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Selfishness and Self-Affirmation in Rosamund Vincy and Gwendolen Harleth

At the very beginning of the acquaintance of Rosamund Vincy and Dr. Lydgate, before there has been time for more than her decision that he shall certainly fall in love with her, Rosamund's brother sickens with typhoid fever and a series of providential coincidences take place which bring Rosamund and Lydgate into delightful proximity for the whole tense period of the illness. This sequence of events and Rosamund's apprehension of them, so fortunate for her plans so shattering for those of Lydgate, is represented by George Eliot in a striking passage of imagery:

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... The scratches are events, and the candle is the egoism of any person now absent — of Miss Vincy, for example. Rosamund 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.¹

The candle flame and the illusive centricity which it conjures up, are perfect images for the exquisitely destructive selfishness of Rosamund, the culmination of a long line of George Eliot's studies in egocentricity. From *Scenes of Clerical Life* onwards there is no novel without its helpless, obtuse, pliant or dissembling egoist, all presented with delicacy and

¹ George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, ch. 27, Penguin ed. 1970, p. 297.

perception. But not until *Middlemarch* do we find such a character at the very centre of the novel, and realized with the same sympathetic complexity as those more noble characters with whom George Eliot so often seemed to identify herself. Rosamund with her ruthlessly limited and self-centered vision of life is just as surely the pivot of *Middlemarch* as is Dorothea with her noble impulses.

In many respects Gwendolen Harleth, the heroine of George Eliot's next and last novel, seems to have grown straight out of Rosamund Vincy. And one of the distinguishing features of *Daniel Deronda* is that, for the first time, George Eliot made the kernel of the whole novel a character almost entirely guided by self-interest, by a strong impulse to take pleasure herself even at the expense of others. Her physical similarity with Rosamund is apparent in the many passages describing their beauty, the alluring turn of neck, the sense of pleasure in their personal attractions, their need to be the admired focus of attention and the assurance that that need will be constantly met. In their obsessive consciousness of what is due to them as beautiful and accomplished young women they are almost identical. The Gwendolen of the early part of the novel is also identical with Rosamund in a total lack of interest in, even of thought about, the moral life or of any feeling of responsibility for human beings outside herself. Neither of them have Dinah, Maggie's, Romola's or Dorothea's passionate preoccupation with conscience and the claims of others.

Yet these strong similarities are only the likenesses of brush strokes with which the outlines of two personalities are sketched. Gwendolen Harleth so differs from Rosamund, and from any previous George Eliot heroine, that she may be said to embody another kind of personality, not realized with the same subtlety by any other novelist before Henry James. We may well be content with the term "selfishness" to describe Rosamund Vincy but we must find something different for Gwendolen — some term such as "self-fulfilment" or "self-affirmation".

The essential differences in the characters of Rosamund and Gwendolen are apparent throughout in the images through which their personalities are presented. There is vitality and drama in Gwendolen. She has an irresistible personal gaiety, a rapidity of judgement and an ardent sense of living. The single most arresting image through which she is presented, and which is as fitting for her as the candle and mirror image for Rosamund is what is called the "irridescence of her

character". Against Gwendolen's energy and exuberance stand Rosamund's graceful charm and bland neutrality. Rosamund's is a centripetal, flowerlike temptation, and like flowers and candlelight she attracts towards herself, she does not go flashing out in search of. Flower imagery is often used to describe Rosamund. Her head is flowerlike on its white stem, she is like a half-opened blush-rose. The delicately observed episode which brings her and Lydgate irrevocably together is full of flower imagery:

Lydgate rose to go, and Rosamond, made nervous by her struggle between mortification and the wish not to betray it, dropped her chain as if startled, and rose too, mechanically. Lydgate instantaneously stooped to pick up the chain. When he rose he was very near to a lovely little face set on a fair long neck which he had been used to see turning about under the most perfect management of self-contented grace. As Lydgate raised his eyes now he saw a certain helpless quivering which touched him quite newly, and made him look at Rosamond with a questioning flash. At this moment she was as natural as she had ever been when she was five years old: she felt that her tears had risen, and it was no use to try to do anything else than let them stay like water on a blue flower or let them fall over her cheeks, even as they would.

That moment of naturalness was the crystallizing feathertouch: it shook flirtation into love. Remember that the ambitious man who was looking at those Forget-me-nots under the water was very warm-hearted and rash. He did not know where the chain went: an idea had thrilled through the recesses within him which had a Miraculous effect in raising the power of passionate love lying buried there in no sealed sepulchre, but the lightest, easily pierced mould. His words were quite abrupt and awkward; but the tone made them sound like an ardent, appealing avowal.

'What is the matter? you are distressed. Tell me — pray'.

Rosamond had never been spoken to in such tones before. I am not sure that she knew what the words were; but she looked at Lydgate and the tears fell over her cheeks. There could have been no more complete answer than that silence, and Lydgate, forgetting everything else, completely mastered by the outrush of tenderness at the sudden belief that this sweet young creature depended on him for her joy, actually put his arms round her, folding her gently and protectingly — he was used to being gentle with the weak and suffering — and kissed each of the two large tears. This was a strange way of arriving at an understanding, but it was a short way.²

As well as flower imagery we have tenderness here. It tells us much about Rosamund's kind of attraction which, seemingly fragile, calls forth the sense of care and protection, the feeling for small helpless creatures. The early impact of such feeling still binds Lydgate to her much later on. Even when he has realized the terrible, egoistic tenacity of this mild being. She repeatedly masters him by what he must always re-

² *Ibid.*, ch. 31, p. 335—336.

present to himself as a woman's frailty needing his male protection.

Flower imagery in connection with Gwendolen is used at one place only. She uses it of herself with a core of bitterness and rebellion, and with very different effect:

"We women . . . must stay where we grow, or where the gardeners like to transplant us. We are brought up like flowers, to look as pretty as we can, and be dull without complaining. That is my notion about the plants: they are often bored, and that is the reason why some of them have got poisonous"³

She lends dramatic force to these remarks, made at a time when she is still keeping Grandcourt from making any open declaration, by whipping the heads off some rhododendrons with fierce strokes from her riding crop. For Rosamund the flower metaphor is natural and delightful. For Gwendolen it is inevitable but repugnant. She is more fittingly compared with the racehorse, seen at best in striving and dynamic action.

Gwendolen's character is questing, her development that of the discovery of self as realized in the varied world outside self. She embodies possibilities of development surpassing those of any previous George Eliot heroine except Maggie Tulliver from whose potentialities George Eliot shied away or was not yet sure. Rosamund and Gwendolyn crystallize two essentially different kinds of personality. The strength of one is inflexible and depends on service and support from outside. The strength of the other is supple and adapts itself to change wrought upon it by outside forces. The preoccupations of one are ingrowing, of the other outgoing. Parallel scenes from the two novels give this difference of personality dramatic form. Many of George Eliot's heroines enjoy riding and their attitude to it is often a touchstone of their character. We may remember Dorothea's feeling about it being a kind of Pagan enjoyment "an exhilarating indolence which she always looked forward to renouncing". Rosamund's interest in riding is very little concerned with the exhilaration of movement or with the changing aspects of the scene around. Her feelings are introverted and revolve round the bewitching appearance of herself in riding costume. She rides not to enjoy riding but to be admired on horseback and envied for the company she keeps. When her husband's cousin, son of a baronet, visits her with all the attractions of fashionable connections, and with his stupidity concealed beneath 'style', pleasant scent and a good accent there are plenty of reasons why, in contraversion of her

³ George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, Penguin ed. 1968, ch. 13, p. 171.

husband's express command, she should go riding with him so that the superiority of the company she kept and of her own graceful fitness for such company should be admired:

The temptation was certainly great: she was very fond of the exercise, and the gratification of riding on a fine horse, with Captain Lydgate, Sir Godwin's son, on another fine horse by her side, and of being met in this position... was something as good as her dreams...⁴

Gwendolen's joy in riding is very different. She rides not to be seen but for excitement and competition, for pitting her skill against that of others. Riding for her is a release from small restrictions, it provides an escape into a freer world and she often avails herself of the sense of liberation it gives her even after her betrothal to Grandcourt. The hunting scene is typical of Gwendolyn's feeling about riding and of her ambitions:

All other thoughts were soon lost for her in the excitement of the scene... The colour, the stir of the field had taken possession of Gwendolen... [she] felt no check on the animal stimulus that came from the stir and tongues of the hounds, the pawing of the horses, the varying voices of men, the movement hither and thither of vivid colour... that utmost excitement of the coming chase which consists in feeling something like a combination of dog and horse, with the superadded thrill of social varieties and consciousness of centaur-power which belongs to human kind...

[She] was never fearful in action and companionship... and felt as secure as an immortal goddess, having, if she had no thought of risk, a core of confidence that no ill luck would happen to her.⁵

The scene in each novel in which the girls are first seen symbolize the different frameworks not only of their physical lives but of their emotions and imaginative horizons. We see Rosamund first at the family breakfast table in one of George Eliot's brilliant short episodes of ironic domestic comedy. She is introduced to us as she exercises her tiny feelings of innate superiority by criticizing her mother's speech and her brother's behaviour. "With your education you must know" Rosamund's admiring mother replies to her daughter's criticism and Gwendolen's idolizing Mother would have said the same. But while praise and adulation are accepted as quite fitting by Rosamund they are never able completely to stifle the inner voices of Gwendolen's self-criticism. Her we see first in a public context, very unlike the Vincy family breakfast-room. At the opening of the novel she is playing at the roulette-table of the German spa of Leubronn and although to the confidence

⁴ *Middlemarch*, *op. cit.*, ch. 58, p. 630.

⁵ *Daniel Deronda*, *op. cit.*, ch. 7, pp. 102—103.

of her beauty is added the exhilaration of winning, she has none of Rosamund's complacent certainty of her own inviolability. These scenes make vivid also the difference in sensitivity of the two young women to outside standards. Rosamund, the flower of Miss Lemon's academy for young ladies, is only aware of such standards as are manifest in social differences, she is undisturbed by any perplexities concerning aesthetic or intellectual superiority. But Gwendolen is challenged by standards she suspects as being beyond her own. Her self-love is as great as Rosamund's but it does not lie upon the same foundation of self-satisfaction. The critical scrutiny of Daniel Deronda in the opening roulette scene is not resented so much for his having turned her luck as for:

The darting sense that he was measuring her and looking down on her as an inferior... that he felt himself in a region outside and above her, and was examining her as a specimen of a lower order.⁶

The apprehension of standards of excellence beyond her present attainments is a constant strand in the development of Gwendolen. Rosamund is never in doubt about the perfect adequacy of her accomplishment for the ends she has in mind. It is Gwendolen's sensitivity to artistic, mental and ultimately moral values beyond those that she practices that make possible her continual expansion. She first of all resents such standards and then feels challenged by them. Three people are important for Gwendolen's apprehension in this respect: Herr Klesmer, Catharine Arrowpoint and Deronda himself. Klesmer's early comment on her piano playing, which is perfectly satisfactory to meet the ordinary demands of the nineteenth century drawing rooms, makes her reply to him with a sinking heart "at the sudden width of horizon opened round her small musical performance". The force of his own playing later on shows the abiding generous side of Gwendolen so that:

in spite of her wounded egoism [she] had fulness of nature enough to feel the power of this playing, and it gradually turned her inward sob of mortification into an excitement which lifted her for the moment into a desperate indifference about her own doings.⁷

This challenge to Gwendolen's musical standards comes at the beginning of the novel and thus early presents her as a woman unsatisfied with limited attainment and grudgingly drawn towards those whose superior standards she was forced to recognize:

⁶ *Ibid.*, ch. 1, p. 38.

⁷ *Ibid.*, ch. 5, p. 80.

[Herr Klesmer's] lofty criticism had caused Gwendolen a new sort of pain. She would not have chosen to confess how unfortunate she thought herself in not having had Miss Arrowpoint's musical advantages, so as to be able to question Herr Klesmer's taste with the confidence of thorough knowledge; still less to admit even to herself that Miss Arrowpoint each time they met raised an unwonted feeling of jealousy in her: not in the least because she was an heiress, but because... [of] a certain mental superiority which could not be explained away — an exasperating thoroughness in her musical accomplishment, a fastidious discrimination in her general tastes, which made it impossible to force her admiration and kept you in awe of her standard.⁸

This quality of dissatisfaction is outside the range of Rosamund's character, and even in the early Gwendolen it is not allowed to pass without astringent comment. Gwendolen has the breadth of imagination to recognize outside standards, even to wish to attain them but:

Perhaps it would have been rash to say then that she was at all exceptional inwardly, or that the unusual in her was more than her rare grace of movement and bearing, and a certain bearing which gave piquancy to a very common egoistic ambition, such as exists under many clumsy exteriors and is taken no notice of. For I suppose the set of the head does not really determine the hunger of the inner self for supremacy; it only makes a difference sometimes as to the way in which the supremacy is held attainable, and a little also to the degree in which it can be attained;... She rejoiced to feel herself exceptional; but her horizon was that of the genteel romance.⁹

Gwendolen, no less than Rosamund, is "held captive by the ordinary wirework of social forms". She is as much in danger as Rosamund of "doing nothing in particular". But Gwendolen is able to conceive that what is truly worthwhile lies outside the social wirework. Rosamund is not.

The above incidents come from the early parts of *Daniel Deronda*, and an important word in the last quoted passage is *then*. "Perhaps it would have been rash to say *then* that she was at all exceptional", that she was more exceptional than Rosamund. However the potential for becoming so clearly existed.

One of the most important scenes of the novel also involves Klesmer. It is the moment when Gwendolen finally realizes the emptiness of her belief that she can hope to do something different, something independent, the moment when she is unequivocally faced with the extent of her formation by social circumstance. The event leading up to the crucial scene is the loss of the family fortune. This also has a parallel in

⁸ *Ibid.*, ch. 6, p. 83.

Middlemarch when Lydgate, as a result of lavish household spending is forced to tell Rosamund that they are deeply in debt. Rosamund's reaction to this crisis is to reply — "What can I do, Tertius?", throwing into her thin utterance as much neutrality as the words can hold. "I will do something" is Gwendolen's reaction to their family losses, her speech has a generous resolution "I don't mind, I will do something. I will be something". It is in order to give substance to this impulsive assertion that she asks Klesmer to see her to obtain his advice as to whether she could earn her living professionally as a singer and actress. The scene is one of the turning points of the novel another being the restrained and disturbing interview where she finally accepts Grandcourt, an event which grows directly out of the Klesmer scene. For in her interview with Klesmer Gwendolen comes to realize how spurious her illusions of independence are, how unsubstantial her hopes of being able to meet higher standards, how illusory her possibilities of choice:

In spite of her self-confidence, she dreaded Klesmer as part of that unmanageable world which was independent of her wishes ... she was at a higher crisis of her women's fate than in her past experience with Grandcourt. The questioning then was whether she should take a particular man as a husband. The utmost fold of her questioning now, was whether she need take a husband at all — whether she could not achieve substantiality for herself and know gratified ambition without bondage.¹⁰

She asks Klesmer to tell her whether he believes she could become a successful singer and actress and earn an independent existence for herself and her Mother and sisters. His reply leaves no room for doubt:

"You are a beautiful young lady — you have been brought up in ease — you have done what you would — you have not said to yourself", "I must know this exactly", "I must understand this exactly", "I must do this exactly" — in uttering these three terrible *musts* Klesmer lifted up three long fingers in succession. "In sum you have not been called upon to be anything but a charming young lady, whom it is an impoliteness to find fault with".¹¹

He presents professional life to her as one of arduous, demanding and unceasing work. Unless it is a vocation, when it may bring achievement, it can never be anything but lifelong drudgery. Not without argument, for Gwendolen's hopes are suitably naive and show a complete absence of realism, she finally believe him. His words bite into her self-confidence and turn it into the pain of a wound. There is no other

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, ch. 23, pp. 294—295.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, ch. 23, p. 297.

scene in nineteenth century fiction where a proud, gifted and independent woman is so completely faced with the difference between the amateur and the trained mind and accomplishment. The scene has no close parallel until Angus Wilson's *Middle Age of Mrs. Eliot* where Meg Eliot, with the same unsparring honesty, is given the same picture of what she really is. The Meg Eliot of a century later is able to follow the demands of Klesmer's "musts". For Gwendolen the choice is the, to her, crushingly inferior position of governess, or a rich husband and she accepts Grandcourt in spite of her knowledge of his past and her deep inborn reluctance to make herself subservient to any man.

The attitude of Rosamund and Gwendolen towards men is another contrasted strand in the pattern of their personalities. Rosamund's social romance had always turned upon a lover and bridegroom. She took an especial delight in the homage of men and hers would never be the hand to go out to open the door for herself if there was a man to do it for her. On first meeting Lydgate she sees a man of talent "whom it would be especially delightful to enslave" — and who she would then marry. For her marriage is the proper culmination of her life. Gwendolen we are expressly told had no delight in men's enslavement, and her early imaginative musings about Grandcourt are how she will reject him not how she will persuade him to marry her. She has a fierce reaction against lovemaking as is very early made clear in her relationship to Rex:

The perception that poor Rex wanted to be tender made her curl up and harden like a sea-anemone at the touch of a finger...

He tried to take her hand, but she hastily eluded his grasp and moved to the other end of the hearth, facing him.

"Pray don't make love to me! I hate it". She looked at him fiercely...

The life of passion had begun negatively in her. She felt passionately averse to this volunteered love.¹²

The remembrance of shared moment of intimacy and tenderness is able to bring Rosamund and Lydgate together again briefly even when he has become aware of her enamel shallowness. Such ideas and such moments are not the basis of Gwendolen's girlhood emotional imaginings, and they can never become part of her life with Grandcourt. Indeed his reserve and physical coldness are what recommend him to her as a husband.

Shared emotion when it does come to her, as it does with Daniel, is a feeling out towards companionship on the level

¹² *Ibid.*, ch. 7, pp. 113,114.

of ideas as a prelude to any other, and in this Gwendolen's character is in harmony with that of Dorothea Brooke and not Rosamund Vincy. The passage in *Middlemarch* in which Dorothea's imagination runs upon a husband who might even teach her Hebrew if she wished has often been the source of critical amusement, but this is rather a facile reaction. That Dorothea was awakened to the physical needs of her womanhood and was aware of that awakening is suggested by the whole of the passage describing her return to her room in Lowick after her honeymoon in Rome. It is a scene rich in muted sexual imagery of vivid mouth, clinging fur pelisse and Dorothea's gem-like brightness. Her tragedy is that a sensitive and ardent girl's desire for intellectual companionship should have been so mistakenly placed. With Gwendolen too the ideal of shared intimacy begins on the mental level. This is deeply within her character as one who would affirm herself, who would not renounce her own freedom but join it with the freedom of another. But this does not mean that she was not aware of Daniel on a mixture of levels. Her physical awareness of his presence is conveyed in many of their meetings after her marriage, above all during the Christmas visit to the Abbey. It is here that to her apprehension of Deronda as someone with outside standards of judgement, and Deronda as an attractive man albeit with voice and eyes that have the unintentional effect of making his ready sympathy seem more personal and special than it really is, is added her overwhelming need of Deronda as someone who might help her to a moral standard by which to guide herself. In the poignant scenes between the two after Grandcourt's drowning Gwendolen's need for Deronda is the experience of many levels of her wonderfully mixed consciousness which even at that moment is held in check by the pressure of opposing realities.

Such moments come later in the novel and are intensified as it proceeds and Gwendolen's needs change. What we are made aware of in the earlier sequences is "a certain fierceness of maidenhood in her" and this is presented dramatically as well as in description of feeling. The two long triumphant archery sequences in the early part of the novel, when Gwendolen seems a kind of conquering Diana, exhibit it and are in harmony with her untrammelled individuality. And this individuality remains untrammelled. Even when she accepts Grandcourt and moves into the cold death of that marriage. There is something splendid in her refusal to admit defeat. She moves through the salons of London society with as triumphant a bearing as she had moved through the glades of

Brakenshaw Castle, bow in hand, overcoming her dumb repugnance with a show of cold elation. This pride of her independence, this preservation of her individual self which Grandcourt discerns as refractoriness in her is what adds to his special pleasure in mastery and he meets it with increasingly stringent curtailment of her liberty.

The realities of marriage to Grandcourt make independence impossible on any but the level of personal behaviour and moral standard. The limitations of the new steel mesh in which she has entrapped herself are even greater than the old had been. And thus her apprehension of the world of values that Deronda signifies for her becomes more and more important. George Eliot makes it clear in several places where she feels true independence lies, and we may refer again to Klesmer's three *musts* — to know and to understand exactly, which means submitting to some discipline, artistic intellectual or moral in order that we may do exactly. Three parallels in the novel illustrate Klesmer's words to Gwendolen all presented in the lives of women in the novel who actually do achieve independence and self-affirmation. They achieve it in real life situations and through renunciation of the immediate pleasures of life, not in the world of romantic archery symbolism which is where Gwendolen lived until her marriage.

The three women are Mirah, Deronda's mother and Catherine Arrowpoint. Mirah's long recital of her early training and life, given to Mrs. Meyrick, are an exact illustration of the relentless discipline that Klesmer had told Gwendolyn the artist must submit to. Deronda's mother in her justification of her life to her son makes a similar point more dramatically, but his mother, unlike Mirah was a woman with a vocation. Mirah was driven to become a professional by outside necessity. Deronda's mother's case is that of the woman in whom self-affirmation has developed into self-assertion:

Catherine Arrowpoint comes between the two. She too goes through the discipline of mastery of a vocation and the renunciation of her most obvious social benefits in order to follow the life and the man she has freely chosen.

"Had I not a rightful claim to be something more than a mere daughter and mother? The voice and the genius matched the face. Whatever else was wrong, acknowledge that I had a right to be an artist, though my father's will was against it. My nature gave me a charter".¹³

¹³ *Ibid.*, ch. 53, p. 728.

Gwendolen's self-affirmation remained no more than an empty impulse in her early life because she was not willing freely to undertake any curtailment of pleasure and of the optimistic expectation of easy mastery, nor was she forced by circumstances to do so. Thus her desire for self-affirmation was nullified by her refusal of discipline. But the experiences of her marriage to Grandcourt, his death and the marriage of Deronda to Mirah finally place her in a position which needs all the latent strength and resilience of her character to meet and Gwendolen is left in a position in which George Eliot had not before had the artistic integrity to leave any heroine. Gwendolen is, in fact, not only at one and the same time the culmination of and a new departure in the presentation of the obviously egocentric character. She is also the culmination of and new exploration in what is innately noble in character. Very early on we become aware that "some of the goodness which Rex believed in was there", and Klesmer, her sternest and most impartial critic, tells her that he feels she should be like noble music. Gwendolen is brought at the end of the novel to the early stages of realizing that nobility which is latent in her and she is brought to it not by romantic dreams but as the outcome of hard and painful development. Her problems of fulfilling her potentialities within the framework of a life with some real meaning are not cut short by death like Maggie Tulliver's, nor blurred by marriage like Dorothea's nor fulfilled by the needs of a plague stricken island like Romola's. Her future course and development are left open-ended. All we have to go on is the knowledge we have of her character and potentialities gained earlier.

Gwendolen's final overt act is the generous letter that she sends to Mirah and Deronda. It is something that the merely selfish character would be incapable of and it is something that reminds us again of the daring side of her nature, the side that leads her to challenge life, it asserts her character once more as basically strong and generous not weak and demanding. In the Gwendolen Harleth section of *Daniel Deronda* George Eliot accomplished what she had never fully accomplished before. She brought herself to show the essential solitariness of anyone who, for whatever reasons, does not fit into conventional moulds. And by not allowing any spurious salvation for Gwendolen, by leaving her stripped of every external moral and psychological support to meet the reality of loneliness with nothing but the strength and assertive power of her own character George Eliot provided a heroine as much in the pattern of the twentieth century as of the nineteenth.