

that "she dislikes to talk about her books," or otherwise indulge the idle curiosity of the Paul Prys of the time.

Our author has been called "The ablest novelist of the age," and the distinction is no doubt a just one; yet, if it be intended as establishing her relative position in the literary world, it seems to us without meaning. Where there is but one star of the first magnitude, comparison with the lesser lights is profitless, and the luminary shines in solitary splendour, with clear, cold beams—apart and alone. With regard to the work before us, considerable difference of opinion prevails as to its position amongst the author's novels. To some critics, *Middlemarch* appears to be her crowning achievement; to others, the early enthusiasm, if we may apply the word in such connection, seems to have died out, or to have been transformed into a cynical discontent with the world, and the institutions of the world. There seems to be part of the truth in both these estimates of *Middlemarch*. There are, doubtless, particular excellencies to be found in one or other of her former works which do not appear so conspicuously here. On the other hand, it must be remembered that the canvas is broader, the figures more numerous, the general plan more elaborately laid and executed, and the finish of the whole more thoroughly artistic than in any of her other works. Moreover, those peculiar features which were the signs of intellectual power, have been evidently matured by time. The searching analysis of character which enables us to read the inmost hearts of her *dramatis personæ* with a clearness we can never attain in the closest intimacy with those around us, seems more incisive and more thorough than before. Within the narrow circle of *Middlemarch* and its vicinity, the scene is constantly shifting, new groups of characters appear, every member of which is submitted to the scalpel, its hidden secrets of character, its moving springs of action laid bare until, however significant in himself or for the purposes of the story, he acquires an individuality which makes him somewhat respectable in the reader's eyes.

It would, of course, be out of the question, within the limits of this notice, to give the most cursory glance at the large number of figures which move in the microcosm of *Middlemarch*. Let us content ourselves with a brief reference to a few of the more prominent characters. Dorothea the heroine, with her sister Celia, who serves as a foil to the high-minded spirituality of the former, occupies the front ground. The mention of her name brings us face to face with the theory upon which the work is founded. Given a young woman with lofty aims, an enthusiastic nature, tinctured with Puritan principles and yearning to fulfil a noble mission in the world, to discover what will be the end of her aspirations, hampered by the false "social morality" of the world, and made the sport of external circumstances. George Eliot replies,—"a life of mistakes, the offspring of a certain spiritual grandeur, ill-matched with the meanness of opportunity." In other words, nobleness of nature, in the world of to-day, stands in imminent danger of shipwreck from the chilling atmosphere in which its lot is cast. George Eliot would say with the poet, "There is a Providence which shapes our ends, rough-hew them as we may;" but she seems to have lost faith in Providence and substitutes for it society, and its rules and prejudices. According to this gospel, if that term be

not a misnomer, man and woman, especially the latter, are the playthings of their surroundings, and their destiny is forecast, not by them, but for them, and often in spite of them. Let us quote a passage: "Any one watching keenly the stealthy convergence of human lots, sees a slow preparation of effects from one life on another, which tells like a calculated irony on the indifference or the frozen stare with which we look upon our unintroducted neighbour. Destiny stands, sarcastic, with our *dramatis personæ* folded in her hand." This sentence appears like a truism somewhat strongly stated; but let us observe the use made of it. Dorothea with that impetuous self-will, which hurried her into the mistakes the author lays at the door of society, encounters a dry-hearted pedantic bachelor of fifty, Edward Casaubon. He is engaged in the study of comparative mythology, and is wasting his energies in the attempt to establish the rather trite position which he evidently supposes to be an original conception of his own—"that all the mythical systems or erratic mythical fragments in the world were corruptions of a tradition, originally revealed." Dorothea immediately fancies that the way for her lofty mission lies upon before her. She falls in love with the elderly scholar, learns the Greek characters, so as to be able to read to him, and is betrothed and finally married to him. As might have been anticipated, both parties are disappointed. Her illusions are dispelled, the warmth of her nature chilled, and her idol shattered. His awakening to the sober reality takes the disagreeable form of jealousy, and he becomes as uncomfortable a companion as a conceited head, and a withered, affectionless heart, can make a man. One would think that there was nothing in this first great mistake wherewith to frame an indictment against society. All Miss Brooke's friends opposed the match. Her uncle even, in his feeble, helpless way, remonstrated. Sir James Chettam, afterwards Celia's spouse, although an interested party, honestly opposed the match, rather on Dorothea's account than his own. Celia was astonished at the outrageous proposal, and Mrs. Cadwallader, the quaintest of epigrammatists, was furious at the idea of it. The latter declared that a drop of Casaubon's blood had been examined under a microscope, and was found to "contain nothing but commas and parentheses." Celia in a conversation with the vicar's wife said,—"I am so sorry for Dorothea." "Sorry," said Mrs. C. "It is her doing I suppose." "Yes; she says Mr. Casaubon has a great soul." "With all my heart." "Oh, Mrs. Cadwallader, I don't think it can be nice to marry a man with a great soul." "Well, my dear, take warning. You know the look of one now; when the next comes and wants you to marry him, don't you accept him." "I'm sure," said Celia who had an eye on the good-natured Sir James Chettam, "I'm sure I never should." It seems certain that when these lines were penned, George Eliot had no complaint to make against the "social morality" of the borough of Middlemarch. What more could Dorothea's friends have done, unless they had put strychnine in Casaubon's tea, or prevailed upon Sir James Chettam to carry off the lady, and marry her out of hand? In the *Finale*, however, in a passage of singular beauty, the author, that she may be true to her theory, is false to her facts. We cannot resist the temptation of quoting a few sentences. Speaking of the "determining acts" of Dorothea's life, she writes—"They were the mixed result of young and