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Author(s): JOHN KUCICH

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Repression and Dialectical Inwardness in *Middlemarch*

JOHN KUCICH

At the end of *Middlemarch*, Dorothea Brooke seems to discover the principles that permit an ideal communion between her desires and the world. Resolving to overlook her own disappointed love for Will, and to mediate unselfishly between Lydgate and Rosamond, Dorothea finds that "the objects of her rescue were not to be sought out by her fancy: they were chosen for her."[1] Far from diminishing her capacity for love, however, the compulsoriness of her duty only enlarges Dorothea emotionally—she feels "a part of...involuntary, palpitating life." Her ego-less union with others also seems to ratify her more private love for Will, as the broken dam of her feeling opens possibilities for their reconciliation, and their marriage.

Dorothea's transformation is, perhaps, Eliot's most famous expression of passionate individualism vitalized by impersonal feeling, by what she called "wider sympathy." Appropriately, readers have looked to the ending of *Middlemarch* to focus many of their disagreements about nineteenth-century syntheses of the personal and the social: disagreements about whether these tenuous syntheses really diffuse social commitment;[2] whether, on the contrary, they socialize and repress emotional life;[3] or whether they do successfully unite romantic self-expression with interdependence—a crucial stage in the doctine of melioration Eliot derived from Spinoza, from French and German Idealists, and from Herbert Spencer.

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Regardless of how Dorothea's resolution is interpreted, however, most readers accept the terms of this nineteenth-century conflict as they are given, and often merely repeat them by arguing one of these three readings. That is, George Eliot is seen as struggling, through Dorothea, with the essentially antagonistic relationship between two different kinds of desire: one private and romantic, the other altruistic, impersonal and implicitly collective. Eliot's apparent attempt to resolve this opposition, though perhaps the most psychologically and philosophically discursive in nineteenth-century fiction, is, after all, widely-grounded in the preoccupations of the period's novelists. Dickens' thematic oscillations between personal guilt or violence and communal sentimentality, the Brontës' between rage and dependence, and even Thackeray's between ambition and irony, all express divided nineteenth-century loyalties to two kinds of desire, selfish and selfless. But the nineteenth century is partly responsible for teaching us to regard these forms of desire as antithetical, and in conflict. We must be suspicious of the apparent naturalness, as well as the static simplicity, of this general cultural ambivalence.

There are, in fact, distinct advantages to be had by representing desire in this way, as divided against itself in a conflict that might never be adequately resolved. For this familiar impasse in Victorian fiction also works to produce a general conception of desire as self-conflict. That is to say, the opposition of two coherent and self-consistent forms of desire that appears to split novels like *Middlemarch* actually conceals a unilateral representation of desire as labyrinthine in its inward irresolvability. The divisive claims of desire in these novels seem to reflect a real, inevitable conflict between private and public needs, and they idealize self-conflict as evidence of a conscientious concern for accommodating the self to the external world. The convoluted, conflictual impulses of Victorian protagonists, however, in which the clash between private and public needs is re-conceived as an infinite debate between expressive and repressive energies, often come to obscure any connection to problems of internal or external completion. They suffuse these problems instead with an introspective texture of hesitation, qualification and doubt in which self-conflict comes to seem the very origin and limit of all desire—personal or impersonal—and the only field in which desire's intensity can be expressed. The play of conflicting forces within self-consciousness comes to seem an autonomous dynamic, a secret, personal struggle that is much more central to identity, especially in its limitlessness, than the public/private antagonism it rarely manages to mediate successfully anyway.

This unstated conception of desire as essentially, vitally self-conflictual is useful to Victorian bourgeois culture primarily because it values the internal suspension and circulation of emotional energy. It diminishes desire's vulnerability to otherness in both social and personal relations, at the same time that it deceptively presents conscientiousness as its chief context. For through this narrative ordering of desire, public life is not simply absorbed

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into private life—even within the private, intimacy with others is replaced by a more pure and unlimited self-reflexivity. While this internalization of conflict may be disguised in the strained adjustments between romantic indulgence and altruism made by the works themselves—as in the ending of *Middlemarch*—we can locate it in the enclosed, unified relationship of self-expression to repression that saturates both these kinds of desire and defines them as complementary forms of a conflictual but dynamic inwardness.

This dynamic inwardness, and its partial dependence on repression, is usefully clarified by the recent work of Michel Foucault, whose theory of Victorian sexual repression parallels the more ethical terminology of novelists like George Eliot. Foucault argues that sexual desire and repression are not at all contrary forces in Victorian culture, but that they cooperate in a strategy whose sole function is to introvert the search for knowledge and gratification and to structure it within an "infinitized" subjectivity. In *The History of Sexuality,* he argues that Victorian culture actually enshrined sexual passion as the cherished and mercurial "secret" of identity by veiling it in repression—a strategy that bases identity in self-relation and self-conflict rather than in the forms of an individual's relationship to others: "let us not isolate the restrictions, reticences, evasions, or silences which [Victorian sexuality] may have manifested, in order to refer them to some constitutive taboo, psychical repression or death instinct. What was formed was...an affirmation of self."[4] According to Foucault, repression reinforces sexual desire and names it as the internal origin of identity in two key ways: by mystifying it and by enjoining individuals to seek out and define the dangerous, primal "truth" of the sexuality buried within themselves. Increasing self-conflict through repression only increases an absorption with seemingly bottomless and unmediated internal conditions, seen as the "meaning" of an individual existence: "what was involved was not an asceticism, in any case not a renunciation or a disqualification of the flesh, but on the contrary an intensification, a problematization of health and its operational terms: it was a question of techniques for maximizing life" (pp. 122-23). In short, the intensity of the Victorian conjunction of desire and repression works outside the questions of "fulfillment" that it makes endlessly problematic by heightening interiority at the expense of relationship—a displacement with ominous implications for Victorian theories of social melioration that hope to produce melioration out of the self-conflicts of individual actors.

Foucault's analysis of Victorian repression is very narrowly focused on the sexual and it is, perhaps, excessively concerned with "power" as the ultimate end of human desire. But his notion that forms of self-negation became a widespread Victorian strategy for heightening interiority (a notion that has been supported by a number of recent cultural studies),[5] rather than simply reflecting a conflict between self and society, has broad implications for the study of Victorian fiction generally and of George Eliot in particular. For self-negation obviously dominates the wider regions of emotional and ethical life in Victorian fiction. The psychological and philosophical discursiveness

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of George Eliot's attempted resolutions of antithetical desire, as opposed to the more discontinuous juxtapositions of self and society in other Victorian novelists, makes her work a particularly good starting point for an analysis of self-conflict as a reigning form of subjectivity. And by placing the ambiguous resolutions of *Middlemarch* in this context, we can see very clearly how desire might be represented as self-conflict on the two parallel—not oppositional—levels of personal and impersonal impulse.

On the one hand, Eliot's romantic narrative ultimately undermines the quest for union implicit in all romance, turning the progress of Will and Dorothea's love into a counterpointing, mutual refinement of interiority through repression. On the other, as much as *Middlemarch* seeks social improvement, it also demonstrates George Eliot's deep-seated, contradictory conviction that "wider sympathy" can best be sustained by a certain tension within personality, and that its exercise depends on a careful insulation of identity from the influence of otherness, even in altruistic action. 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 this conflictual inwardness through its associations with more conventional images of intense, constricted feeling. In both public and private spheres, Eliot shifts the drama of her characters' desires away from the field of relationship to others, and instead focuses it in a more dynamic framework, one that thrives on the confrontation of forces solely within the self. In effect, the charged, climactic places in her novels become those in which emotional conflicts within certain characters privately sustain the passion denied to them by Eliot's public world. The deepest tragedy of Eliot's work lies here, in the ideology of self-reflexiveness infecting and distorting what she clearly intended as progressive social theory and as a general escape from the cell of egotism. Eliot's abstract ethical pronouncements, of course, often imagine a stronger, more dialectical relation between self and world than she is able to project through characters like Dorothea.[6] But while the novels hardly abandon this concern with otherness, they always distort it through a characteristically Victorian discourse of productive self-conflict.

The concept of a cooperation between love and altruism, as covert means of heightening interiority through self-relation, can be aligned with Eliot's own language more accurately if we refer to the philosophical origins of her ideas about desire. The model for self-conflict in *Middlemarch* is best understood as a Hegelian one: Eliot's characters are self-divided by impulses that complete each other dialectically. That is, they combine within themselves impulses that seem to exclude and contradict each other, as "personal" and "impersonal" (or "positive" and "negative") versions of the self. But these oppositional energies eventually form a dialectic that enlarges selfhood in relation to itself, and in isolation from the inconclusive and fragmentary world of others. It is a common tendency to assimilate this kind of inner conflict to Freudian theory, which sees repression as the internalization of social constraints—the frustration of any movement of desire outward toward

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objects in the world. But repression in *Middlemarch* is more usefully placed in relation to its philosophical sources: in Eliot's novel, personal and impersonal energies form a passionate inward world, a world in which the need to engage "otherness" is fulfilled through internal mediations. It is only by examining this dialectic of Hegelian inwardness that we can better understand the identity of love and altruism in *Middlemarch* as a basic cooperation between desire and its own negation.[7]

To call this strategy of internal opposition "Hegelian" is not to identify Hegel as its direct source, but only to isolate one particular thread in the neo-Romantic subjectivism Eliot inherited, mostly from Strauss and Feuerbach.[8] In *The Essence of Christianity,* which Eliot translated in 1854 with great enthusiasm, the internal opposition of an impersonal "human nature" to individual will is the key to Feuerbach's entire system. As Feuerbach describes the dynamic, man encounters others chiefly as the instruments through which he recognizes a dualism within himself, a tension between what he calls "subjective" and "objective" energies within his own being: "Man is nothing without an object....But the object to which a subject essentially, necessarily relates, is nothing else than this subject's own, but objective nature....The power of the object over him is therefore the power of his own nature. Thus the power of the object of feeling is feeling itself."[9] In this way, by using external objects as vehicles for self-recognition, "feeling" permits the self to expand by dividing it internally: "Feeling is thy own inward power, but at the same time a power distinct from thee, and independent of thee; it is in thee, above thee: it is itself that which constitutes the objective in thee—thy own being which impresses thee as another being" (pp. 10-11). This displacement of external powers into an inward dialectic is usually ignored by readers of Feuerbach's Religion of Humanity, but it is dangerous to regard his notion of fraternity as a fundamental orientation to others, as "selflessness." Ultimately, Feuerbach defines religion itself as a dialectical self-relation: "Religion, at least the Christian, is the relation of man to himself, or more correctly to his own nature (i.e., his subjective nature); but a relation to it, viewed as a nature apart from his own" (pp. 13-14). Karl Marx's attack on Feuerbach begins precisely at this point, with his contempt for the idealism—and the solipsism—of such self-relation, which he finds to be an avoidance of otherness in history common to Hegel, Feuerbach and German philosophy generally.[10]

Before examining the role of *Middlemarch*'s inward dialectic in either the social or the romance plots, it is necessary first to see why an internalization of the power of "otherness" becomes inevitable in the novel. Eliot's difficulty imagining a satisfactory form of external relationship is, of course, the presupposition of *Middlemarch*: the Preface to the novel begins by idealizing a kind of desire that tests itself against others in such a way as to bracket that desire as an impossibility. St. Theresa's "epic" desire is a confrontation between her "ideal, passionate nature" and an oppositional social world: as a child, she is turned back from martyrdom by "domestic reality...in the shape of

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uncles"; ultimately, she achieves satisfaction of her passion in the "reform of a religious order." Whatever else is contained in St. Theresa's passion—a nostalgia for lost origins, for faith—it is, in a very powerful way, a quest for relationship to others.

Yet this is a more complicated form of relationship than it initially appears. St. Theresa's passion assumes that a profoundly satisfying engagement of opposing energies can be found in a confrontation between the self and forces external to it. She acts assertively, assaulting and then reforming the world. But she is also filled by an energy whose source lies beyond her: Theresa can engage the world in the first place only because she is "helped by a coherent social faith," because her heart "beat to a national idea." This dialectical movement—an assertion of the self against the force of others, and a transpersonal union with it—is implicit in Theresa's achievement of a place in her world. Without this opposition, her desire would not be able to form itself even internally: modern Theresas find that "their ardour alternated between a vague ideal and the common yearning of womanhood." Theresa's passion manages to satisfy in social terms what might be called a paradox of all desire: self-expression at its highest pitch seeks to burst the constraints of its own egotism and to be united with its negation, with a power that is not self. And society, representing that power for Theresa, is able to order desire and to make it visible by clearly defining the difference between personal and impersonal energies.

George Eliot's warning in the Preface, however, seems to be that desires based in a need for this kind of dynamic relatedness are no longer possible: the world has become too confused a place to be confronted directly, its coherence reduced to "tangled circumstances," its diffused energies producing only "inconsistency and formlessness." The modern-day Theresa is compared to a "cygnet...among the ducklings in the brown pond," who can never find "fellowship with its own oary-footed kind." On the simplest level, the Preface tells us that the contemporary world defeats desire; but one cause for that defeat is a loss of the social differentiation necessary to produce any kind of tension between desire and otherness. The concentrated external powers against which desire can form and project itself have disappeared. As the novel develops, we see clearly that the relatedness necessary to desire is frustrated by the inconsistent authority of figures like Mr. Brooke, Sir James—or Parliament;[11] by the obfuscations of gossip; and, in general, by the "movement and mixture" of "old provincial society" (ch. 11). Eliot seems to have understood, too, that no private vision by itself can reconstitute the necessary oppositional force of St. Theresa's world.

Clearly, however, it is not just the "movement and mixture" of the social world that is too unstable to become a foil for desire. The word "mixture," in fact, is one of the most frequently-used words in *Middlemarch*, and it applies to personalities as well as to social conditions. In the first sentence of the book, man himself is called a "mysterious mixture." And the narrator often reflects that disorder and confusion have a source within personality: "There

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are many wonderful mixtures in the world which are all alike called love" (ch. 31), she muses, when considering Rosamond's thorny aspirations. Mr. Brooke is "an odd mixture of obstinacy and changeableness" (ch. 38). In a telling passage, the narrator notes that the "few personages or families that stood with rocky firmness amid all this fluctuation, were slowly presenting new aspects in spite of solidity, and altering with the double change of self and beholder" (ch. 11). Without the social coherence against which they might define themselves, characters display an inner confusion that appears to be innate. Mr. Brooke's instability is not explicitly made to reflect flaws in society; neither is Bulstrode's hypocritical blending of business and religion, or Lydgate's divided interest in both science and beautiful women. Fragmentation is a central theme in *Middlemarch*, the root of its many frustrated passions. But the novel does not locate the source of fragmentation only in the "meanness of opportunity" inherent in the world, as the Preface would have us believe. Instead, it involves us in a kind of "double change" of characters and context, in which diffusion becomes a universal state. The struggle for relatedness is lost on two fronts: neither self nor world are homogeneous enough to form an opposition, to define the limits separating and, potentially, energizing them.

At the same time, however, the novel seems absorbed in a subtle counter study, in a reevaluation of the problem of psychological "mixtures." For rather than simply garbling relationships, the mixtures within Eliot's characters tend to become a source of promise. In fact, it is the favored characters in *Middlemarch* who most concentrate mixedness within themselves, and who seem more interesting because of it. From the outset, for example, such mixtures heighten Dorothea's attractiveness. Chapter 1 begins by telling us that Dorothea "had that kind of beauty which seems to be thrown into relief by poor dress," and that she has "the impressiveness of a fine quotation from the Bible...in a paragraph of today's newspaper." Frequently, the narrator dwells on Dorothea's contraditions in this flattering way. More importantly, several characters seem drawn to Dorothea because of the conflicts within her personality. Lydgate finds in her "the piquancy of an unusual combination" (ch. 10). Naumann, struck by the contrast between Dorothea's beauty and her "Quakerish grey drapery," calls her "antique form animated by Christian sentiment—a sort of Christian Antigone—sensuous force controlled by spiritual passion." (ch. 19) Will at first finds her cold and critical, yet with a strikingly beautiful voice that was like "the voice of a soul that had once lived in an Aeolian harp." Fascinated, he calls her "one of Nature's inconsistencies" (ch. 9).

Dorothea is not alone in being alluring by reason of her multiplicity. Mr. Farebrother, for example, described as "a mixture of the shrewd and mild" (ch. 16), intrigues Lydgate, who finds him "exceptionally fine" and compares his personality to "those southern landscapes which seem divided between natural grandeur and social slovenliness" (ch. 18). Mary Garth's very integrity lies in her contradictions: she had not "that perfect good sense and good

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principle which are usually recommended to the less fortunate girl, as if they were to be obtained in quantities ready mixed"; instead, "her shrewdness had a streak of satiric bitterness continually renewed and never carried utterly out of sight, except by a strong current of gratitude" toward those who treat her well (ch. 12). Her father, too, mixes "business" and religion in a rustic way that earns general approval. But it is Will Ladislaw who openly promotes the virtues of internal multiplicity. Speaking enthusiastically of Rome's "miscellaneousness," Will claims that it "made the mind flexible with constant comparison" (ch. 22). And Will's esthetic, early in the novel, glorifies this love of multiplicity: "if I could pick my enjoyment to pieces I should find it made up of many different threads," he tells Dorothea in their discussion about art; interestingly, this is also his reason for giving up painting: "It is too one-sided a life," he claims, "I should not like to get into [that] way of looking at the world entirely from the studio point of view" (ch. 21). Will's quest for flexibility may make him a dilletante, but it is also the source of his charm.[12]

No doubt there is some kind of symbolic drama, some bifurcation, at work in the novel's treatment of mixedness. That Will, with his acute and appealing self-contradictions, should reside and work with the absurdly irresolute Mr. Brooke through much of the novel, pinpoints the need for a hierarchy. Though all personalities in *Middlemarch* are mixed in one way or another, certain compounds are more attractive than others—they promise not confusion but vital sparks. As Mr. Farebrother observes of Will's hybridized genealogy: "some sorts of dirt seem to clarify" (ch. 71). Through Eliot's lovers, two crucial standards for a hierarchy of mixtures suggest themselves. First, Dorothea and Will are divided internally by impulses that come to seem diametrically opposed. Instead of balancing public and private energies, they balance psychological forces that directly deny each other, but that also seem to promise a dynamic cooperation—the dynamic of Hegelian internal mediation. Second, the nature of these impulses is transformed in such a way as to conserve Will's and Dorothea's autonomy, despite the mixedness of their personalities and despite their gestures toward public action. In sum, Dorothea and Will escape the ennervating diffusion of their society not by becoming whole themselves, or by achieving interdependence, but through a generative conflict of internal impulses that is protected from the entropy of the outside world. Their mixed personalities are both heightened and circumscribed at the same time.

To see more clearly how this process works, it is worth looking at Dorothea first, and outlining her particular self-division in some detail. Putting it simply, the essential contradiction in Dorothea might be said to lie between two kinds of passion—one appetitive and sensuous, the other self-renouncing and ascetic. Though some form of this conflict is obvious to all readers of *Middlemarch*, many describe the second passion simply as the force of Freudian repression, or as a sublimation of self-actualizing desires.[13] Certainly, renunciation is the source of Dorothea's "self-repression" (ch. 50), when she binds herself to Casaubon's wishes instead of defying them, as she

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sometimes wants to. However, in Eliot's imagination this ascetic self-denial has the unmistakable force of a passion in its own right. It is not conceived as an internalization of social constraints or as displaced energy—no matter what its occasional effects—so much as a desire for ecstatic union with an energy that originates beyond the self. Self-denial in Dorothea corresponds roughly to St. Theresa's eroticized surrender to greater authority than herself, her ability to "reconcile self-despair with the rapturous consciousness of life beyond self" (Preface). In Naumann's terms, Dorothea expresses both "sensuous force" and "spiritual passion" (ch. 19). And through this analogy to religious passion, self-denial is conceived as a need to internalize essentially impersonal energy, energy that—despite its private origins—overcomes isolation and egotism by negating the self. For Dorothea, the force of the impersonal, public energy available to St. Theresa is replaced by a private self-denial, an inward form of energy whose source is nevertheless felt to be non-personal.

This privately-motivated renunciation is initially what makes Dorothea seem priggish: Celia chides her because she "likes giving up" (ch. 2), with no apparent purpose in mind. But in Hegelian terms, Eliot is attempting to conceive self-denial as the force of a negative power within subjectivity.[14] St. Theresa's wish for union with the external world becomes for Dorothea the search for a purely inward impersonality, what Hegel often describes as the mind's ability to imagine and to dwell within its own death.[15] Though inspired initially by religion, Dorothea's passion for self-immolation is an impulse that has broken free of external contexts: her mind is "theoretic," we are told, and "she was enamored of intensity and greatness, and rash in embracing whatever seemed to her to have those aspects; likely to seek martyrdom, to make retractions, and then to incur martyrdom after all in a quarter where she had not sought it" (ch. 1).

Dorothea's isolation, early in the novel, further stresses the personal, abstract and unshaped character of this passion for martyrdom. And, ultimately, her need for a pure self-negation, which has no necessary connection either to social constraints or to altruistic action, is what generates the contrapuntal tension within Dorothea's private crisis of passion with Will. What had once been the "inconsistency" of an imbalance becomes a dynamic mixture: at the end of her night of anguish, in which renunciation of Will has climaxed as a sacramental "grief" we are told that "she felt as if her soul had been liberated from its terrible conflict: she was no longer wrestling with her grief, but could sit down with it as a lasting companion and make it a sharer in her thoughts" (ch. 80). Dorothea's emotional development climaxes not in the singleness of her desires, but in a potent kind of doubleness.

Even though most readers have found Will an inadequate lover for Dorothea, the two characters' desires mirror each other exactly. Independently, Dorothea and Will both experience love as self-contradiction, as the same opposition of sensuous yearning and passionate asceticism we found first in Dorothea. The prohibition Casaubon places over them is only the

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distractingly official imposition of a conflict that is essential to their love at all its stages. Long before Casaubon's interdiction, Will reveals that his passion for Dorothea is inherently double, thriving both in a desire to possess and in a desire to renounce. The narrator tells us: "there were plenty of contradictions in [Will's] imaginative demands. It was beautiful to see how Dorothea's eyes turned with wifely anxiety and beseeching to Mr. Casaubon: she would have lost some of her halo if she had been without that duteous preoccupation; and yet at the next moment the husband's sandy absorption of such nectar was too intolerable; and Will's longing to say damaging things about him was perhaps not the less tormenting because he felt the strongest reasons for restraining it" (ch. 22).

Will's strong reasons for restraint are partly just good manners and prudence; but the passage also links them with his desire to preserve Dorothea's devotion to Casaubon, which Will can appreciate only through renunciation of his own desires. Later, the narrator tells us explicitly that Will does not wish for Casaubon's death, does not imagine himself as Casaubon's successor with Dorothea: "it was not only that he was unwilling to entertain thoughts which could be accused of baseness...there were yet other reasons. Will, as we know, could not bear the thought of any flaw appearing in his crystal: he was at once exasperated and delighted by the calm freedom with which Dorothea looked at him and spoke to him, and there was something so exquisite in thinking of her just as she was, that he could not long for a change which must somehow change her." This admiration for Dorothea's perfect autonomy inspires Will to devote himself to Dorothea without thought for his own satisfaction. Yet the narrator is quick to tell us: "he was not without contradictoriness and rebellion even towards his own resolve....[for] notwithstanding his sacrifice of dignity for Dorothea's sake, he could hardly ever see her. Whereupon, not being able to contradict these unpleasant facts, he contradicted his own strongest bias and said, 'I am a fool'" (ch. 47).

For Will, one passion feeds the other: his yearning compelling him to renounce, renunciation in turn flaming his desire, even as the very object of it. And although Casaubon's codicil makes this self-conflict in Will seem to be the result of mere circumstances and social constraints, it is crucial to see it operating here as an essential doubleness within Will's original attraction to Dorothea. Self-conflict is the structure of love in *Middlemarch*, not an impediment to it. This doubleness makes Will's and Dorothea's later encounters simply an elaboration of an inherent paradox of desire, with Will nearly torn apart by the violence of his internal division, by "the stormy fluctuations of his feelings." Love is forbidden to him, he tells Dorothea, not "merely by being out of my reach, but forbidden me, even if it were within my reach, by my own pride and honor—by everything I respect myself for." Will's own passion for ascetic purity divides him inwardly: "Indeed, he felt that he was contradicting himself and offending against his self-approval in speaking to her so plainly; but still—it could not be fairly called wooing a woman to tell her that he would never woo her. It must be admitted to be a

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ghostly kind of wooing" (ch. 62). But the phrase "ghostly wooing" perfectly combines two passions: the spiritual with the sensuous.

The general dissatisfaction with Will as a strong match for Dorothea has its source here: Will is essentially at war with himself, and for that reason incapable of any undivided, consequential action. We are never meant to find Will an active resolver of Dorothea's doubleness, a potent Shelley fulfilling Dorothea's mistaken quest for a Miltonic guide. Rather, Will and Dorothea are meant to be recognized as twins, both undergoing an inward transformation that enlarges their territory of self-knowledge. In love, for both characters, the power of external influence is deliberately minimized. Eliot's favorable attitude toward Will does not derive simply from his "feminine" qualities, as some feminists have argued, if these qualities are seen to lie only in his dispossession and his non-competitive compassion.[16] Will's capacity for self-negation mirrors Dorothea's more closely in its expansive internal power than in any affiliation with victimage or with maternal nurturance.

While a number of recent feminist works have argued persuasively that female repression in Victorian culture often became a strategy of authority and power,[17] this productive aspect of repression is so firmly grounded in the general nineteenth-century heightening of interiority that a slightly eccentric relation seems to exist between gender difference and repressive self-conflict. As Nancy Armstrong has argued persuasively, the authority Victorian woman derived from her privileged claims to inwardness was very deeply rooted in a cross-sexual ambivalance about public and private life.[18] In effect, the nineteenth-century discourse of self-conflict tended to represent the emotional organization of men and women as the same, even as it argued that a different experience of and response to self-conflict was natural to each sex.

In George Eliot's case, Dorothea does demonstrate a fullness of command in self-conflict that Will cannot attain (though Daniel Deronda will attain it later), which implies the Victorian woman's more meditative and passive relationship to self-conflictual inwardness. Not as bitter as Will, Dorothea finds their division from each other, as well as the division within herself, to be actually a kind of wholeness; if Will is sensitive to the tension in their self-divided love, Dorothea is sensitive to this tension as a kind of emotional envelopment: "in the months since their parting Dorothea had felt a delicious though sad repose in their relation to each other, as one which was inwardly whole and without blemish. She had an active force of antagonism within her, when the antagonism turned on the defense either of plans or persons that she believed in; and the wrongs which she felt that Will had received from her husband...only gave the more tenacity to her affection and admiring judgement." These "wrongs," it goes without saying, are the suspicions that Will is encouraging Dorothea's love; and yet denying those suspicions only increases her affection. Or again, Dorothea is conscious of "a deeper relation between them which must always remain in consecrated secrecy. But her silence shrouded her resistant emotion into a more thorough glow" (ch. 77). Dorothea may articulate the experience of their

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love as more of a unity than Will, but the internal opposition for her is the same as his: negations of feeling give rise to passion, which becomes the passion to affirm negated feeling. One movement facilitates the other.

It is significant that Dorothea first feels love for Will only when she discovers Casaubon's codicil prohibiting their marriage. Her "sudden strange yearning of heart towards Will Ladislaw" occurs at precisely the moment that she becomes aware of "unfitting conditions" (ch. 50). This moment, in a curiously circular way, is repeated when, at the end of the novel, she discovers her love for Will through his supposed betrayal: "Oh, I did love him," Dorothea moans only when it seems to be too late, and the narrator tells us: "she discovered her passion to herself in the unshrinking utterance of despair" (ch. 80). During their separation, too, Dorothea often finds that the intensity of her renunciation of love is precisely what allows her inwardly to exercise her own passion. At one point we are told: "Their young delight in speaking to each other...was forever ended, and become a treasure of the past. For this very reason she dwelt on it without inward check. That unique happiness too was dead, and in its shadowed silent chamber she might vent the passionate grief which she herself wondered at" (ch. 55). And immediately following separation: "They were parted all the same, but—Dorothea drew a deep breath and felt her strength return—she could think of him unrestrainedly....The joy was not the less—perhaps it was the more complete just then—because of the irrevocable parting" (ch. 62).

It is impossible to read these passages only as rationalizations of an internalized constraint, or as untransformed romantic idealizations of absence and negativity. While romantic conventions commonly posit impeded consummation as the highest pitch of desire, Eliot's more Victorian use of these conventions refines them by radically diminishing the influence of the object over the lover, never attempting to mystify the inaccessibility of the object. She also emphasizes the internal origin of refusal, as a non-conventional or "organic" double of desire that insulates it from all external mediation, rather than locating refusal in social obstacles or expectations, which are deliberately trivialized. Dorothea's sense of wholeness within contradiction, her ability to let the force of her emotions flow in two directions at once, implies that two quite separate and contradictory passions have created a world within her in the form of an endless inner conflict. This world formed by the self remains permanently unstable, which explains why it can have a history, just as Will's and Dorothea's love has a history as it swings between the two poles of its expression; yet its unstable dynamism depends on its never being interrupted by external demands. And as we will see, that radical protection from others keeps personal history from contributing effectively to social history.[19]

What we have, finally, within both characters is a kind of oppositional relationship that is, in some sense, self-sufficient. Significantly, the content of verbal exchanges between Dorothea and Will comes to seem much less important than their ability to catalyze within each other an intensification

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of internal conflict. For this reason, too, Eliot extends their separation, preserving emotional contradiction through what many readers have complained is an artificial device. Having Dorothea misunderstand Will's reference to "what I care more for than I can ever care for anything else" (ch. 62) allows Eliot to prolong the separation they seem to require, while also ensuring that their divided passion will continue, since Dorothea then corrects herself and recognizes Will's love just minutes after it is too late. And, unwilling to resolve their inward drama even at the end, the narrative almost completely abandons Will and Dorothea after they escape the paradoxes of their "ghostly wooing."

Yet "escape" is too strong a word: nothing alters this balance of oppositions, or creates a different kind of love—rather, Dorothea's self-negation is preserved even in marriage, though it is shifted slightly: at the heart of her acceptance of Will is Dorothea's conviction that marrying him abolishes her desires for an epic life. The terms may be different here, but Dorothea and Will's marriage is presented in a deliberately vague way as both a personal triumph and as a loss. And the resigned sense of limitation in their marriage can thus be understood as Eliot's attempt to preserve some trace of the inward conflict necessary to her characters' passions.

Ironically, while George Eliot may not have believed that her characters' sole source of satisfation lay in their affections,[20] despite herself she often conceived their marital choices in this way as the medium for an inward balance—a cooperation of assertion with self-denial—and could only leave characters like Dorothea disengaged from the world, self-reflexive.[21] Eliot's failure, within such marriages, to consider action as the scene in which self meets world is precisely what has earned her the charge that she is reactionary. We should note here, too, that self-division is a climactic experience for many of Eliot's lovers. The best example, perhaps, is Maggie Tulliver, who divides her love among three men, feeling each passion to be both pure and impure, legitimated and affirmed only through its denial. But other characters in her fiction—Adam Bede, Dinah Morris, Gwendolen Harleth—end by enduring an exacerbation of contrary motions within themselves, what Eliot called an "antagonism between valid claims" in her essay on Antigone (p. 264), a figure to whom Dorothea is compared several times.

The second criterion for differentiating the hierarchy of mixtures in *Middlemarch* is just as crucial: the balance Dorothea and Will achieve between appetite and renunciation protects their autonomy from the dangerous mixedness of the external world. Will calls their invisible love "a world apart" (ch. 82). In *Middlemarch*, the crucial problem with either appetite or renunciation alone is that each threatens to enslave the self in dependence on others. It is not so much that passion violates a social taboo, and self-negation a personal one; the danger for Eliot in both is that they compromise the autonomy of the self, and in that way ultimately seem to stifle desire. For all Eliot's interest in interdependence, her narrative logic betrays a counter-desire: any excess of feeling in *Middlemarch*, unchecked by an

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internal balance such as Will's and Dorothea's, runs the risk of consuming the self through relationship to others. For Eliot, this dread is an obsessive one, and a cursory sketch of its extension in *Middlemarch* can suggest how dominant it is for her characters.

On the one hand, characters who too easily gratify their own appetites place themselves unwittingly at the mercy of others. Lydgate and Rosamond are perhaps the best examples here. What begins for both as the gratification of a secret wish—for Lydgate, the "fitful swerving of passion to which he was prone" (ch. 15), for Rosamond, her aspiration for "prestige" and social refinement—ends in a double imprisonment. Lydgate falls under the "yoke" (ch. 71) of Rosamond's selfishness and suffers her "feminine dictation" (ch. 64). Rosamond herself finds that, rather than having achieved refinement, she has been ensnared by Lydgate's failures. Later, Lydgate's decision to accept money from Bulstrode nearly ruins him through association with the banker. Bulstrode himself is another, more dramatic example of this loss of autonomy through appetite: having given in to his greed, Bulstrode is pathetically ensnared by Raffles. On the other hand, a complete denial of self-will brings about enslavement just as surely. Fred Vincy's reliance on his Uncle Featherstone renders him absurdly powerless and vulnerable, especially when Featherstone capriciously cuts Fred out of his will. With even purer intentions, Caleb Garth entrusts his money to Fred, only to lose it through Fred's carelessness. But the most important example here is Dorothea herself: abnegating her own will before Casaubon leaves her an emotional prisoner and forces upon her a debilitating self-repression. In all of these cases, the surrender of self to others proves disastrous.

In contrast, the figures in the pastoral plot—which is relatively ahistorical, outside the possiblity of progress and, therefore, the need for effective social relationship—achieve an uncomplicated kind of autonomy. Mary Garth has a nearly religious terror of involving herself in Featherstone's will and his money. She is extremely wary not to promise herself away to an unreliable Fred; she is also adamant that, for the sake of his own integrity, Fred does not submit himself to conscription in the clergy and to his father's demands. Mr. Farebrother's "duty" toward Mary and Fred, his refusal to play the rival, while it seems to deny him personal satisfactions, also stresses the reformation of the Rector's will and his assertion of his own independence, since it coincides with his escape from financial entanglements and indebtedness: "his was one of those natures in which conscience gets the more active when the yoke of life ceases to gall them" (ch. 52). Ultimately, however, Will stresses the need for autonomy more emphatically than anyone else: by dissolving his dependence on Casaubon, by refusing dependence on Bulstrode, by proving his independence from Dorothea's own fortune.

In this context, it is helpful to remember that Eliot's novels are replete with warnings about the dangers of dependence on others. Gwendolen Harleth, Arthur Donnithorne, Godfrey Cass, Maggie Tulliver—all suffer excruciating torment from the power they have allowed others to gain over them.

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Autonomy, in Eliot's world, is a prerequisite for any kind of fruitful action. Even in her ethical formulations of interdependence, Eliot sees autonomy as the necessary position of strength from which one can then fulfill selfless interests. Though her thoughts on sympathetic interdependence are complex, she borrows from Spinoza a central emphasis on self-possession.[22] This remark in an essay attacking doctrinaire evangelicalism is typical: "If the soothing or the succor be given because another being wishes or approves it, the deed ceases to be one of benevolence, and becomes one of deference, of obedience, of self-interest, or vanity" (p. 187). And at the same time, her most enthusiastic expressions of connection to the world often turn on relatively autonomous acts of perception and knowledge, rather than on action, as when Lydgate exclaims, "A man's mind must be continually expanding and shrinking between the whole human horizon and the horizon of an object-glass" (ch. 63). As a result, many readers have been bothered by Eliot's dominantly condescending and ironic attitude toward the visible communities of her novels.[23] If the world has any force of its own in her novels, it is primarily a predatory, entrapping one. No wonder, then, that for Eliot self-renunciation becomes an internal act, not an interdependent one.

Fully aware of the idiosyncratic inwardness Eliot develops within private relations, we can now pursue Dorothea's vision of impersonal desire and altruism to make several important, complementary qualifications. For one thing, Dorothea's altruism preserves within it an unmistakable reserve, a protection of her own autonomy against the widespread dangers of dependency. The obligations she has taken on are indefinite, non-coercive: her duty is toward "involuntary, palpitating life" (ch. 80), not toward some specific person or principle. In particular, by resolving to mediate between Rosamond and Lydgate, Dorothea has not by any means entered into a mutually-determining relationship with them.[24] It is a certain excess of generosity that Dorothea extends here, not a surrender of self to enlarging, external powers.

Earlier, that kind of generosity had been conveyed in an image of melancholy self-sufficiency: "she adhered to her declaration that she would never be married again, and in the long valley of her life, which looked so flat and empty of way-marks, guidance would come as she walked along the road, and saw her fellow-passengers by the way" (ch. 77). And it had been "superfluous money" that she gave to Lydgate. Now, the very rhetoric of Dorothea's benevolence stresses her distance from other characters. She imagines Lydgate, Rosamond and Will all as "suppliants bearing the sacred branch" to her, while Dorothea herself has "the perfect Right," making "a throne within her." She expects to "save" Rosamond; the three of them are "objects of her rescue" (ch. 80). And when she goes to Rosamond, her presence is hardly self-abnegating. Lydgate realizes "that he was rather a blundering husband to be dependent for his wife's trust in him on the influence of another woman." Rosamond feels "something like bashful timidity before a superior, in the presence of [Dorothea's] self-forgetful ardour" (ch. 81). Whatever Dorothea's generosity, her actions here do nothing to make us feel that she has opened

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herself to others, in the kind of trusting receptivity she displayed—almost fatally—by marrying Casaubon. If anything, her actions confirm the essential difference of Dorothea, and the private convolutions of her desire.

Dorothea's difference rests finally in the degree of emotional intensity her self-conflict produces. Even when Dorothea and Rosamond embrace, weeping together, the origin of feeling is largely an inward conflict between willing sympathy and suppressed rebellion: "Dorothea, completely swayed by the feeling that she was uttering, forgot everything but that she was speaking from out the heart of her own trial to Rosamond's." Or again: "She was too much preoccupied with her own anxiety to be aware that Rosamond was trembling too." The emphasis on Dorothea's "trial" and "anxiety" here places the origin of her actions firmly within an internal conflict between impulses to affirm and to negate herself. For while it would be reductive to call Dorothea's impulses egoistic,[25] her emotional energy comes from internal conflict, and not from an uncomplicated and consistent form of generosity. In this scene we see Dorothea struggling mainly with her own divisive emotions. When Rosamond suddenly bursts into tears of remorse, "poor Dorothea was feeling a great wave of her own sorrow returning over her—her thought being drawn to the possible share that Will Ladislaw might have in Rosamond's mental tumult. She was beginning to fear that she should not be able to suppress herself enough to the end of this meeting, and while her hand was still resting on Rosamond's lap, though the hand underneath it was withdrawn, she was struggling against her own rising sobs." Later, battling herself, she feels "as if she were being inwardly grappled" (ch. 81).

The emotional intensity of Dorothea's altruism comes entirely from this inward conflict, not from a homogeneous and unqualified sympathy. It is only this tortured conflict between two competing impulses that distinguishes Dorothea's generosity here from her earlier, blander projects to house the peasantry—certainly, it is difficult to see any important difference in the results of either impulse. In her final, most direct confrontation with herself, Dorothea experiences a purely Feuerbachian moment, discovering the meeting ground between her own individual desire and an impersonal internal impulse, her "own being which impresses [her] as another being."

But most importantly, Dorothea's motives here do not originate in any interactive relationship to the objects of her altruism. Her self-renunciation finally has only an ephemeral relation to Rosamond, Lydgate and the outside world; it has a much more profound and permanent relation to her own self-reflexive passion for Will, to that "possible share that Will Ladislaw might have" in this drama. At this point, private desire and "wider sympathy" merge as interrelated forms of self-conflict. And it is because of this conjunction that Dorothea's generosity cannot be seen as a victory of one side of her nature over the other. Dorothea's renunciation, we must remember, begins not as a denial of selfishness, but as a renunciation of her love for Will. And this passionate renunciation, as we have seen, is paradoxically and inextricably related to Dorothea's very capacity to feel love. Her ability to

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overcome her disappointment over Will, and to rouse herself to act in spite of it, serves in this way only as the necessary prelude to her giving way to that opposing passion when she and Will meet later. We are never forgetful, during Dorothea's triumph over love, that Will's betrayal had been a misunderstanding, and that there remains the chance of a reconciliation. We are also aware that Dorothea has not ceased to feel passion for Will; rather, she has proved only that such passion does not consume her, that it does not threaten her autonomy, and that it is balanced and heightened by a self-negating passion. Dramatically, Dorothea's altruistic scenes work to counterpoint the coming love scene, and must be evaluated as only one half of this inward context.

The passion of renunciation continues to be a foil for the passion of love, continues to permit and to intensify it. Thus it is that when Rosamond reveals Will's innocence, "the revulsion of feeling in Dorothea was too strong to be called joy. It was a tumult in which the terrible strain of the night and morning made a resistant pain" (ch. 81). Dorothea's feeling for Will climaxes here in isolation, in a "tumult" of mutually resisting and mutually augmenting emotions. And the afterglow of Dorothea's "resistant pain" is carried over to the crucial love scene itself, which is composed almost entirely of affirmations that they are both still capable of separation. "Since I must go away," Will says, "since we must always be divided—you may think of me as one on the brink of the grave....It is impossible for us ever to belong to each other." Dorothea answers: "Don't be sorry...I would rather share all the trouble of our parting" (ch. 83). And at that very moment, they kiss for the first time.

In Dorothea's vision of communion with the world, her passion for ascetic self-denial is complexly woven into a fabric of desire that depends also on its opposite, on self-expression. This endlessly self-conflictual model of desire is identical in both the private world of romance and the public world of "wider sympathy." Such desire is based finally not on a wish for union with others in either sphere, but in the cultivation of internally sensitized limits, and Dorothea's effect, both on the world and on Will, remains tangential to the structure of that desire. Social melioration, in particular, to whatever extent it does occur—since Dorothea's effect on both Lydgate and Rosamond, at least, is hardly as profound as she imagines—may be dependent on human desire, but not as the distinct object of it. In this sense, melioration becomes a purely abstract faith that, for Eliot, has somehow come to seem sufficient to justify the insulated play of self-assertion and self-denial that Victorian culture cherished as a safe haven for desire.

NOTES

1/ George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, ed. Gordon S. Haight (Boston, 1956), ch. 80. All further references will be to this edition and quotations will be identified by chapter.

2/ See Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (New York, 1973), esp. pp. 165-81; and Terry Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology: A Study in Marxist Literary Theory* (London, 1978), esp. pp. 110-29.

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3/ The most strident of these is Calvin Bedient, *Architects of the Self: George Eliot, D. H. Lawrence, and E. M. Forster* (Berkeley, 1972). The general trend of modern criticism to fault Eliot for her Victorian "repressiveness" is especially strong among feminist critics. For a summary, see Zelda Austen, "Why Feminist Critics are Angry with George Eliot," *College English*, 37 (1976), 549-61. In particular, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven, 1979), though they have some respect for the "feminine" virtues animating George Eliot's repressiveness, describe such repression primarily as an avoidance (p. 513).

4/ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York, 1978), p. 123. For a compelling description of the historical replacement of social relations by internal ones as the locus of "truth" in the modern Western world, see Richard Sennett and Michel Foucault, "Sexuality and Solitude," *London Review of Books*, Vol. 3, no. 9 (May 21, 1981), 3-7. A similar argument is made by Leo Bersani, *A Future for Astyanax: Character and Desire in Literature* (Boston, 1976).

5/ See, e.g., Bruce Haley, *The Healthy Body and Victorian Culture* (Cambridge, Mass., 1978); Carl N. Degler, *At Odds: Women and the Family in America from the Revolution to the Present* (New York, 1980); Nina Auerbach, *Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth* (Cambridge, Mass., 1982), pp. 249-97.

6/ In "The Antigone and Its Moral," for instance, she describes a "struggle between elemental tendencies and established laws by which the outer life of man is gradually and painfully being brought into harmony with his inner needs." *The Essays of George Eliot* (hereafter referred to as *Essays*), ed. Thomas Pinney (London, 1963), p. 264.

7/ Eliot's use of Hegelian subjectivism is only one path Victorian novelists could employ to make "repression" the means toward a passionate inward world. See my essay "Repression and Representation: Dickens' General Economy," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 38 (1983), 62-77.

8/ As pointed out by Sara M. Putzell, "'An Antagonism of Valid Claims': The Dynamics of *The Mill on the Floss*," *Studies in the Novel*, 7 (1975), 227-44, Eliot never directly mentions Hegel, but she did work with German and French post-Hegelians who wrote out of the Hegelian dialectic.

9/ Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. Marian Evans (London, 1854), pp. 4-5.

10/ See "The German Ideology," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York, 1972), esp. pp. 118-19.

11/ U.C. Knoepflmacher, "*Middlemarch*: An Avuncular View," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 30 (1975), 53-81, has an excellent discussion of the "hunger for relation and relationship" that is frustrated by *Middlemarch's* weak authority figures.

12/ J.M.S. Tompkins, "A Plea for Ancient Lights," in "*Middlemarch*": *Critical Approaches to the Novel*, ed. Barbara Hardy (London, 1967), pp. 178-79, provides a good defense of Will on the grounds of his amiable "discrepancies."

13/ This description is made both by critics and sympathizers. There are, however, numerous defenses of "moral restraint" in Eliot as an undisplaced, unmediated passion. One of the most compelling is still Joan Bennett, *George Eliot: Her Mind and Her Art* (Cambridge, 1948). But for a more complex view, see Knoepflmacher, *Religious Humanism and the Victorian Novel* (Princeton, 1965).

14/ Perhaps Hegel's clearest formulation of the concept of internal mediation, as a generative self-negation, is to be found in *The Phenomenology of Mind*, trans. J.B. Baille (1910; New York, 1967) esp. pp. 80-81.

15/ This self-antithesis is most prominent in Hegel's master-slave dialectic. But it is also crucial to his general discussion of the "labour of the negative" within consciousness. See *The Phenomenology of Mind*, p. 93.

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16/ Gilbert and Gubar make this argument, pp. 528-29.

17/ See esp. Auerbach; Degler; Elizabeth Janeway, "On the Power of the Weak," *Signs*, 1 (1975), 103-09; and Judith Lowder Newton, *Women, Power, and Subversion: Social Strategies in British Fiction, 1778-1860* (Athens, Ga., 1981).

18/ Nancy Armstrong, "The Rise of Feminine Authority in the Novel," *Novel*, 15 (1982), 127-45.

19/ Discussions of Hegelian dialectics in Eliot tend to focus on her efforts to put individuality and history into relation, without noting how the novels disrupt the actual interchanges between self and others. See, for example, Putzell, esp. pp. 236-41. A refreshing exception is Linda Bamber, "Self-Defeating Politics in George Eliot's *Felix Holt*," *Victorian Studies*, 18 (1975), 419-35.

20/ For a good summary of Eliot's attitudes toward the values of work and vocational choice as an alternative to narcissism, see Alan Mintz, *George Eliot & the Novel of Vocation* (Cambridge, Mass., 1978).

21/ Derek Oldfield's excellent linguistic analysis parallels my argument. See "The Language of the Novel: The Character of Dorothea," in "*Middlemarch*": *Critical Approaches*, esp. p. 80.

22/ For a good discussion of Eliot's relation to Spinoza and his conception of egotism as necessary to self-sacrifice, see Rosemary D. Ashton, "The Intellectual 'Medium' of *Middlemarch*" *Review of English Studies*, 30 (1979), 154-68. For other sources for Eliot's justification of some degree of egotism, see George Levine, "Determinism and Responsibility in the Works of George Eliot," *PMLA*, 77 (1962), 268-79.

23/ See Williams, for example, or Mintz, who, despite his claim that Eliot idealized social commitment, observes that the idea of "community" in the novels is always handled ironically (p. 99).

24/ Michael York Mason, "*Middlemarch* and Science: Problems of Life and Mind," *Review of English Studies*, 22 (1971), 151-69, argues that Dorothea never fully recognizes Rosamond because of her own anxiety. See also J. Hillis Miller's argument that Dorothea's ethical action—especially in the case of Lydgate and Rosamond—depends on ignorance; Miller, Barbara Hardy, and Richard Poirier, "*Middlemarch*, Chapter 85: Three Commentaries," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 35 (1980), 432-53.

25/ This claim has, however, been made by Mason, p. 168.

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