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What Rosy Knew:
Language, Learning and Lore in *Middlemarch*[†]

The ways in which people speak unerringly reveal language to be as much an instrument of division as of communication in *Middlemarch*. Everyone has their own register, and each moves within the confines of his or her linguistic boundaries. George Eliot's novel, self-professedly about 'unravelling certain human lots, and seeing how they were woven and interwoven' (p. 96), is as much about the self-enclosed isolation of those 'lots' as it is about the links between them. Education, whether in its institutional form or at the level of Casaubon's learning or Lydgate's medical researches, is seen to isolate the individuals who pursue it. Lydgate's research is at one level obviously conceived of as being in direct contrast to Casaubon's. Lydgate 'must read' (p. 92) but he has abandoned a random self-education in conventional literature – 'Rasselas or Gulliver . . . Bailey's Dictionary or the Bible with the Apocrypha in it' (p. 92) – for the study of medicine. Here his work has real potential: it is not a chimerical key to mythologies that he seeks, but 'that fundamental knowledge of structure' which can be gained from the investigation of 'primary webs or tissues' (p. 95), and which will contribute to the advancement of medical science, and the well-being of individual human beings. Nevertheless Lydgate, like Casaubon, lives a divided life in which the intellectual and the emotional being exist in separate spheres: 'The reveries from which it was difficult to detach himself were ideal constructions of something other than Rosamond's virtues, and the primitive tissue was still his fair unknown' (p. 172). In a somewhat similar way Dorothea's self-education, which has led her not to know quite enough about either Pascal or Milton to be able to detect the real affinities between them and the scholar she idealises, leads her to disaster as surely as does Rosamond's training at Miss Lemon's. 'Strangers, whether wrecked and clinging to a raft, or duly escorted and accompanied by portmanteaus, have always had a circumstantial fascination for the virgin mind' (p. 76), says the narrator apropos of Rosamond's attraction to Lydgate: the comment can equally well be applied to Dorothea. The very form of the multiplot novel, of which *Middlemarch* is the most sophisticated and cerebral example, implies the ultimate resolution of 'connexion', a term that Dickens used in the course of his most complicated essay in the form, *Bleak House*. 'What connexion can there be', Dickens asks, '. . . between many people in the innumerable histories of this world, who, from opposite sides of great gulfs, have, nevertheless, been very curiously brought together?'[‡] The question is one which both *Bleak House* and *Middlemarch* set out to answer. But in *Middlemarch* the 'connexions' that are made are either marginal or partial: Lowick Manor, from which Dorothea looks out at the mourners at Peter Featherstone's funeral, is a very *Bleak House* indeed.

[†] From *Critical Quarterly* 35.4(Winter 1993):21-30, reprinted by permission. The author's footnotes have been renumbered, and one has been deleted. Page references to *Middlemarch* are to this Norton Critical Edition.

[‡] Charles Dickens, *Bleak House*, 1852-53, Penguin English Library Edition, ed. J. Hillis Miller (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), p. 272. I take the term "multiplot novel" from Peter K. Garrett, *The Victorian Multiplot Novel* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980).