"Middlemarch," Obligation, and Dorothea's Duplicity
Author(s): Clifford J. Marks
Source: *Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature*, Vol. 54, No. 2 (2000), pp. 25-41
Published by: Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association
Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/1348118
Accessed: 10-04-2019 08:51 UTC

REFERENCES
Linked references are available on JSTOR for this article:
https://www.jstor.org/stable/1348118?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references_tab_contents
You may need to log in to JSTOR to access the linked references.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at https://about.jstor.org/terms

Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature*

This content downloaded from 159.84.15.122 on Wed, 10 Apr 2019 08:51:50 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Middlemarch, Obligation, and Dorothea's Duplicity

Clifford J. Marks
University of Wyoming

> But the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive, for 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 live faithfully a hidden life and rest in unvisited tombs.
>
> (Eliot, *Middlemarch* 811)

> Many imagine God after the likeness of man, consisting of body and mind, and liable to passions; but how far such persons are from the true knowledge of God, is sufficiently apparent from what has already been demonstrated. These, however, I pass by; for all who have in any degree contemplated the nature of God, deny that God is corporeal; and they bring excellent proof of this when they urge that by a body we understand some quantity, with length, breadth, and depth, some determinate figure, a conception which it is the height of absurdity to God, i.e. to the absolutely infinite being.
>
> (Spinoza, *Ethics* 13)

George Eliot, in her fiction, repeatedly represents alternative ethical models that attempt to revise the foundation of human relationships. Utilizing her unorthodox approach to spirituality and her wide readings in the field of ethics, Eliot delineates forms of ethical behavior that offer innovative depictions of community and human interaction. A translator of Spinoza, Eliot constructs a world in her works where obligation is a necessity in rapidly changing times. By highlighting the importance of obligation, Eliot demonstrates how the power of human relationships must be understood ethically. Her novels offer compelling critiques of the status quo. These critiques, though, offer somewhat radical solutions to entrenched social problems. Furthermore, this sense of obligation must be tied to a spirituality which would at once confirm the importance of human action and, simultaneously, demonstrate how that *grounded* action suggests, paradoxically, the trace of a transcendent state.

These representations explicitly occur in *Middlemarch*. Eliot's novel noticeably portrays moments of spiritual fulfillment and understanding, instances of philo-

This content downloaded from 159.84.15.122 on Wed, 10 Apr 2019 08:51:50 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

sophical growth and awareness, and a pivotal shift in ethical perception as related to spirituality. This kind of ethical perception has its roots in the Romantic revision of the individual's relationship to himself and society. Although not explicitly deemed ethical in the early part of the century, Wordsworth's natural self, Shelley's questioning utopianism, and Robinson's searing portrayals of the quotidian find their expression, in one form or another, in later Victorian fiction. Eliot distills these ideas in *Middlemarch*, representing a view of provincial life that parallels the shifting sense of propriety in the greater culture. But Eliot, who spent her career searching for the right balance among spiritual ideas, philosophical guidelines, and pragmatic living, offers examples in the novel of relationships crumbling and growing in order to examine the foundations of a righteous society. This righteousness transcends a simple "being-in-the-world" by suggesting the spiritual component of every human relationship. When that spiritual component fails, not only does the relationship break down, but the very fabric of society is torn.

Emmanuel Levinas' revision of ethics is useful for this discussion. Levinas describes the ethical connection between the spiritual and the actual and explains how ethics informs a pre-ontological state that gives rise to being. According to Levinas, ethics is an establishing force between the other and the same (or self); ethics is not reducible to a concept of behavioral morality, precisely because ethics precedes morality. In his translator's introduction to Levinas' *Otherwise Than Being Or Beyond Essence*, Alphonso Lingis paraphrases Levinas:

> I am responsible for processes that go beyond the limits of my foresight and intention, that carry on even when I am no longer adding my sustaining force to them — even when I am no longer there. (xiv)
>
> There is an obedience before the order has been understood, comprehended, even synthetically formulated for me — as though I find myself obedient to the law before it has been pronounced. (xvii)

According to Levinas, an ethical force precedes and constitutes the individual, pronounces his or her essence, before he or she comprehends the idea of self. Levinas postulates that our relationships with one another must be grounded in ethics as opposed to narcissism because, in the most banal sense, our obedience to entities such as social structures, law, and spirituality would not be possible if others did not work to sustain our existence.

The pre-representational sense of the ethical relationship demands an inequality between the same (or self) and other. Since the establishing connection comes from the other, the same depends on the other for its sustenance. Therefore, an

This content downloaded from 159.84.15.122 on Wed, 10 Apr 2019 08:51:50 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

asymmetrical relationship develops where the other dominates the same. Lawrence Buell has pointed out how this kind of relationship could lead to a fundamental breakdown in a moral community. But out of this asymmetry arises the idea of ethics, because the disproportionate relationship puts the other at an advantage: the other, who is dominant, chooses responsibility or abandonment. Asymmetricality signals a power displacement and an unstable subjectivity that constantly threatens, even at the point where understanding would seem to have the greatest opportunity (Levinas, *Totality* 82-101).

Therefore (and this idea has been raised in different ways before), perhaps the most important thread running through *Middlemarch* involves the growth of a certain kind of ethical awareness among the characters. Some critics have made the claim that Eliot sketches out a positivist ethics throughout (e.g., Court, Martin), and though many of these observations are helpful, another kind of ethics emerges as the novel develops. The entire idea of the individual as a hermetic place where truth can be nurtured and explored becomes demystified and exposed as false by the end of the novel, even as certain reform-minded ideas lose their urgency in the maze of unbalanced relationships. Using Levinas as a lens, we can analyze how these asymmetrical relationships figure a new ethical knowledge which emerges from the damaged moral system.

Eliot conveys these concepts through the strategy of depicting the asymmetrical relationships within couples. While these relationships also have negative sides, the process of pairing individuals provides the impetus and power for forming an ethical awareness. In doing so, Eliot mounts a dramatic critique of Enlightenment individualism. In *Middlemarch*, the couple either improves or diminishes society. Barry Qualls writes: "*Middlemarch* explores the myths, fictions, and lies that men and women create or expropriate in order to confront and survive change" (273). Four couples — including Rosamond Vincy and Tertius Lydgate, Fred Vincy and Mary Garth, and the Dorothea Brooke, Edward Casaubon, and Will Ladislaw triangle — exemplify the possibility and risk of ethical awareness and change, but the latter "triangle" best provides the metaphoric examples of ethically situated relationships.

The point of the triangle is, of course, Dorothea Brooke. As John Kucich observes, "Dorothea's altruism actually appears to contain its own inversion, a fundamental reversal of impulses to confront others, while her love for Will reflects and enhances the conflictual inwardness through its associations with more conventional images of intense, constricted feeling.... Eliot's abstract ethical pronouncements, of course, imagine a stronger, more dialectical relation between self and world than she is able to project through characters like Dorothea" (48). But

This content downloaded from 159.84.15.122 on Wed, 10 Apr 2019 08:51:50 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

where Kucich sees the limitations of Dorothea's ability to project Eliot's "ethical pronouncements," I see Dorothea's potential and realization. Significantly, Eliot marks Dorothea's characterization with a conflicted vision of ethical behavior. Dorothea's preliminary embrace of her own limited vision dooms her. But her ability to transcend her own weaknesses keys her growing consciousness.

Initially, Dorothea Brooke's idea of the divine revolves around Mr. Casaubon. To her, he represents the sum of worldly achievement, and she envisions a union with him yielding an enriched mind and life for herself. Casaubon, whose lifework, *The Key to All Mythologies*, will supposedly revolutionize the study of religion and literature, presents a dour, serious, disembodied persona who directly signifies his limitations as a human being. Despite the dryness of Casaubon's character, Dorothea finds herself attracted to the idea of serving such a great scholar, attracted to the idea of seeing herself reflected in his meditative gaze. Casaubon, in the same vein, sees Dorothea as a suitable helpmeet who would theoretically help him achieve all of his goals. Both of their "projects" involve their own sense of achievement; neither really wishes to help improve the life of the other, because they put their own needs first. Neither seeks a true spiritual understanding of the world around them.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, the radical Will Ladislaw — young, vibrant, revolutionary — labors culturally, albeit diffusely, to solve the problems of the world.[1] He embraces the latest and most radical causes as he writes his scathing attacks on the establishment to effect social reform. Unlike Casaubon, whose life's ambition yields a closed mind, Ladislaw's ideas reflect a more democratic "human spirit" as he attempts to maintain a connection to the forces of individual liberties that belong to each human being. Where Ladislaw considers how his actions may help others, Casaubon dwells on *The Key to All Mythologies*, his opus that he imagines will uncover the secrets of mythological revelation and reveal his genius to the world. Casaubon's "other" is always a rival, a perceived threat, an unfinished project, and lifeless. Ladislaw's "other," although loosely realized in the first parts of the novel, speaks to his spiritual need to see others' lives improve.

The worlds represented by Casaubon and Ladislaw, the overemphasized worlds of repression and emancipation, the worlds of disembodied spirit and spiritualized body, usually remain separate. Any attempt to define these worlds, whether in an earthly union with Dorothea Brooke or in their own relationships with other people or projects, usually fails because the impervious self has no need for outside mediation. This narcissistic ego fantasizes that it knows all that is right and therefore can continue on in its narrow way. But in *Middlemarch*, the ethical need to assert the necessity of individual emancipation becomes of primary importance,

This content downloaded from 159.84.15.122 on Wed, 10 Apr 2019 08:51:50 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

and the character of Dorothea Brooke acts as the human conduit who can exchange slavery for freedom, finally developing a perspective that will materially and spiritually enhance her culture. Dorothea eventually ascertains her ethical awareness, but she must suffer through the complexities of traditional obligations before she can find viable alternatives.

At the beginning of the novel, Dorothea fancies that Casaubon's "labyrinthine" qualities signify his profundity and spirituality:

> Dorothea by this time had looked deep into the ungauged reservoir of Mr. Casaubon's mind, seeing reflected there in vague labyrinthine extension every quality she herself brought, had opened much of her own experience to him, and had understood from him the scope of his great work, also of attractively labyrinthine extent. For he had been as instructive as Milton's "affable archangel," and with something of archangelic manner he told her how he had undertaken to show (what indeed had been attempted before, but not with that thoroughness, justice of comparison, and effectiveness of arrangement at which Mr. Casaubon aimed) that all the mythical systems or erratic mythical fragments in the world were corruptions of a tradition originally revealed. (25)

An intriguing possibility arises for Dorothea in the guise of the aging Casaubon. She, who craves erudition, desires Casaubon because she believes he will fill her lack. After all, Casaubon tells her that his academic endeavor is so vast that his final product emphatically will announce to the world his comprehensive genius that heretofore has gone unnoticed and unappreciated. His obligation to unveiling truth will reflect well on her obligation to supporting such efforts. He seeks a pre-existing essential quality through textuality. Dorothea, young, comely, but insecure in her own abilities, hopes to bolster her position, perhaps vainly and naively, in the fact that she "recognized" Casaubon before his production achieved universal notoriety. She does not recognize that Casaubon's project is a doomed quest. Imagining her future with him, living in the aura of his genius, Dorothea implicitly fantasizes that she will gain god-like knowledge, giving her the authority she desires. The narrator, however, warns us that Dorothea sees reflected in Casaubon only "every quality she herself brought." Here, Dorothea demonstrates a narcissistic desire through Casaubon. Mistakenly, she sees Casaubon as the agent of her growth. Like Casaubon's erroneous intuiting of the existence of a pristine mythological system, Dorothea believes her marriage will reveal a perfected version of her self.

Any reader of *Middlemarch* quickly realizes that the union with Casaubon cannot satisfy Dorothea's needs. But perhaps the dynamics of this ill-fated union illuminate what is at stake in Dorothea's coming to a new awareness about obligation. She acts as the operative force that remains fluid throughout the novel.

This content downloaded from 159.84.15.122 on Wed, 10 Apr 2019 08:51:50 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Casaubon will not and cannot change: he remains ensconced in his narcissism no matter what happens. In one sense it may appear that Dorothea acts ethically in terms of Casaubon. After all, she desires to serve his needs, his project, with her feminine selflessness. For Dorothea, her sealed world seems to become secondary so that she may facilitate Casaubon's great mind. At first, Dorothea accepts Casaubon's grandiose claim that he pursues the greatest academic achievement of all time; thus she wants to be part of this magnificent scheme, assisting him in his efforts. As Court argues, "Dorothea stands at the end as a testament to belief, a fundamental Positivist belief, in the ethical superiority of women who have the capacity to consecrate their rational and imaginative faculties to the service of feeling rather than blessedness" (25). Eliot begins the novel with an allusion to the tireless efforts of St. Theresa: but could one argue that Dorothea's labors are equivalent to St. Theresa's? Sherry Mitchell notes "where Teresa ... had been allowed to write and initiate reforms among the Carmelites, Dorothea is presented as being hopelessly contained by a combination of Victorian social practices and discourses of normative femininity" (33). Dorothea reflects this "containment" in her relationship with Casaubon. But with Will and society, Dorothea exceeds boundaries. In that sense, Eliot appropriately links Dorothea with St. Theresa, although the equivalency does not remain static throughout the narrative.

If one accepts uncritically Dorothea's fantasies and the Victorian gender ideology of the "angel in the house," then we can see Dorothea as a type of Theresa from beginning to end.[2] But to do so would deny observing her growth and change. The early invocation of St. Theresa suggests that the motivations behind Dorothea's actions have nothing to do with ethical understanding and everything to do with her position in society:

> "He thinks with me," said Dorothea to herself, "or rather, he thinks a whole world of which my thought is but a poor twopenny mirror. And his feelings, too, his whole experience — what a lake compared with my little pool." (26-7)

At first Dorothea imagines that she and Casaubon have like minds and that this similarity ("He thinks *with* me..."; my emphasis) provides for their potential happiness. But immediately she abandons the idea of equality and cooperation for the notion that Casaubon dwarfs her in terms of his presence, his intelligence, and (this third term dramatizes the intensity of Dorothea's own narcissism) his emotions as well. Shying away from a genuine connection with Casaubon, impossible because both cannot see, Dorothea settles for the security of a coherently defined, albeit greatly reduced, role. Yet she remains open to change, and Dorothea fosters a remarkable transformation by the end of the novel.

This content downloaded from 159.84.15.122 on Wed, 10 Apr 2019 08:51:50 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

What Dorothea looks for in the mind and life of Casaubon is someone who can provide the knowledge and experience that she craves so desperately. Sadly, her desire represents a damaging kind of egoism. By thinking of Casaubon as the germinating force of her developing intellect, Dorothea de-humanizes an already pathetically constricted human being. Although Dorothea believes that her desiring and obtaining a union with Casaubon represent the highest of what she can achieve, the situation's ethical reality demonstrates the danger of her seemingly "selfless," but actually self-oriented perspective.

Casaubon's proposal letter and Dorothea's reaction emblematize the ethical problems with their involvement:

> Our conversations have, I think, made sufficiently clear to you the tenor of my life and purposes: a tenor unsuited, I am aware, to the commoner order of minds. But 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 said at once to win and to confer distinction when combined, as they notably are in you, with the mental qualities above indicated.
>
> Dorothea trembled while she read this letter; then she fell on her knees, buried her face, and sobbed....
>
> How could it occur to her to examine the letter, to look at it critically as a profession of love? Her whole soul was possessed by the fact that a fuller life was opening before her. (44)

The tenor of Casaubon's letter reflects his own views of the world. His descriptions of his wife-to-be show a man who looks on other human beings as instruments. But Casaubon is not the energized point of the system of the novel — Dorothea is — and we must look at her reactions to his systematic dehumanizing of her. Upon close inspection, it seems that Casaubon wants a highly educated dog, whose "devotedness" would serve him well in his project to enlighten the world. Such a servant must have certain qualities that fit his specifications and although he has not seen many examples of young women like this, Dorothea appears to fit the bill. Dorothea plays right into this characterization. The full impact of the narrator's question, "How could it occur to her to examine the letter, to look at it critically as a profession of love?" will be slowly revealed as the novel unfolds. At this narrative moment, the question seems sympathetic with Dorothea, who is overcome by gratitude and self-abasement. In retrospect, however, the question will become more ominous. Trapped in a hollow marriage and shorn of the illusion that Casaubon possesses a "fuller life" than hers, Dorothea learns too late to examine Casaubon's discourse "critically as a profession of love."

This content downloaded from 159.84.15.122 on Wed, 10 Apr 2019 08:51:50 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Both Dorothea and Casaubon dwell in the world of the impermeable self, demanding that the other must be subjugated to sustain each's narcissism — of Casaubon's grandiose self and Dorothea's grandiose selflessness. Neither considers love: love would imperil them because love does not limit union to bartered exchange of intellectual assistance and educational improvement. Elizabeth Langland points out that "*Middlemarch* is, in fact, committed to the cause of 'love,' which is manifest as an inverse ratio to all possible social motivation or benefit" (103). Dangerously for Casaubon, who does not care, and even more so for Dorothea, who does, love requires that individuals go beyond their selves and trust others without necessarily expecting a guaranteed return. Casaubon risks nothing (the proposal has all of the emotion of a sound business deal) and Dorothea realizes too late her selfless selfishness.

As if to dramatize Dorothea's spiritual lack, the narrator says that she "could not pray; under the rush of solemn emotion in which thoughts became vague and images floated uncertainly, she could but cast herself, with a childlike sense of reclining, in the lap of a Divine consciousness which sustained her own" (45). After Dorothea reads the letter, God and spirituality exit from the most spiritual of situations. Instead of affirming her capabilities, Casaubon's proposal has the effect of reducing Dorothea to a child. Dorothea's passive response predicts the cost of her becoming a part of this union. Effective relationships, throughout *Middlemarch*, involve an asymmetricality and a transcendent connection to something divine. The absence of spirituality and ethical communion does not trouble Casaubon. But these limitations later impel the shifting sensibilities of Dorothea.

Once married, Dorothea begins to change her perception of the significance of Casaubon's "labyrinthine" nature:

> How was it that in the weeks since her marriage Dorothea had not distinctly observed but felt with a stifling depression that the large vistas and wide fresh air which she had dreamed of finding in her husband's mind were replaced by anterooms and winding passages that seemed to lead no whither? (193)

Dorothea's marriage reveals how two narcissistic selves can hold two radically different visions of an ideal future, never communicate each's vision to the other, and thus enter into a relationship with no spiritual connection. The reader sees that Dorothea expects her life to enlarge and become more exciting. At the same time, we know that Casaubon wants to maintain his restricted status quo, while having his partner manage the quotidian affairs. Dorothea desires a gentle touch, a reassuring kiss; Casaubon offers nothing and, in fact, is revolted by physical communion. What Dorothea thought would be a spiritually enlightening, embodied union, turns out to be drudgery-filled monotony.

This content downloaded from 159.84.15.122 on Wed, 10 Apr 2019 08:51:50 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

In all cases the relationship between Casaubon and Dorothea reflects two self-centered individuals seeking to constrain the other so as to bolster their own inflated, tenuous view of their own selves. As an ethical novelist, Eliot portrays a situation whose doom seems obvious from the beginning. Casaubon, a man of the cloth and intellect, maintains his stony perspectives throughout life and grotesquely beyond death. Dorothea, who inchoately desires a fuller selfhood, nevertheless succumbs to the socially acceptable feminine role of self-abnegation as a means to self-gratification. By remaining oblivious to significant self-development and social responsibility, Dorothea experiences unhappiness and confusion: her marriage is boring and meaningless. Ultimately, her marriage will "murder" her as she cannot escape its broad responsibilities. Both Casaubon's and Dorothea's (noting Sally Shuttleworth's argument about murderous desire in *Middlemarch*) actions towards one another have the distinct possibility of devolving into each denying the other's existence. Shuttleworth contends that as the novel explores issues of altruism, morality, and innocence, it simultaneously enacts darker, unspoken thoughts of murder in a world where male desire silences any attempts by female discourse to escape (425-427). The union disables Dorothea's previous desire to improve the world. Ironically, in a marriage between a man of the spirit and a woman whose character causes the author to write of St. Theresa, virtually all requirements of an ethical relationship remain unmet. The difficulties that the two encounter result from their pre-determined roles for the other, which are constructed to enhance their own individuality. Self-pitying and bitter, Casaubon thinks that "Dorothea was not only his wife, she was a personification of that shallow world which surrounds the ill-appreciated or desponding author" (198). To insulate himself from Dorothea's need for love, which he cannot or will not fulfill, Casaubon characterizes himself in the third person (the "desponding author") and Dorothea merely as a synecdoche for the "shallow world." He translates the discourse of love into a discourse of intellectual power in order to preserve inviolable his own superiority, his hermetic self.

Similarly, Dorothea cannot escape significant critique. Critics have too frequently and swiftly embraced Dorothea as a St. Theresa figure without considering the emotional and intellectual work she has to do before assuming that kind of role. If *Middlemarch* is Dorothea's *bildungsroman*, then in one sense she begins in selfishness and moves to selflessness. Her selflessness seems to be her "true" character; nevertheless, she must discover how to negotiate her world in order to produce circumstances that would allow her to find her niche.

The married Dorothea's growing friendship with Will Ladislaw serves as a foil to countermand the deficiencies of her relationship with Casaubon. Almost im-

This content downloaded from 159.84.15.122 on Wed, 10 Apr 2019 08:51:50 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

mediately on her honeymoon, Dorothea regrets her decision to marry Casaubon. Her chance meeting with Will highlights her unhappiness, for Will takes a fancy to her, first as an art object in a museum (through the agency of his German friend Naumann) and then as a friend. Abigail Rischin argues persuasively for the novel's valorization of the fine arts, despite the textual statement that language is richer than painting. Rischin points out how Dorothea's adventures in the museum provide a dismantling discourse to the orthodox forces that would suppress her desire. Thus when Will objectifies her, he in essence provides her with a language in an unspeakable situation. While not discrediting language's power to transform worlds, *Middlemarch*, according to Rischin, provides a representative space through both language *and* the physical arts to move Dorothea. Although Rischin does not use ethical terminology, one could infer from her argument that language and the fine arts, both being forms of representation, operate as counter-discourses to the prevailing mores of the time which would suppress Dorothea's self-evolution.

Thus in the museum, Will moves from subjecting Dorothea to being subjected by her. In contrast, Dorothea's conversations with Casaubon inevitably disintegrate. She discovers that his intellectual pretensions strive to cover his spiritual inadequacy and Casaubon, mistrustful, fears she will expose his folly. But when Will comes calling during the day while Casaubon is sequestered in the Vatican library, Dorothea's repressed animation and desirous self emerge. In one conversation she shares her intuitions about art and social improvement:

> "I suppose I am dull about many things," said Dorothea simply. "I should like to make life beautiful — I mean everybody's life. And then, all this immense expense of art, that seems somehow to lie outside life and make it no better for the world, pains one. It spoils my enjoyment of anything when I am made to think that most people are shut out from it." (215-6)

Although she begins with a quick apology for her "dullness" which the rest of her conversation belies, Dorothea overcomes her shyness about her own ideas and shares them with Will. Here, she criticizes the kind of exclusiveness that characterizes Casaubon's esoteric project. Dorothea suggests how art cannot make "everybody's life" beautiful. The cause of moral improvement, at least temporarily, would disable the need for aesthetic excellence. When Dorothea can speak forthrightly to a sympathetic listener, we see that others dominate her developing philosophy. Unfortunately, marriage with Casaubon requires that Dorothea stifle this social self in order that she not imply that another area of life exists in which

This content downloaded from 159.84.15.122 on Wed, 10 Apr 2019 08:51:50 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Casaubon is deficient. Will notices Dorothea's restriction when he comments on her living conditions:

> "And now you will go and be shut up in that stone prison at Lowick, you will be buried alive. It makes me savage to think of it! I would rather never have seen you than think of you with such a prospect."
>
> Will again feared that he had gone too far, but the meaning we attach to words depends on our feeling, and his tone of angry regret had so much kindness in it for Dorothea's heart, which had always been giving out ardour and had never been fed with much from the living beings around her, that she felt a new sense of gratitude and answered with a gentle smile.
>
> "It is very good about you to be anxious about me." (217)

Interestingly, the language Dorothea earlier used spoke of people being "shut out from things" and how this recognition prevented her enjoying the art that she observed. Will, who first encounters Dorothea in Rome as something of an art object, observes that her condition prevents her from having commerce with the world. His compassionate outrage — comparing her home life to a prison — does not shock or upset her. Instead she thanks him for his concern because she knows that he speaks a truth which values naming another's pain over preserving social etiquette. The legal and economic restrictions on middle-class Victorian women as well as Dorothea's own social conditioning do not permit her to escape from the jail she has entered. But significantly, Dorothea does not deny her situation and she does not try to silence Will for uttering the truth. Instead she feels "a new sense of gratitude" (as opposed to the self-abasement she experienced on receiving Casaubon's proposal letter); she is relieved to find someone who recognizes her individual worth. Will's gesticulation only reveals her isolation. The narrator comments, "and his tone of angry regret had so much kindness in it for Dorothea's heart, which had always been giving out ardour and had never been fed with much from the living beings around her...." Here an expression of "angry" emotion reminds Dorothea of the major stakes involved in her relationship with Casaubon. Dorothea needs other human beings to sustain her existence. Casaubon cannot fulfill this role.

In these instances we see how a relationship infuses the narrative in an ethical way. There is no sign that Will speaks because he wants to seduce Dorothea. He speaks because he sees her condition, feels it, and wants her to know, despite the seeming social impropriety, that she does not anguish alone. Their conversations, full of life and observation, charm and wit, show the reader that Dorothea can exist outside of the purview of Casaubon and these discussions give her the strength to outlast Casaubon. Moreover, Dorothea can begin to see how she has limited herself and acted outside of her "true nature."

This content downloaded from 159.84.15.122 on Wed, 10 Apr 2019 08:51:50 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

As for Casaubon, his ways stretch even beyond the grave. His early and unexpected death punctuates his unending selfishness. Casaubon's dying is protracted, reflecting the figurative death he has lived pursuing *The Key to All Mythologies*. Shortly before his death, Casaubon attempts to keep Dorothea in subservience to him even after he has died. He requests information from her about whether or not she will carry out his wishes after he is gone. Dorothea refuses to answer immediately and Casaubon dies before she can respond. Thinking that her husband's wishes revolved around his work, Dorothea had planned to answer affirmatively. But Casaubon wishes to legislate a far more personal aspect of her life. We learn,

> "Why, he has made a codicil to his will to say the property was all to go away if you married — I mean —"
>
> "That is of no consequence," said Dorothea, breaking in impetuously.
>
> "But if you married Mr. Ladislaw, not anybody else." (475)

Casaubon's behavior represents the farthest reach of self-willed action that denies the validity of another and adumbrates the significance and pre-eminence of selfish behavior. Even after death he continues to dictate, according to his terms, his vision. It is not merely Dorothea's intellectual existence, but her sexuality, indeed her entire being, that Casaubon wishes to control. In posthumously dominating her, his obsession suggests a version of necrophilia, but here a dead body wishes to possess a live one. The horror of this scene intensifies when we realize that Casaubon's wish only literalizes and perpetuates what have always been the terms of his relationship with Dorothea. Eventually, the key to all mythologies resides not in Casaubon's discovering the secret, unifying force of the universe, but in his forcing his most death-dealing sense of self beyond the grave. The most notable act that Casaubon achieves does not even happen in his lifetime: his post-mortem desire reveals his willingness to negate the possibility of an ethical connection between Dorothea and Will because of his egotistic jealousy.

Why does Casaubon react so strongly against Will Ladislaw? In the situation of the narrative, Eliot sets Ladislaw and Casaubon up as contrasting human beings because of their mutual connections to Dorothea. Many critics have written about this comparison.[3] Jackson notes how the narrator plays down the sexual element of Casaubon's feelings about Will: "It's a jealousy of Will's imagined influence over Dorothea's mind as undermining the idealisation of him which ministers to his own sense of self-esteem" (16). Whether sexual or intellectual, Eliot represents Casaubon as repressive. This repression, in turn, inhibits Dorothea's ability to embrace the spiritual. To me, the ultimate difference between Casaubon and Ladislaw involves the question of how Dorothea, who wants so much to improve the world around her, has that opportunity stunted when she imagines

This content downloaded from 159.84.15.122 on Wed, 10 Apr 2019 08:51:50 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

she finds in Casaubon the key to all of her mythologies. But when she turns to Ladislaw, Dorothea not only commences the necessary relationship to fulfill her vision of herself, but she also creates or enhances in Ladislaw his own ethical possibility in the world. Both Will and Dorothea, without each other, have energetic ideas that look good in theory but do not go anywhere in practice. Together they temper and hone their ideals, which then become translated into useful actions in their worlds.

The difficulty their relationship encounters in its genesis comments on the complex theoretical constructions of the Levinasian ethical relation. If ethics occurs pre-being, if ethics represents a founding relationship of the human, then all of the self-imposed barriers to understanding this essence must be removed before the ethical relationship can be appreciated. Although transcendence involves a giving-up of self, the world encourages constructing a narcissistic self that facilitates material success without considering one's obligation to another. As we follow Dorothea as she moves from Casaubon to Ladislaw, learning about the ethical predisposition of her nature, we observe a character who must act against the will of the world but find in the words and gaze of another a foundation that she can turn to in a difficult society where her views do not translate as universals.

In their developing relationship after the death of Casaubon, the narrator provides clues that point toward a spiritual awareness that transcends the worldliness of Dorothea's and Will's connection:

> Will was not surprised at her silence. His mind also was tumultuously busy while he watched her, and he was feeling rather wildly that something must happen to hinder their parting — some miracle, clearly nothing in their own deliberate speech. Yet, after all, had she any love for him? He could not pretend to himself that he would rather believe her to be without that pain. He could not deny that a secret longing for the assurance that she loved him was at the root of all his words. (615)

Giving in to the pressures of the world, Dorothea and Will part company during this section of the narrative. Their moral commitments prevent them from violating a command, even if the command seems irrational and unreasonable, coming from the grave. Yet each seeks and receives signs from the other; the assurance of this exchange overrides the seemingly real and final fact of their separation. Will's thoughts in this instance do not relate to how much he loves her, how right they would be together, or how wrong Casaubon was to write such a disgustingly selfish codicil. Instead, his hopes focus upon Dorothea's views, her position, and her feelings. Such awareness constitutes their relationship and negotiates the distance that

This content downloaded from 159.84.15.122 on Wed, 10 Apr 2019 08:51:50 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

they put between each other in the process of living in the aftermath of Casaubon's codicil.

Sherry Mitchell notes, "Despite her nobility and talented character, however, Dorothea remains imprisoned within the field of power relations dictated by the discourses of femininity" (35). But I contend that in *Middlemarch*, power relationships dictate the actions of all the characters *except* Dorothea and Will. When Dorothea and Will have their reconciliation, it occurs precisely because power exits and love, ethics, and spirituality reign, hopefully transcending the banal power relationships that lead to so much misery. Bert Hornback writes: "The most remarkable, beautiful thing in *Middlemarch* will be Dorothea's discovery that she loves Will. That she gives up a fortune to marry him is insignificant; that she gives herself to him, freely, and takes him in return, is wonderful" (84-5). A selfless sense of each other dominates their united position:

Dorothea began to say what she had been thinking of.

> "That was a wrong thing for you to say, that you would have had nothing to try for. If we had lost our own chief good, other people's good would remain, and that is worth trying for. Some can be happy. I seemed to see that more clearly than ever when I was the most wretched. I can hardly think how I could have borne the trouble if that feeling had not come to me to make strength." (784-5)

At the moment of their union, the strength for Dorothea does not come from self-will, but from the recognition that *others can have a good life*. These thoughts inform her decision to marry Ladislaw. The practical Dorothea Brooke, who wants to do good for others in the world, and the fiery Will Ladislaw, whose idealistic passions work to establish a better life for the underprivileged, come together even though they face poverty; they come together because the power of ethical understanding can, in the world of *Middlemarch*, transcend the worldly selfishness that promotes the Casaubons.

Finally, to return to the spiritual, the possibility of Dorothea and Will represents the possibility of ethical transcendence if only in the sense that their example provides a trace of the divine[4] that informs all human relationships:

> There are natures in which, if they love us, we are conscious of having a sort of baptism and consecration: they bind us over to rectitude and purity by their pure belief about us; and our sins become that worst kind of sacrilege which tears down the invisible altar of trust. "If you are not good, none is good" — those little words may give a terrific meaning to responsibility, may hold a vitriolic intensity for remorse. (748)

Spiritual language emerges because the turn to the ethical represents a turn to the spiritual. As a man of the cloth, Casaubon reinforced the Calvinist and Cartesian

This content downloaded from 159.84.15.122 on Wed, 10 Apr 2019 08:51:50 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

separation of the spirit from body. In the union of Dorothea Brooke and Will Ladislaw, however, we observe how the spirit informs the intellect and the body. Their fierce non-religiosity suggests that institutionalized Christianity blocks spiritual understanding. While the spirit remains a trace, the embodied relationship between Will and Dorothea provides an example for readers interested in developing an ethical awareness that would radiate outward to create hope and result in action. While Maxwell claims that "Readers who recognize the mixture of Dorothea's spiritual and sensual energies are more likely to be disturbed by the slow but pressured adaptation of her visionary desire to the normative demands of nineteenth-century marriage and motherhood" (125), I allege that Dorothea, with her sexuality and spirituality aligned, steps out of the role determined for her, despite the conventions of the Victorian era. Her relationship with Will allows sexuality, spirituality, ethics, and reform to emerge safely in the form of a traditional marriage.

The quotation from Eliot's translation of Spinoza that begins this article emphasizes God's non-corporeality. Levinas begins his signature treatise, *Totality and Infinity*, with "The true life is absent. But we are in the world" (33). Eliot wrestled with questions of spirituality, the manifestation of a divine presence, and justice throughout her public and private lives. *Middlemarch* does not claim to reveal a divine ethics which would absolutely alter the way people treat each other. Like other novelists, Eliot had an audience to please and bills to pay. But does she seek "the true life" in her representations of provincial life? And can some kind of non-corporeal divinity be uncovered through the process of novelistic depiction? As Eliot says in the final words of the novel, "for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts" (811). The true life remains elusive, as does the infusion of the non-corporeal spirit in daily practice. Nevertheless, *Middlemarch* demonstrates the necessity to attempt these "unhistoric acts," and works through untenable situations until they can be set ethically straight. This slow building process, like natural growth or evolution, may not be noticeable to the contemporary onlooker, but the eventual fallout, far in the future, results in a society where reform is not mocked, and the individual can seek his or her spiritual understanding in a world respectful of that quest. As Eliot merges spirituality and ethics, she envisions their complementarity in a purifying sense. This purification gradually allows the spiritual to unfold in daily ethical practice. *Middlemarch* portrays this process as it evolves, literally in the middle of Victorian consciousness. Eliot's final novel, *Daniel Deronda* (1876), will attempt to see how ethics and spirituality might be advanced at a political level, potentially enriching life for all. ❊

This content downloaded from 159.84.15.122 on Wed, 10 Apr 2019 08:51:50 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Notes

[1] The character of Will Ladislaw has been the object of much critical debate. For an excellent summary of the problems critics have with Ladislaw, see Gordon Haight's essay, "George Eliot's 'eminent failure,' Will Ladislaw." Patricia McKee, in "Power as Partiality in *Middlemarch*," sees Will and Casaubon as the same projection of Dorothea's ideals. Jeanie Thomas, in *Reading Middlemarch: Reclaiming the Middle Distance*, praises Will's character, but applauds the more realistic readers who see Will's imperfections.

[2] See Elizabeth Langland, "Inventing Reality: The Ideological Commitments of George Eliot's *Middlemarch*," for a convincing analysis of how Eliot severs domestic order and good society. Langland sees *Middlemarch* valuing the sphere of the private couple over social interaction, and she presents an excellent survey of *Middlemarch*'s critique of the "angel in the house" ideology.

[3] Barbara Hardy, in *Particularities*, observes the sexual disparity between the two men (29). More recently, R.L.P. Jackson, in "The Secret Motion of *Middlemarch*," argues convincingly about the spiritual component of Dorothea's evolving sexuality.

[4] Joseph Wiesenfarth, in "*Middlemarch*: The Language of Art," sees the novel's culmination in Ladislaw choosing soul, Dorothea, over siren, Rosamond (363). Soul does not necessarily have to be associated with an orthodox Judeo-Christian perspective; quite to the contrary, the relationships in the novel suggest a movement forward to a spiritual understanding that sees in humanity's affairs the power to reconnect and rebuild a community that has fallen in a divine-less society. Suzanne Graver, in *George Eliot and Community*, sees these moments of communal renaissance as central to Eliot's project (3): community is the ultimate expression of the special qualities of humanity, and Eliot sees the negative communal forces of the corrupt church hindering attempts to improve quotidian life.

Works Cited

Atkins, Dorothy. *George Eliot and Spinoza*. Salzburg: Institut fur Englische Sprache und Literatur, Universitat Salzburg, 1978.

Buell, Lawrence. "In Pursuit of Ethics." *PMLA* 114 (1999): 7-19.

Court, Franklin. "The Image of St. Theresa in *Middlemarch* and Positive Ethics." *The Victorian Newsletter* 63 (1983): 21-25.

Eliot, George. *Middlemarch*. NY: Signet Classic, 1964.

Graver, Suzanne. *George Eliot and Community*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984.

This content downloaded from 159.84.15.122 on Wed, 10 Apr 2019 08:51:50 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Haight, Gordon. "George Eliot's 'eminent failure,' Will Ladislaw." *This Particular Web*. Ed. Ian Adam. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1975. 22-42.

Hardy, Barbara. *Particularities*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 1982.

Hornback, Bert. *Middlemarch: A Novel of Reform*. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1988.

Jackson, R.L.P. "The Secret Motion of *Middlemarch*." *The Cambridge Quarterly* 26 (1997): 1-18.

Kucich, John. "Repression and Dialectical Inwardness in *Middlemarch*." *Mosaic* 18 (1985): 45-63.

Langland, Elizabeth. "Inventing Reality: The Ideological Commitments of George Eliot's *Middlemarch*." *Narrative* 2 (1994): 87-111.

Levinas, Emmanuel. *Otherwise Than Being Or Beyond Essence*. Trans. Alphonso Lingis. Hingham: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981.

—. *Totality and Infinity*. Trans. Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969.

Martin, Bruce. "Fred Vincy and the Unraveling of *Middlemarch*." *Papers on Language and Literature* (1994): 3-24.

Maxwell, Catherine. "The Brooking of Desire: Dorothea and Deferment in *Middlemarch*." *The Yearbook of English Studies* 26 (1996): 116-126.

McKee, Patricia. "Power as Partiality in *Middlemarch*." *Modern Critical Interpretations: Middlemarch*. Ed. Harold Bloom. NY: Chelsea House, 1987. 141-149.

Mitchell, Sherry L. "Saint Teresa and Dorothea Brooke: The Absent Road to Perfection in *Middlemarch*." *The Victorian Newsletter* 92 (1997): 32-37.

Qualls, Barry. "Speaking through Parable: George Eliot's Search for a Narrative Medium." *Victorian Fiction*. Ed. Harold Bloom. NY: Chelsea House, 1989. 273-286.

Rischin, Abigail S. "Beside the Reclining Statue: Ekphrasis, Narrative, and Desire in *Middlemarch*." *PMLA* 111 (1996): 1121-1132.

Shuttleworth, Sally."Sexuality and Knowledge in *Middlemarch*." *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 19 (1996): 425-441.

Spinoza, Benedict de. *Ethics*. 1856. Trans. George Eliot. Rpt. Salzburg, Austria: Institut fur Anglistik and Amerikanistik, Universitat Salzburg, 1981.

Thomas, Jeanie. *Reading Middlemarch: Reclaiming the Middle Distance*. Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1988.

Wiesenfarth, Joseph. "*Middlemarch*: The Language of Art." *PMLA* 97 (1982): 363-77.

This content downloaded from 159.84.15.122 on Wed, 10 Apr 2019 08:51:50 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms