares something of this acolyte's attitude—and perhaps it is justified, though others have argued that literary history and criticism have too readily accepted and applied Jamesian standards to fiction with other priorities.[18] But what are the ethical implications of a style so resistant to understanding? How is it compatible with Nussbaum's claim for *The Golden Bowl* as a work in which the implied author and the

reader stand together as friends, understanding our own human limitations? As Nussbaum herself says, in reading *The Golden Bowl*, "we are struck at every point by the incompleteness and inadequacy of our own attention" (*LK,* p. 144) compared to the narrator's apparently infinite capacity for discernment. The extraordinary effort required just to follow his sentences may be "an activity of exploration and unraveling that uses abilities . . . rarely tapped by philosophical texts" (*LK,* p. 143), but the non-Jamesian might suspect that the standard is being set artificially high or even that the underlying message of such elaborate obscurity is, not that "living together is the object of our ethical interest" (*LK,* p. 48), but that the author is our moral and intellectual superior.

Here some attention to James's literary-historical context proves illuminating. James's criticisms of George Eliot (accepted without question by Nussbaum) are part of his conscious attempt to define the novel in his own post-Victorian terms, terms which we now recognize as the terms of high modernism.[19] One of the defining commitments of modernism was to establishing a separate arena for difficult art which would be inaccessible except to the educated few. Such art was not expected to give pleasure—or the pleasure was to come from what Armstrong calls "hermeneutic challenge," not from emotional involvement or reactions of the sort that, say, Dickens, would have provoked.[20] As Leonard Diepeveen points out, modernism's standards continue "to govern both current literary criticism and attempts to expand the canon."[21] But should they govern our approach to ethics? Such privileging of the knowing few over the feeling many suggests a very different ethos than the one Nussbaum claims governs *The Golden Bowl*, but surely one that corresponds more directly to most readers' experience of the novel, not as an egalitarian exercise in community building but as something that leaves them "completely baffled and quite irritated."[22]

The difficulty of the prose style has the further effect of calling attention to the novel as an artifact that is the product of a particular consciousness. Krupnick notes the "towering subjectivity" of *The Golden Bowl* as typical of modernist fiction generally, turning art into its own primary subject.[23] This inward movement—towards subjectivity, psychology, or consciousness and away from society and history—is what Raymond Williams calls the "parting of the ways" between Victorianism and Modernism, and of course James, like the other writers of that transitional period, was both reflecting a new sense of the nature of experience and reacting more personally to the literary competition of his greatest predecessors.[24] As Pippin says, "it is understandable that

James would again attract the attention of our skeptical age."[25] But what I am suggesting we should do, which Nussbaum does *not* do, is ask ourselves if what is most compatible with our skepticism is necessarily most desirable for our moral philosophy. The Jamesian retreat from didacticism into uncertainty is one way of responding to the complexities of modern life, but it is not the only one. As Wayne Booth says, another "might well be to build works of art that themselves help to mold a new consensus."[26] The exclusionary difficulty of James's prose, the covert control exercised by his knowing narrator, and the evasion of moralising: none of these contribute to a "new consensus" except, perhaps, on high aesthetic grounds that preclude the essential work of decision-making and thus represent an ethos ultimately unsuited to the project of moral philosophy. In George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, however, I believe we find a narrator, a form, and an ethos well-suited to just this project.[27]

II

Recognizing, like Nussbaum, the difficulty of determining the "sense of life" present in a long and complex novel without offering the whole text as my example, I offer first the entire Prelude, which introduces the novel's readers not only to the themes of the novel but to the novel's narrator, and so can reasonably be taken as exemplary.

> Who that cares much to know the history of man, and how the mysterious mixture behaves under the varying experiments of Time, has not dwelt, at least briefly, on the life of Saint Theresa, has not smiled with some gentleness at the thought of the little girl walking forth one morning hand-in-hand with her still smaller brother, to go and seek martyrdom in the country of the Moors? Out they toddled, from rugged Avila, wide-eyed and helpless-looking as two fawns, but with human hearts, already beating to a national idea; until domestic reality met them in the shape of uncles, and turned them back from their great resolve. That child-pilgrimage was a fit beginning. Theresa's passionate, ideal nature demanded an epic life: what were many-volumed romances of chivalry and the social conquests of a brilliant girl to her? Her flame quickly burned up that light fuel; and, fed from within, soared after some illimitable satisfaction, some object which would never justify weariness, which would reconcile self-despair with the rapturous consciousness of life beyond self. She found her epos in the reform of a religious order.
>
> That Spanish woman who lived three hundred years ago, was certainly

> not the last of her kind. Many Theresas have been born who found for themselves no epic life wherein there was a constant unfolding of far-resonant action; perhaps only a life of mistakes, the offspring of a certain spiritual grandeur mismatched with the meanness of opportunity; perhaps a tragic failure which found no sacred poet and sank unwept into oblivion. With dim lights and tangled circumstance they tried to shape their thought and deed in noble agreement; but after all, to common eyes their struggles seemed mere inconsistency and formlessness; for these later-born Theresas were helped by no coherent social faith and order which could perform the function of knowledge for the ardently willing soul. 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.
>
> Some have felt that these blundering lives are due to the inconvenient indefiniteness with which the Supreme Power has fashioned the natures of women: if there were one level of feminine incompetence as strict as the ability to count three and no more, the social lot of women might be treated with scientific certitude. Meanwhile the indefiniteness remains, and the limits of variation are really much wider than anyone would imagine from the sameness of women's coiffure and the favourite love-stories in prose and verse. Here and there a cygnet is reared uneasily among the ducklings in the brown pond, and never finds the living stream in fellowship with its own oary-footed kind. Here and there is born a Saint Theresa, foundress of nothing, whose loving heartbeats and sobs after an unattained goodness tremble off and are dispersed among hindrances, instead of centering in some long-recognizable deed.[28]

Anyone who has also been reading *The Golden Bowl* will be struck by the clarity, the precision, the quiet confidence of this erudite narrator. Confronting a complex social and historical world, she draws on an extensive fund of knowledge to interpret Saint Theresa's life and explain its relevance to a modern context, offering analysis that illuminates without simplifying.[29] This speaker does not have "common eyes": she sees what others do not and avoids the mistakes made by "some" others.

The special wisdom and the resultant privileged perspective of this narrator have led many, including James (and, following him, Nussbaum) to characterize her as "omniscient" and to reject her, accordingly, as a model for ethical practice. As I have already noted, Nussbaum praises James for casting off what he calls the "majesty of authorship" to join with "the persons engaged in the struggle" (*LK*, p. 144). Following James, Nussbaum identifies George Eliot as exemplifying this tradition and so relegates her to a footnote—indeed, as Catherine Gardner notes, Eliot

is "the only author excluded by name in *Love's Knowledge*" from "those suitable for moral inquiry."[30] In this section, I will argue that James and Nussbaum misjudge both Eliot's narrator and the moral value of her other narrative techniques. Together, these model a far more valuable form of ethical work than the "moral effort of straining to see correctly" that Nussbaum praises so highly in James (*LK,* p. 88) but which, as the previous section argued, leaves most readers bewildered and immobilized rather than enlightened or empowered. I will work towards these large claims by more detailed analysis of the "sense of life" found in the novel, beginning with the Prelude.

The novel's first lines already tell us a lot about "what is important and what is not" (*LK,* p. 7) in this fictional world—"the history of man." But is the opening question an invitation to equals to consider, together, one of the "varying experiments of Time"? Is it ironic, implying that even those who do care have not dwelt even briefly on the life of Saint Theresa? Or is it patronizing, indicating the distance in both care and knowledge between most of us and this speaker, who *has* dwelt on it? Until we know more about the speaker and the relationship she is cultivating with us, we cannot be sure. But the speaker seems kindly, expressing affectionate compassion as she describes the contrast between the children's toddling steps and their "rugged" environment, their "wide-eyed," innocent selves and the aspirations that lead them away from home. Though everyone from us to their uncles is better informed about martyrdom than they are, nothing in the treatment of them invites our criticism or even our mockery. Rather, the narrator's elevated language ("a national idea," "their great resolve," "child-pilgrimage") encourages us to admire their idealistic plan, and to lament the practical limits of "domestic reality." The commentary on Theresa's later life further highlights the value placed on idealism, again through the choice of words with strongly positive connotations, such as "soared," but also through the insistence that it was worthy of epic treatment.

Theresa's epos consists of finding a "rapturous consciousness of life beyond self," and as we read on we learn that this movement away from the narrowly egoistic is the essential narrative and moral movement of both the Prelude and the novel it introduces. The initial invitation to consider Theresa's life as part of an ongoing "history of man" already implies connections between individuals across divides of time and place. This emphasis on connections becomes explicit in the second paragraph as the narrator develops her crucial analogy between the medieval woman and "later-born Theresas" who found "no epic life" of their own. Fresh

from the admiring account of Saint Theresa's successful "reform of a religious order," we are moved to sympathy by the contrast now introduced: though sharing her desire for a life of "far-resonant action," these later aspirants to an epic life are defeated by "tangled circumstance." The historical analogy has prepared us to consider the fate of these "unwept" souls not just as personal losses but as part of the operation of complex historical conditions which even the narrator cannot reduce with certainty to single causes or results ("perhaps"). The intimate perspective we have been given on Saint Theresa's experience, though, means that even as we move to the more general phenomenon—from the singular to the plural—we cannot forget that each of the "many Theresas" who followed her lives out her own equally intense and personal version of the common story. In the third paragraph, we move to the individual again ("a cygnet," "a Saint Theresa"), but now we can no more consider the single life as unique—a lone, autonomous self, a character independent of history and without precedent or relationships—than we can consider any general concept of people or, to use the Prelude's own example, of women, without acknowledging the particularity of each case. A desire for "scientific certitude" which seeks to reduce "indefiniteness" to formulae misleads as surely as the egocentrism that ignores the constraints of "opportunity," culture, and history. As she explains the complex interplay between self and world, the narrator also models it for us by the movement of her narrative attention.

The movement of attention from one point of view to another is, of course, the fundamental structuring pattern of *Middlemarch*, and I offer further examples and discussion below. Before I leave the Prelude, however, I will make just two more observations about "the conception of what matters" it offers us. First, the whole point of the Prelude, on one level, is to help us "care" appropriately, first about Saint Theresa but then, and more importantly, about her successors: our emotions are engaged on behalf of people besides ourselves. More specifically, our attention is directed from the famous and successful to the unknown and unwept; this narrator sees and values, and wants us to see and value, what is usually overlooked. Finally, this narrator uses abundantly metaphorical language, and metaphors of course are the fundamental linguistic way of making connections, of demanding that we see relationships between superficially disparate or separate elements. Reading this prose is thus an exercise in perceiving such relationships, and the structure of the narrative overall formally reproduces this mental activity.

Entering the world of *Middlemarch* by way of its Prelude, then, we

find ourselves keeping company with a perceptive, highly educated, yet compassionate implied author who is tender, admiring of idealism, alert to resemblances, parallels, and relationships, and adept with language. She rejects universalizing precepts ("scientific certitude") but finds in metaphors and analogies routes to the more general significance of particular cases. If *The Golden Bowl* is "the prose of Aristotelian perception" (*LK,* p. 88), what kind of moral philosophy is enacted through *this* prose? Should we even try to label it, or should we respond, as Dorothea does to Will, "'Please not to call it by any name'" (*M,* p. 244)?[31] Before I proffer answers to these questions, let me consider two further examples, beginning with probably the novel's most famous passage, the opening to Chapter 27.

> "Let the high Muse chant loves Olympian:
> We are but mortals, and must sing of man."
>
> An eminent philosopher among my friends, who can dignify even your ugly furniture by lifting it into the serene light of science, has shown me this pregnant little fact. Your pier-glass or extensive surface of polished steel made to be rubbed by a housemaid, will be minutely and multitudinously scratched in all directions; but place now against it a lighted candle as a centre of illumination, and lo! the scratches will seem to arrange themselves in a fine series of concentric circles round that little sun. It is demonstrable that the scratches are going everywhere impartially, and it is only your candle which produces the flattering illusion of a concentric arrangement, its light falling with an exclusive optical selection. These things are a parable. The scratches are events, and the candle is the egoism of any person now absent—of Miss Vincy, for example. Rosamond had a Providence of her own who had kindly made her more charming than other girls, and who seemed to have arranged Fred's illness and Mr Wrench's mistake in order to bring her and Lydgate within effective proximity. (*M,* pp. 166–67)

The presence of an epigraph immediately emphasizes the artifice of the narrative: its careful design, its distance from naïve mimetic representation. Thus the epigraph alerts us to an issue Nussbaum also raises, that life "is never simply *presented* by a text; it is always *represented as* something" (*LK,* p. 5, original emphasis), and it tells us that this text attempts no deception; unlike *The Golden Bowl*, with its obscured artifice, *Middlemarch* insists that we consider it *as* representation. The first-person plural pronoun in the epigraph itself makes a further demand on us:

that we admit our kinship with the speaker, including our limitations as "mortals." Together, we are dissociated from Olympians, resigned to a humbler mode which nonetheless has its right dignity; the self-consciousness about this identity, however, induced by the overt artifice of the narrative, requires us to think about it and about our shared responsibilities as mortals, including the obligation to "sing of man," echoing the Prelude's emphasis on common lives.

The relationship of the epigraph to the first paragraph of the chapter proper is not immediately evident, forcing us, as readers, into mental activity as we contemplate its possible relevance. We are prompted to this effort by our assumption that the narrator has a reason for the juxtaposition, some insight we do not yet share. Despite this presumed superiority of the narrator, however, the inclusive "we" of the epigraph reassures us of our kinship with this speaker, who overtly rejects a position of divine or supernatural knowledge—of "majesty." In fact, the relationship established in this passage is a paradigmatically pedagogical one. Teaching is an activity that relies on two things: the greater wisdom and experience (in a specific field) of the instructor, which justifies her authority in the pedagogical context, and the receptivity and ability of the learner, which justifies the lesson. The relationship requires mutual respect and a certain reciprocal deference. The teacher in this case has gleaned a particular insight she proceeds to share with her readers. She does not claim any inherent authority but rather assumes the authority of science, an authority we too can obtain because we can perform the experiment ourselves: "place now against it a lighted candle," she instructs us. The speaker has already learned the lesson, "shown" by her friend the "eminent philosopher"; her wisdom is the fruit of experience and of her own willingness to learn from observation and from another's expertise—hardly the attitude of someone "who is not humanly finite" (*LK,* p. 144). This narrator's overt wish to activate the intelligence of her readers, and her efforts to involve them, emotionally but also intellectually, in ethical inquiry, stand in sharp contrast to the obfuscating narrative of *The Golden Bowl*, a narrative in which the use of the pronoun "we" (so appealingly democratic to Nussbaum) either masks a quite *un*democratic attitude or operates disingenuously as a substitute for "I"—as the so-called "royal 'we.'"

Eliot's narrator does have an idea of her own about the application of the "pregnant little fact" on the table, however. "These things are a parable," she tells us. As with the historical analogy of the Prelude, the metaphorical use she now makes of her scientific discovery insists on

resemblances between apparently disparate things, here optics and egoism. Her explicit point is that egoism causes us to mistake the complex multitudinousness of life for a concentric arrangement with ourselves at the center, a point brought home by the matching language with which she describes the scratches, which "seem to arrange themselves," and Rosamond's perception of Providence, which "seemed to have arranged" things to suit her desires. This parallel phrasing also brings out the irony of her suggestion that such faults of perception are committed only by those "now absent": she, and then we, made the same error when we observed the pier-glass, after all, so why should we think we are exempt from similar confusions in our own lives? Even as we are directed to consider Rosamond's self-centered worldview, we bring with us the knowledge of our own susceptibility to egoism.

Readers of *Middlemarch* will be well aware of how many passages in the novel insist on just this need to replace the "flattering illusion" of our own centrality with the realization that others have an "equivalent centre of self, whence the lights and shadows must always fall with a certain difference" (*M,* p. 135). My interest here is to point out how the narrative itself, in its form, adheres to this principle and thus becomes, as Nussbaum argues James's novels become, not just an account of but an example of the moral imperative—the ethical approach—it advocates. Catherine Gardner notes that most philosophical approaches to literature leave us wondering "why we would want to read [these theories] in a novel rather than a philosophical treatise," while discussions of Eliot and philosophy leave it "unclear why Eliot would choose to express her ideas in the form of a novel."[32] George Eliot's moral philosophy requires fictional form precisely because its basis is that movement from our own limited perspectives to the point of view of others and an awareness of relationships and connections across a wide range of individual experiences—the intellectual and imaginative movement that is the basis of sympathy. While *Middlemarch* often, through its characters and events, tells us the value of this movement, and dramatizes the need for it as well as its difficulties, costs, and rewards, the novel's greatest contribution as philosophical fiction is to move its readers in just this way.

Let me offer one more passage that demonstrates this effect, this time from chapter 42, just after Lydgate has discussed with Casaubon the possibility that his heart condition may be fatal.

> Lydgate, certain that his patient wished to be alone, soon left him; and the black figure with hands behind and head bent forward continued to

> pace the walk where the dark yew-trees gave him a mute companionship in melancholy, and the little shadows of bird or leaf that fleeted across the isles of sunlight, stole along in silence as in the presence of a sorrow. Here was a man who now for the first time found himself looking into the eyes of death—who was passing through one of those rare moments of experience when we feel the truth of a commonplace, which is as different from what we call knowing it, as the vision of waters upon the earth is different from the delirious vision of the water which cannot be had to cool the burning tongue. When the commonplace "We must all die" transforms itself suddenly into the acute consciousness "I must die—and soon," then death grapples us, and his fingers are cruel; afterwards, he may come to fold us in his arms as our mother did, and our last moment of dim earthly discerning may be like the first. To Mr Casaubon now, it was as if he suddenly found himself on the dark river-brink and heard the plash of the oncoming oar, not discerning the forms, but expecting the summons. (*M,* p. 264)

Once again the narrator guides us to the significance of this moment in a passage exemplary of the novel's formal and moral priorities. Because Casaubon is a basically unpleasant character, the narrator's major task here is to urge us beyond our dislike to sympathy. In other parts of the novel the narrator has instructed us to temper our judgment of Casaubon with compassion because he "had an intense consciousness within him, and was spiritually a-hungered like the rest of us" (*M,* p. 175). The appeal to our human fellowship remains the primary argumentative method here, but the careful shifting of our point of view also enacts such fellowship. We begin here as observers, watching from the outside as the "black figure" paces the shady walk and looks "into the eyes of death." But Casaubon's situation is also *our* situation, as the shift to the first-person plural reminds us: "we feel the truth of a commonplace." Our sympathetic identification with his plight is realized fully with the next shift, to the first-person singular: "I must die—and soon." This movement from the abstract (death) to the general (human mortality) to the personal (my death) is what Casaubon has been experiencing, and the movement of pronouns brings us to the same "cruel" confrontation with our own inevitable end. When we return to Casaubon ("To Mr Casaubon now"), we are no longer detached observers but sympathetic participants in his situation. We cannot forget his faults; even if we were inclined to suppress our knowledge to simplify our response to him, the narrator soon reminds us of the "low and mist-like" clingings of his "passionate longings" (*M,* p. 264). But our judgment and our sympathy

must go together. We have an obligation to love this "poor man" (*M*, p. 264) because we understand him.

This movement from observation to understanding and then to sympathy recurs throughout the novel on both the micro- and the macro-level. Consider a sentence from which I have already quoted: "In spite of the blinking eyes and white moles objectionable to Celia, and the want of muscular curve which was morally painful to Sir James, Mr Casaubon had an intense consciousness within him, and was spiritually a-hungered like the rest of us"—observation, insight, kinship. This sentence comes just after one of the novel's most famous shifts in perspective, the opening to Chapter 29: "One morning, some weeks after her arrival at Lowick, Dorothea—but why always Dorothea? Was her point of view the only possible one with regard to this marriage?" (*M*, p. 175). Over and over, *Middlemarch* challenges the assumption that a single point of view suffices for understanding. Just as individual characters learn by rethinking what they have seen or done, the novel and its implied author enact the moral obligation to see things from a different angle and disrupt our own desire—egotistical or readerly—to think, as Harpham puts it, "only through the 'I.'"[33] And, as in the example from Chapter 29 just quoted, the overt artifice, the intrusiveness, of this method induces self-consciousness about it and so reflection on its implications: philosophical deliberation is both modeled and prompted by these novelistic techniques. Not only does Eliot's implied author demonstrate an ethos much more congenial to community as well as individual flourishing than James's, but she also practices a form of fiction that works with her readers towards an answer to the question, not "How should *one* live?" but "How should *we* live?" Thus she seems to me a friend worth having and *Middlemarch* a novel that makes a valuable contribution to moral philosophy.

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1. *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), hereafter abbreviated *LK*. In later work Nussbaum turns to other writers including Dickens, Proust, and Emily Brontë, but her assumptions about James remain foundational to her theory.

2. As Catherine Gardner aptly describes it, the traditional philosophical approach or "philosophical model" is "the search for cogent and consistent arguments, the evaluation of the correctness of conclusions, and the construction of a systematic theory from these conclusions and arguments." *Moral Philosophy and the Novels of George Eliot.* Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation (Philosophy), University of Virginia, 1996, p. 3.

3. Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *Shadows of Ethics: Criticism and the Just Society* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), p. 222.

4. Wayne C. Booth, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p. 221 (original emphasis).

5. See Gardner, *Moral Philosophy and the Novels of George Eliot*, pp. 114–15 for one analysis of the circularity of Nussbaum's argument.

6. I use "implied author" and "narrator" interchangeably for James as for George Eliot, though for different reasons; for James, it seems to me that in so thoroughly erasing specific signs of a narrating voice, he has effectively elided the two identities. See note 29 for my argument about Eliot's narrator.

7. Henry James, *The Golden Bowl*, ed. Patricia Crick (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), p. 20 (original emphasis). In order to allow space for substantial quotations from *Middlemarch*, and because Nussbaum quotes so extensively from *The Golden Bowl* in her essays, I will not provide or analyze specific examples from it here.

8. Kenneth Graham, *Indirections of the Novel: James, Conrad, Forster* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 74.

9. Mark L. Krupnick, "*The Golden Bowl*: Henry James's Novel About Nothing," *English Studies* 57 (1976): 539.

10. Richard Lansdown, "People on Whom Nothing is Lost: Maturity in F. R. Leavis, Martha Nussbaum, and Others," *Critical Review* 38 (1998): 128.

11. Krupnick, p. 540.

12. Robert J. Reilla, "Henry James and the Morality of Fiction," *American Literature* 39 (1967): 1.

13. Harpham, *Shadows of Ethics*, p. 30.

14. Paul B. Armstrong, *The Challenge of Bewilderment: Understanding and Representation in James, Conrad, and Ford* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), p. 60.

15. Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, p. 144; Nicola Bradbury, *Henry James: The Later Novels* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1979), p. 125; Robert Eaglestone, *Ethical Criticism: Reading After Levinas* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), p. 47; R. B. J. Wilson, *Henry James's Ultimate Narrative: The Golden Bowl* (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1981), p. 5 and 8; Philip Weinstein, *Henry James and the Requirements of the Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), p. 165. I have come across only one critic who claims to find *The Golden Bowl* straightforward: "I find nothing rarified or remote about *The Golden Bowl*," says Mildred Hartsock: she rejects "the idea that somehow James in general and this book in particular provide insurmountable difficulties or unresolvable ambiguities

which remove him and it from the real world of men." "Unintentional Fallacy: Critics and *The Golden Bowl*," *Modern Language Quarterly* 35 (1974): 287.

16. Robert B. Pippin, *Henry James and Modern Moral Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 66.

17. Reilla, "Henry James and the Morality of Fiction," p. 1.

18. "It is sufficiently obvious that modern criticism of the novel has received its main bias from the practice and precept of Henry James," notes W. J. Harvey in "George Eliot and the Omniscient Author Convention," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 13.2 (1958): 81.

19. See Graham, *Indirections of the Novel*, p. 74.

20. Armstrong, *The Challenge of Bewilderment*, p. 60.

21. Leonard Diepeveen, "The Difficult Pleasures of Modernism," Modernist Studies Association Conference, University of Pennsylvania, October 13, 2000, p. 14. See also Diepeveen, *The Difficulties of Modernism* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

22. Pippin, *Henry James and Modern Moral Life*, p. 11.

23. Krupnick, "The Golden Bowl: Henry James's Novel About Nothing," p. 539.

24. Raymond Williams, *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1970), p. 135. See also Michael Levenson, *A Genealogy of Modernism: A Study of English Literary Doctrine 1908–1922* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

25. Pippin, *Henry James and Modern Moral Life*, p. 65. Yet moral realism is taken seriously even in this skeptical age. See, for example, Geoffrey Sayre-McCord, ed., *Essays on Moral Realism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), or James Rachels, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, 3rd edition (New York: McGraw Hill, 1999).

26. Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 1961, 2nd edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 393.

27. There seem to me difficulties more extensive than I have space to discuss here with the assumptions, not just of Nussbaum but also of others engaged in this discussion, about literature's role in moral thinking more generally. Jane Adamson, for instance, celebrates the "messiness" of literature, invoking Keats on "Negative Capability." "Against Tidiness: Literature and/versus Moral Philosophy," in *Renegotiating Ethics in Literature, Philosophy, and Theory*, ed. Jane Adamson, Richard Freadman, and David Parker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 101. Surely she is not right that the form of all literature is "interrogative" (p. 103) or that "analytic deliberation" is incompatible with the literary imagination (p. 106). George Eliot is not the only author whose works would, by this standard, be ineligible not just for Nussbaum's project but for consideration as literature in the first place.

28. George Eliot, *Middlemarch: A Study of Provincial Life,* ed. Bert G. Hornback, Norton Critical Edition, 2nd Edition (New York: Norton, 2000), p. 3; hereafter abbreviated *M.*

29. I use feminine pronouns to refer to the implied author or narrator of *Middlemarch* for simplicity, not because I confuse that figure with the author or because I find the ethics or philosophy of the novel feminine, female, or feminist in any particular way. Because I believe that in her narrator Eliot has given direct voice *to* her implied author—with

such conviction that the implied author's name, "George Eliot," continues to supersede Marian Evans's own in discussions of her novels—I will consider the novel's narrator to be identical with its implied author.

30. *Moral Philosophy and the Novels of George Eliot*, p. 76.

31. Many scholars have tracked the evidence of specific philosophical influences, such as Comtean positivism, in *Middlemarch*. My interests are different, however: like Nussbaum with James's novels, I want to get at the philosophical expressiveness *of this writing on its own*.

32. Gardner, *Moral Philosophy and the Novels of George Eliot*, p. 19. Her chief example of such a conventional approach to philosophy in Eliot's fiction is George Levine, "Determinism and Responsibility in the Works of George Eliot," *PMLA* 77 (1962): 268–79.

33. In *Shadows of Ethics*, Harpham argues that "To consider only the point of view of 'one' . . . would be to make oneself inhuman, a brain in a vat; while the absolute refusal to consider that point of view, to think only through the 'I,' would suggest a person almost inconceivably self-absorbed and even mentally handicapped, powerless to generalize" (p. 27). He considers that "ethics can never hope to resolve its internal difficulties. . . . Articulating perplexity, rather than guiding, is what ethics is all about" (p. 27). Eliot advocates and demonstrates an alternative to either "articulating perplexity"—James's and thus Nussbaum's version of ethics—or "guiding": a constant consideration of the question of 'I' through the question of 'one.'